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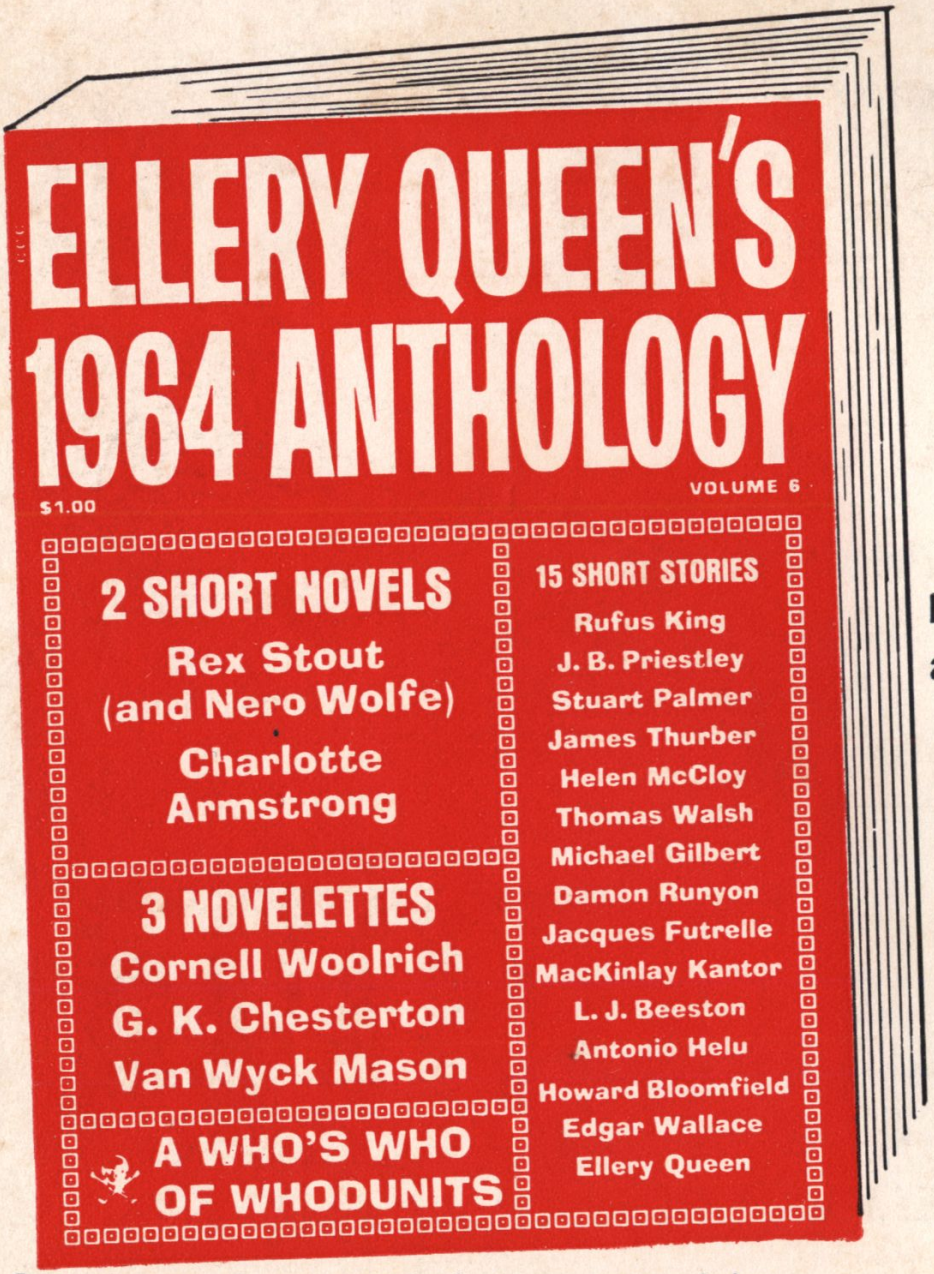

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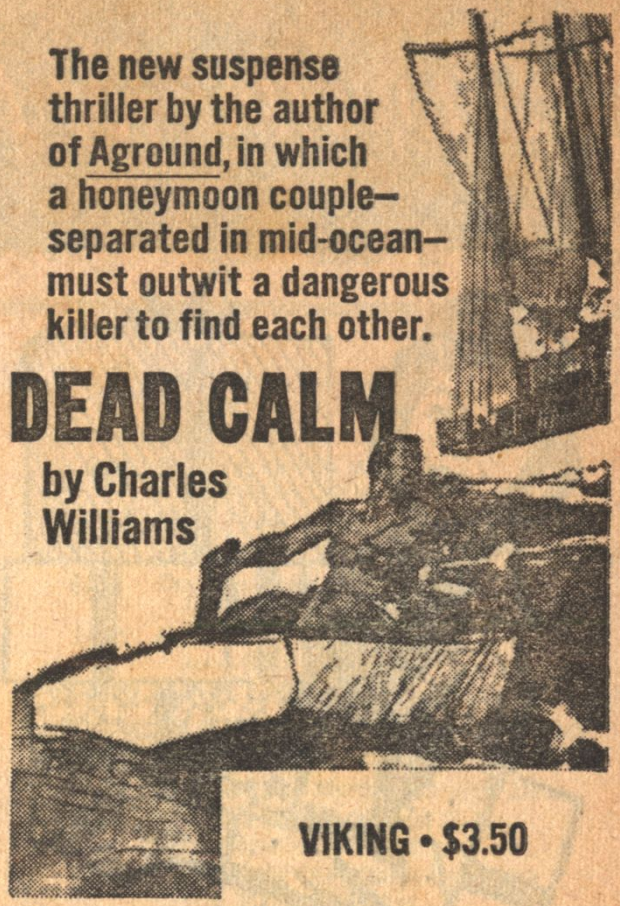

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BLOOD WILL TELL

by REX STOUT

NATURALLY MOST OF THE ITEMS in the mail that is delivered to the old brownstone on West 35th Street are addressed to Nero Wolfe; but since I both work and live there, eight or ten out of a hundred are addressed to me. It is my custom to let my share wait until after I have opened Wolfe's, looked it over, and put it on his desk, but sometimes curiosity butts in. As it did that Tuesday morning when I came to an elegant cream-colored envelope, outsize, addressed to me on a typewriter, with the return address in the corner engraved in dark brown. The name and return address read:

JAMES NEVILLE VANCE
TWO NINETEEN HORN STREET
NEW YORK 12 NEW YORK

Never heard of him. It wasn't flat; it bulged with something soft inside. Like everybody else, I occasionally get envelopes containing samples of something that bulges them—but not expensive envelopes with engraving that isn't phony. So I slit it open and removed the contents. A folded sheet of paper that matched the envelope, including the engraved name and address, had a message typed in the center:

Archie Goodwin—Keep this until you hear from me.

JNV

"This" was a necktie—a four-in-hand, neatly folded to go in the envelope. I stretched it out—long, narrow, maybe silk, light tan, almost the same color as the stationery, with thin brown diagonal lines. A Sutcliffe label, so certainly silk, say twenty bucks. But he should have sent it to the cleaners instead of me, because it had a spot, a big one two inches long, near one end, about the same tone of brown as the thin lines; but the lines' brown was clean and live and the spot's brown was dirty and dead.

I sniffed at it, but I am not a beagle. Having seen a few dried bloodstains here and there, I knew the dirty color was right, but that's no phenolphthalin test. Even so, I told myself as I dropped the tie in a drawer, supposing that James Neville Vance worked in a butcher shop and forgot his bib, why pick on me? As I closed the drawer I shrugged.

That's the way to take it when you get a bloodstained (maybe) necktie in the mail from a stranger—just shrug; but I admit that in the next couple of hours I did something and didn't do something else. What I did was ring Lon Cohen at the *Gazette* to ask a question, and an hour later he called back to say that James Neville Vance, now in his late fifties, still owned all the real estate he had inherited from his father, still spent winters in the Riviera, and was still a bachelor; and what did he want of a private detective? I reserved that.

What I didn't do was take a walk. When nothing is stirring and Wolfe has given me no program, I usually go out after the routine morning chores to work my legs and have a look at the town and my fellow men, not to mention women; but that morning I skipped it because JNV might come or phone. It had been an honest shrug, but you can't shrug all day.

I might as well have had my walk because the phone call didn't come until a quarter past eleven, after Wolfe had come down to the office from his two-hour morning session with the orchids up in the plant rooms on the roof. He had put a spray of *Cymbidium Doris* in the vase on his desk and got his personal seventh of a ton disposed in his

oversize custom-made chair, and was scowling at the dust jacket of a book, one of the items that had been addressed to him, when the phone rang.

"Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"Is this Archie Goodwin?"

Three people out of ten will do that. I am always tempted to say no, it's a trained dog, and see what comes next, but I might get barked at. So I said, "It is. In person."

"This is James Neville Vance. Did you receive something in the mail from me?"

His voice couldn't decide whether to be a squeak or a falsetto and had the worst features of both. "Yes, presumably," I said. "Your envelope and letterhead."

"And an enclosure?"

"Right."

"Please destroy it. Burn it. I intended . . . but what I intended doesn't matter now . . . I was mistaken. Burn it. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

He hung up.

I cradled the phone and swiveled. Wolfe had opened the book to the title page and was eying it with the same kind of look a man I know has for a pretty girl he has just met.

"If I may interrupt," I said. "Since there's nothing urgent in the mail I have an errand, personal or professional, I don't know which." I got the envelope, letterhead, and enclosure from the drawer, rose, and handed them to him. "If that spot on the tie is blood, my theory was that someone stabbed or shot James Neville Vance and got rid of the corpse all right but didn't know what to do with the tie, so he sent it to me. But that phone call was a bagpipe saying he was James Neville Vance, and he had been mistaken, and would I please burn what he had sent me by mail. So evidently—"

"A bagpipe?"

"I merely meant he squeaked. So evidently he couldn't burn it himself because he didn't have a match, and now he's impersonating James Neville Vance, who owns—or owned—various gobs of real estate, and it is my duty as a citizen and a licensed private detective to expose and denounce—"

"Pfui. Some floundering numbskull."

"Okay. I'll go back to burn it. It'll smell."

He grunted. "It may not be blood."

I nodded. "Sure. But if it's ketchup and tobacco juice I can tell him how to get it out and charge him two bucks. That will be a bigger fee than any you've collected for nearly a month."

Another grunt. "Where is Horn Street?"

"In the Village. Thirty-minute walk. I've had no walk."

"Very well." He opened the book.

Most of the houses on Horn Street, which is only three blocks long, could stand a coat of paint,

but Number 219, a four-story brick, was all dressed up—the brick cream-colored and the trim dark brown; and the venetian blinds at the windows matched the bricks. Since Vance was in clover I supposed it was just for him, but in the vestibule there were three names in a panel on the wall. The bottom one was Fougere, the middle one was Kirk, and the top one was James Neville Vance.

I pushed the botton for the top one, and after a wait a voice came from a grille: "Who is it?"

I stooped a little to put my mouth on a level with the lower grille and said, "My name if Archie Goodwin. I'd like to see Mr. Vance."

"This is Vance. What do you want?"

It was a baritone, no trace of a squeak. I told the grille, "I have something that belongs to you and I want to return it."

"You have something that belongs to me?"

"Right."

"What is it and where did you get it?"

"Correction. I *think* it belongs to you. It's a four-in-hand silk tie, Sutcliffe label, the same color as this house, with diagonal lines the same color as the trim. Cream and brown."

"Who are you and where did you get it?"

I got impatient. "Here's a suggestion," I said. "Install closed-circuit television so you can see the vestibule from up there, and phone me at the office of Nero Wolfe, where I work, and I'll come back. It will take a week or so and set you back about ten grand, but it'll be worth it to see the tie without letting me in. After you've identified it I'll tell you where I got it. If you don't—"

"Did you say Nero Wolfe? The detective?"

"Yes."

"But what . . . this is ridiculous."

"I agree. Completely. Give me a ring when you're ready."

"But I . . . all right. Use the elevator. I'm in the studio, the top floor—four."

There was a click at the door, and on the third click I pushed it open and entered. To my surprise the small hall was not more cream and brown, but a deep rich red with black panel borders, and the door of the do-it-yourself elevator was stainless steel. When I pushed the button and the door opened, and, inside, pushed the 4 button and was lifted, there was practically no noise or vibration—very different from the one in the old brownstone which Wolfe always used and I never did.

Stepping out when the door opened, I got another surprise. Since he had called it the studio I was expecting to smell turpentine and see a clutter of vintage Vances, but at first glance it was a piano warehouse. There were three of them in the big room, which was the

length and width of the house.

The man standing there waited to speak until my glance got to him. Undersized, with too much chin for his neat smooth face, no wrinkles, he wasn't as impressive as his stationery, but his clothes were—a cream-colored silk shirt and brown made-to-fit slacks.

He cocked his head, nodded, and said, "I recognize you. I've seen you at the Flamingo." He came a step. "What's this about a tie? Let me see it."

"It's the one you sent me," I said.

He frowned. "The one I sent you?"

"There seems to be a gap," I said. "Are you James Neville Vance?"

"I am. Certainly."

I got the envelope and letterhead from my breast pocket and held them out for inspection. "Then that's your stationery?" He was going to take them, but I held on. He examined the address on the envelope and the message on the letterhead, frowning, lifted the frown to me, and demanded, "What kind of game is this?"

"I've walked two miles to find out." I got the tie from my side pocket. "This was in the envelope. Is it yours?"

I let him take the tie, and he looked it over front and back. "What's this spot?"

"I don't know. Is it yours?"

"Yes. I mean, it must be. That pattern, the colors—they reserve it for me, or they're supposed to."

"Did you mail it to me in this envelope?"

"I did not. Why would—"

"Did you phone me this morning and tell me to burn it?"

"I did not. You got it in the mail this morning?"

I nodded. "And a phone call at a quarter past eleven from a man who squeaked and told me to burn it. Have you got a photograph of yourself handy?"

"Why . . . yes. Why?"

"You have recognized me, but I haven't recognized you. You ask what kind of game this is, and so do I. What if you're not Vance?"

"That's ridiculous!"

"Sure, but why not humor me?"

He was going to say why not, changed his mind, and moved. Crossing the room, detouring around a piano to a bank of cabinets and shelves, he took something from a shelf, came back and handed it to me. It was a thin book with a leather binding that had stamped on it in gold: THE MUSIC OF THE FUTURE by James Neville Vance. Inside the first two pages were blank, the third had just two words at the bottom: *Privately printed;* and the fourth had a picture of the author.

A glance was enough. I put it on a nearby table. "Okay. Nice picture. Any ideas or suggestions?"

"How could I have?" He was peevish. "It's crazy!" He gave the tie another look. "It *must* be mine. I can settle that. Come along."

He headed for the rear and I fol-

lowed, back beyond the second piano, and then down a spiral stairs, wide for a spiral, with carpeted steps and a polished wooden rail. At the bottom, the rear end of a good-sized living room, he turned right through an open door and we were in a bedroom.

He crossed to another door and opened it, and I stopped two steps off. It was a walk-in closet. A friend of mine once told me that a woman's clothes closet will tell you more about her than any other room in the house, and if that goes for a man too there was my chance to get the lowdown on James Neville Vance, but I was interested only in his neckties. They were on a rack at the right, three rows of them, quite an assortment, some cream and brown but by no means all.

James Neville Vance fingered through part of one row, repeated it, turned and emerged, and said, "It's mine. I had nine and gave one to somebody, and there are only seven." He shook his head. "I can't imagine . . ." He let it hang. "What on earth . . ." He let that hang too.

"And your stationery," I said.

"Yes. Of course."

"And the phone call telling me to burn it. With a squeak."

"You asked if I had any ideas or suggestions. Have you?"

"I could have, but they would be expensive. I work for Nero Wolfe and it would be on his time, and the bill would be bad news. You must know who has access to your stationery and that closet, and you ought to be able to make some kind of guess about who and why. And you won't need the tie. It came to me in the mail, so actually and legally it's in my possession, and I ought to keep it." I put a hand out. "If you don't mind?"

"Of course." He handed it over. "But I might . . . you're not going to burn it?"

"No, indeed." I stuck it in my side pocket. The envelope and letterhead were back in my breast pocket. "I have a little collection of souvenirs. If and when you have occasion to produce it for—"

A bell tinkled somewhere, a soft musical tinkle, possibly the music of the future. He frowned and turned and started for the front, and I followed, back through the open door, and across the living room to another door, which he opened. Two men were in a little foyer—one a square little guy in shirt sleeves and brown denim pants, and the other, also square but big, a harness bull.

"Yes, Bert?" Vance said.

"This cop," the little guy said. "He wants in to Mrs. Kirk's apartment."

"What for?"

The bull spoke. "Just to look, Mr. Vance. I'm on patrol and I got a call. Probably nothing, it usually isn't, but I've got to look. Sorry to bother you."

"Look at what?"

"I don't know. Probably nothing,

as I say. Just to see that all's in order. Law and order."

"Why shouldn't it be in order? This is my house, officer."

"Yeah, I know it is. And this is my job. I get a call, I do as I'm told. When I pushed the Kirk button there was no answer, so I got the janitor. Routine. I said I'm sorry to bother you."

"Very well. You have the key, Bert?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ring before you—I'd better go with you." He crossed the sill and when I was out, closed the door. Four of us in the elevator didn't leave much room. When it stopped at 2 and they stepped out, I stepped out too, into another small foyer.

Vance pressed a button on a door jamb, waited nearly half a minute, pressed it again, kept his finger on it for five seconds, and waited some more.

"All right, Bert," he said, and moved aside. Bert put a key in the lock—a Rabson, I noticed—turned it, turned the knob, pushed the door open, and made room for Vance to enter. Then the cop, and then me.

Two steps in, Vance stopped, faced the rear, and raised his baritone: "Bonny! It's Jim!"

I saw it first—a blue slipper on its side on the floor with a foot in it, extending beyond the edge of a couch.

I moved automatically, but stopped short. Let the cop do his own discovering. He did; he saw it too, and went; and when he had passed the end of the couch he stopped shorter than I had, growled, "Godalmighty," and stood looking down.

Then I moved, and so did Vance. When Vance saw it, all of it, he went stiff, gawking; then he made a sort of choking noise, and crumpled. It wasn't a faint; his knees just quit on him and he went down, and no wonder. Even live blood on a live face makes an impression, but when the face is dead and the blood has dried all over one side and the ear, plenty of it, you do need knees.

I don't say I wasn't impressed, but my problem wasn't knees. It took me maybe six seconds to decide. Bert had joined us and was reacting. Vance had grabbed the back of the couch to pull himself up. The cop was squatting for a close-up of the dead face. No one knew if I was there or not, and in another six seconds I wasn't.

I went to the door, easy, let myself out, took the elevator down, and went on out to the sidewalk. A police car was double-parked right in front, and the cop at the wheel, seeing me emerge from that house, gave me an eye but let it go at that as I headed west.

Approaching Sixth Avenue, I felt sweat trickling down onto my cheek and got out my handkerchief. The sun was at the top on a warm August day, but I don't sweat when I'm walking, and besides, why didn't I know it before it collected enough to

trickle? There you are. One man's knees buckle immediately and another man starts sweating five minutes later and doesn't know it.

It was a quarter to one when I climbed out of a taxi in front of the old brownstone on West 35th Street, mounted the seven steps of the stoop, and used my key. Before proceeding down the hall to the office I used my handkerchief thoroughly; Wolfe, who misses nothing, had never seen me sweat and wouldn't now.

When I entered he was still at his desk with the new book, and he took his eyes from it barely enough for a sidewise glance at me as I crossed to my desk. I sat and said, "I don't like to interrupt, but I have a report."

He grunted. "Is it necessary?"

"It's desirable. There's nearly half an hour till lunch, and if someone comes—for instance, an officer of the law—it would be better if you knew about it."

He let the book down a little. "What the devil are you into now?"

"That's the report. Ten minutes will do it, fifteen at the outside, even verbatim."

He inserted a bookmark and put the book on the desk. "Well?"

I started in, verbatim, and by the time I was telling Vance he should install closed-circuit television, Wolfe was leaning back with his eyes closed. Merely force of habit. When I mentioned the title of the privately printed book he made a noise—he says all music is a vestige of barbarism—and when I came to the end he snorted and opened his eyes.

"I don't believe it," he said flatly. "You've omitted something. A death by violence, and, not involved and with no commitment, you left? Nonsense." He straightened up.

I nodded. "You're not interested and you don't intend to be, so you didn't bother to look at it. I was present at the discovery of a dead body, obviously murdered. If I had hung around I would have been stuck. In another minute the cop would have ordered us to stay put, and he would have taken my name and recognized it. When Homicide came—probably Stebbins, but no matter who—he would have learned why I was there, if not from me then from Vance, and he would have taken the envelope and letterhead and necktie, and I wanted them for souvenirs. As I told Vance, they are actually and legally in my possession."

"Pfui."

"I disagree. Of course I would have liked to stay long enough to get a sample of that blood to have it compared with the spot on the tie. If it was the same I would be the first to know it and it's nice to be first. Also, of course, Vance will tell them about me, and the question is —can I be hooked for obstructing justice if I refuse to hand over the tie? I don't see how. There's nothing to connect it with that homicide until and unless her blood is com-

pared with and matches the spot."

Wolfe grunted. "Flummery. Provoking the police is permissible only when it serves a purpose."

"Certainly. And if James Neville Vance comes or calls to say that he expects to be charged with the murder of Mrs. Kirk, if that's who she was, partly because of the tie he *didn't* send me, and if he wants to hire you, wouldn't it be convenient to have the tie? And the envelope and letterhead?"

"I have no expectation of being engaged by Mr. Vance. Nor desire."

"Sure. Because you would have to work. I remarked yesterday that the gross take for the first six months of 1962 is nine grand behind 1961. I am performing one of the main functions you pay me for."

"Not brilliantly," he said, and picked up the book. Merely a childish gesture, since Fritz would enter in eight minutes to announce lunch. I went and opened the safe and stashed my souvenirs on a shelf in the inner compartment.

Inspector Cramer of Homicide West came at ten minutes past six.

I had been functioning all afternoon, I don't say brilliantly. During lunch, in the dining room across the hall, while listening to Wolfe's table talk with one ear, I decided to make myself scarce while I considered the matter. There was no sense in getting out on a limb just for the hell of it, and a homicide dick might show any minute; so as we left the table I told Wolfe that since we had no expectations or desires I was going out on some personal chores.

Wolfe gave me a sharp glance, made a face, and headed for the office. As I was turning to the front, the phone rang and I went in and got it. If it was the D.A.'s office inviting me to call I would make up my mind on the way downtown.

It was Lon Cohen. He had compliments. "No question about it, Archie," he said, "you'd be worth your weight in rubies to any newspaper in town, especially the *Gazette*. At nine thirty you phone for dope on James Neville Vance. At twelve twenty, less than three hours later, a cop finds a body in his house and both you and he are present. Marvelous. Any legman can find out what happened, but knowing what's *going* to happen—you're one in eight million. What's on the program for tomorrow? I only want one day at a time."

I was a little short with him because my problem was the program for today.

I was out of the house and halfway to Eighth Avenue, with no destination in mind, when I realized I was ignoring the main point—no, two main points. One, if a dick came before Wolfe went up to the plant rooms at four o'clock, Wolfe might possibly give him the souvenirs, to keep me out of trouble. Two, if the spot on the tie wasn't blood and its being sent to me was just some kind

of gag, and it therefore had no connection with a murder, I was stewing about nothing.

So I turned and went back. Wolfe, at his desk with his book, apparently paid no attention as I opened the safe and took out the souvenirs; but of course he saw. I pocketed them and left.

Twenty minutes later I was seated in a room on the tenth floor of a building on 43rd Street, telling a man at a desk, "This is for me personally, Mr. Hirsh, not for Mr. Wolfe, but it's possible that he may have a use for it before long." I put the tie on the desk and pointed to the spot. "How long will it take to tell what that is?"

He bent his head for a look without touching it. "Maybe ten minutes, maybe a week, conceivably never."

"How long will it take to tell if it's blood?"

He got a glass from a drawer and took another look. "It's a fairly fresh stain. That it isn't blood, negative for hemoglobin, ten minutes. That it is blood, thirty or forty minutes. That it is or isn't human blood, up to ninety minutes, maybe less. To type it with certainty if it's human, at least five hours."

"I only need yes or no on the human. Would you have to ruin the whole spot?"

"Oh, no. Just a few threads."

"Okay, I'll wait. As I say, it's not for Mr. Wolfe, but I'll appreciate it very much. I'll be in the anteroom."

He rose, taking the tie. "I'll have to do it myself. It's vacation time and we're short-handed."

An hour and a half later, at twenty minutes to five, I was in a down elevator, the tie back in my pocket minus only a few threads. It was human blood, and the stain was less than a week old, probably much less. So I wasn't in a stew for nothing—but now what?

Of course I could go back to the office and try for fingerprints on the envelope and letterhead, but that would have been just passing time since I had nothing to compare them with. Or I could phone James Neville Vance, tell him what the spot was, and ask if he now had any ideas or suggestions; but that would have been pushing it, since I didn't know whether he had told the cops why I was there.

Considering, as I emerged to the sidewalk, how little I did know, that it was either go home and sit on it or learn something somehow, and that the *Gazette* building was only a five-minute walk, I turned east at 44th Street. Lon Cohen's room is on the twentieth floor, two doors down the hall from the corner office of the publisher.

When I walked in, having been announced, he was at one of the three phones on his desk, and I sat. When he hung up he swiveled and said, "No welcome. If you were a real pal you'd have told me this morning and we could have had a photographer there."

"Next time." I crossed my legs to show that we had all day. "You will now please tell me whose body I helped discover and go on from there. I've got amnesia."

"The twilight edition will be on the stands in half an hour and costs a dime."

"Sure, but I want it all, not only what's fit to print."

Before I left, nearly an hour later, he had two journalists up from downstairs. The crop that can be brought in on a hot one, including pictures, in less than five hours, makes you proud to be an American. For instance, there was a photo of Mrs. Martin Kirk, née Bonny Sommers, in a bikini on a beach in 1958.

I'll stick to the essentials. Bonny Sommers had been a secretary in a prominent firm of architects, and a year ago, at the age of 25, she had married one of its not-yet-prominent young men, Martin Kirk, age 33. There were contradictions as to how soon it had started to sour, but none on the fact that Kirk had moved out to a hotel room two weeks ago. If he had developed a conflicting interest its object hadn't been spotted, but efforts to find and identify it were in process. As for Bonny, it was established that she was inclined to experiments, but the details needed further inquiry and were getting it. Four names were mentioned in that connection. One of them was James Neville Vance, and another was Paul Fougere, the tenant, with his wife, of the ground floor of Vance's house. Fougere was an electronics technician and vice-president of Audivideo, Inc.

As for today, Kirk had phoned police headquarters a little before noon, saying that he had dialed his wife's number six times in eighteen hours and got no answer; that he had gone to the house about eleven o'clock, got no response to his ring from the vestibule, used his key to get in, pushed the button at the apartment door repeatedly and heard the bell, without result, and departed without entering; and that he wanted the police to take a look. He had been asked to be there to let a cop use his key but had declined.

Bonny Kirk had last been seen alive, to present knowledge, by a man from a package store who had delivered a bottle of vodka and three bottles of tonic to her at the apartment door, and been paid by her, a little before one o'clock on Monday afternoon. The unopened vodka bottle, found under the couch with blood on it, had been used to smash Bonny Kirk's skull sometime between one p.m. and eight p.m. Monday, the latter limit having been supplied by the medical examiner.

Among those who had been summoned or escorted to the D.A.'s office were Martin Kirk, James Neville Vance, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Fougere, and Bert Odom, the janitor. Presumably some of them, perhaps all, were still there.

For all that and a lot more I'm leaving out I didn't owe Lon anything, since on our give-and-take record to date I had a credit balance; so I didn't mention the necktie. Of course he wanted to know who Wolfe's client was and what about Vance, and it never hurts to have Wolfe's name in the paper, not to mention mine, but since the whole point was that Wolfe was short on clients I decided to save it. Naturally he didn't believe it, that Wolfe had no client, and when I got up to go he said, "No welcome and no fare-you-well either."

I took a taxi because Wolfe likes to find me in the office when he comes down from the plant rooms at six o'clock, and he pays me and I had spent the day on personal chores; but with the traffic at that hour I might as well have walked, and it was ten past six when the hackie finally made it. As I was climbing out, a car I recognized pulled up just behind, and as I stood waiting, a man I also recognized got out of it—a big solid specimen with a big red face topped by an old felt hat even on a hot August day. As he approached I greeted him, "I'll be damned. You yourself?"

Ignoring me, he called to my hackie, "Where did you get this fare?" Apparently the hackie recognized Inspector Cramer of Homicide West, for he called back, "Forty-second and Lexington, Inspector."

"All right, move on." Then to me: "We'll go in."

I shook my head. "I'll save you the trouble. Mr. Wolfe has a new book and there's no point in annoying him. The tie was mailed to me, not to him, and he knows nothing about it and doesn't want to."

"I'd rather get that from him. Come on."

"Nothing doing. He's sore enough as it is, and so am I. I've wasted a day. I've learned that the spot on the tie is human blood, but what—"

"How did you learn that?"

"I had it tested at a laboratory."

"You did." His face got redder. "You left the scene of a crime, withholding information. Then you tampered with evidence. If you think—"

"Nuts. Evidence of what? Even with blood it's not evidence if it isn't the same type as the victim's. As for leaving the scene, I wasn't concerned and no one told me to stay. As for tampering, it's still a perfectly good spot—just a few threads are gone. I had to know if it was blood because if it wasn't I was going to keep it, and if a court ordered me to fork it over I would have fought it. I wanted to find out who had sent it to me and why, and I still do. But since it's blood I couldn't fight an order." I got the souvenirs from my pockets. "Here. When you're through with them I want them back."

"You do." He took them and looked them over. "There's a typewriter in Vance's place. Did you take a sample for comparison?"

"You know damn well I didn't, since he has told you what I said and did."

"He could forget. Is this the tie you got in the mail this morning and is this the envelope it came in?"

"Yes. Now that's an idea. I could have got another set from Vance. I wish I'd thought of it."

"You could have. I know you. I'm taking you down, but we'll go in first. I want to ask Wolfe one question."

"I'm *not* going in, and one will get you ten you won't get in. He's not interested and doesn't intend to be. I could come down after dinner. We're having lobsters, simmered in white wine with tarragon, and a white wine sauce with the tomalley and coral—"

"I'm taking you." He aimed a thumb at the car. "Get in."

I got home well after midnight and before going up two flights to bed, I hit the refrigerator for left-over lobster and a glass of milk—to remove both hunger and the taste of the excuse for bread and stringy corned beef I had been supplied with at the D.A.'s office.

Since my connection with their homicide had been short and simple —merely the twenty seconds I had spent in the Kirk apartment—and my connection with Vance hadn't been much longer, an hour of me should have been more than enough, including typing the statement for me to sign. So it wasn't until after nine o'clock that I realized, from a question by an assistant D.A. named Mandel, what the idea was. They actually thought the tie thing might be some kind of dodge I had been in on, and they were keeping me until they got a report on the stain.

So I cooled down and took it easy, got on speaking terms with a dick who was put in a room with me to see that I didn't jump out a window, got him to produce a deck for some friendly gin rummy, and in two hours managed to lose $4.70. I called time at that point and paid him because he was getting sleepy and it would have been next to impossible to keep him ahead.

But I got my money's worth. Around midnight someone came and called him out, and when he returned ten minutes later and said I was no longer needed I gave him a friendly grin—a good loser, no hard feelings—and said, "So the blood's the same type, huh?" And he nodded and said, "Yeah, modern science is wonderful."

So, I told myself as I got the lobster out, I got not only my money's worth but my time's worth, and by the time I was upstairs and in my pajamas I had decided that if Wolfe wasn't interested I certainly was, and I was going to find out who had sent me that tie even if I had to take a month's leave of absence.

Except in emergencies I get a full eight hours' sleep, and that was merely a project, not an emergency,

so I didn't get down for breakfast, which I eat in the kitchen, until after ten o'clock. As I got orange juice from the refrigerator and Fritz started the burner under the cake griddle, he asked where I had dined, and I said he knew darned well I hadn't dined at all since I had phoned that I was in the D.A.'s office, and he nodded and said, "These clients in trouble."

"Look, Fritz," I told him, "you're a chef, not a diplomat, so why do you keep that up? You know we've had no client for a month and you want to know if we've hooked one, so why don't you just ask? Repeat after me, 'Have we got a client?' Try it."

"Archie." He turned a palm up. "You would have to say yes or no. The way I do it, you can *biaiser* if you wish."

I had to ask him how to spell it so I could look it up when I went to the office. Sitting, I picked up the *Times*, and my brow went up when I saw that it had made the front page. Probably on account of Martin Kirk—the *Times* loves architects as much as it hates disc jockeys and private detectives. It had nothing useful to add to what I had got from Lon, but it mentioned that Mrs. Kirk had been born in Manhattan, Kansas. Any other paper which had dug up that detail would have had a feature piece about born in Manhattan and died in Manhattan.

After three griddle cakes with home-made sausage and one with thyme honey, and two cups of coffee, I made it to the office in time to have the desks dusted, *biaiser* looked up, and the mail opened, when Wolfe came down from the plant rooms. I waited until he had sat down and glanced through the mail to tell him that it now looked as if someone had sent me a hot piece of evidence in a homicide, and I intended to find out why—on my own time, of course—and anyway he wouldn't be needing me since apparently there was nobody that needed him.

His lips tightened. "Evidence? Merely a conjecture."

"No, sir. I took it to Ludlow and it's human blood. So I gave it to Cramer. Of course you've read the *Times*?"

"Yes."

"The blood is the same type as Mrs. Kirk's. If it was or is a floundering numskull, obviously I'd better see—"

The doorbell rang.

I got up and went, telling myself it was even money it was James Neville Vance, but it wasn't. A glance at the one-way glass panel in the front door settled that. It was a panhandler who had run out of luck and started ringing doorbells—a tall lanky one pretending he had to lean against the jamb to keep himself upright. Opening the door, I said politely, "It's a hard life. Good morning."

He got me in focus with bleary

eyes and said, "I would like to see Nero Wolfe. My name is Martin Kirk."

If you think I should have recognized him from the pictures Lon had shown me, I don't agree. You should have seen him. I told him Mr. Wolfe saw people only by appointment, but I'd ask. "You're the Martin Kirk who lives at Two-nineteen Horn Street?"

He said he was, and I invited him in, ushered him into the front room and to a seat, which he evidently needed, went to the office by way of the connecting door, closed the door, and crossed to Wolfe's desk. "I'm on my own time now," I told him. "It's Martin Kirk. He asked to see you, but of course you're not interested. May I use the front room?"

He took a deep breath, in through his nose and out through his mouth, then glared at me for five seconds and growled, "Bring him in."

"But you don't—"

"Bring him."

Unheard of. Absolutely contrary to nature—his nature. The Nero Wolfe I thought I knew would at least have wanted me to pump him first. But with a genius you never know.

As I returned to the front room and told Kirk to come with me, I decided that the idea must be to show me that I would be a sap to waste my time. Wolfe would make short work of Martin Kirk. So as Kirk flopped into the red leather chair near the end of Wolfe's desk, Wolfe snapped at him, "Well, sir? I have read the morning paper. Why do you come to me?"

Kirk pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. He groaned. He lowered his hands and the bleary eyes blinked. "You'll have to make allowances," he said. "I just left the District Attorney's office. I was there all night and had no sleep."

"Have you eaten?"

"My God no."

Wolfe made a face. That complicated it. The mere thought of a man going without food was disagreeable, and to have one here in his house was intolerable. He had to either get him out in a hurry or feed him. "Why should I make allowances?" he demanded.

Kirk actually tried to smile, and it made me want to feed him myself. "I know about you," he said. "You're hard. And you charge high fees. I can pay you, don't worry about that. They think I killed my wife. They let me go, but they—"

"Did you kill your wife?"

"No. But they think I did, and they think they can prove it. I haven't got a lawyer, and I don't know any lawyer I want to go to. I came to you because I know about you—partly that, and partly because they asked me a lot of questions about you—about you and Archie Goodwin." He looked at me. "You're Archie Goodwin, aren't you?"

I told him yes, and he went back to Wolfe. "They asked if I knew you or Goodwin, if I had ever met either of you, and they seemed to think I had—no, they *did* think I had. It seemed to have some connection with something that was mailed to Goodwin, and something about a necktie, and something about a phone call he got yesterday. I'm sorry to be so vague, but I said you'd have to make allowances, I'm not myself. I haven't been myself since—I found—" His jaw had started to work and he stopped to control it. "My wife," he said. "They kept at me that she wasn't much of a wife, and all right, she wasn't, but if a woman—I mean if a man—"

He stopped again to handle his jaw. In a moment he went on, "So I came to you partly because I thought you might know about a tie and a phone call and something mailed to Goodwin. Do you?"

"Possibly." Wolfe was regarding him. "Mr. Kirk. You said you can pay me, but I don't sell information. I sell only services."

"That's what I want, your services."

"You want to hire me to investigate this affair?"

"Yes. That's why I'm here."

"And you can pay me without undue strain?"

"Yes. I have—yes. Do you want a check now?"

"A thousand dollars will do as a retainer."

I had to shut my eyes a second to keep from gawking. That wasn't only unheard of, it was unbelievable. Taking on a job, which meant that he would have to work, without the usual dodging and stalling—that *could* be on account of the lag in receipts; but taking a murder suspect for a client offhand, no questions asked but the routine did you kill her and can you pay me, without the faintest notion whether he was guilty or not and how much the cops had on him—that simply wasn't done, not by anybody, let alone Nero Wolfe.

I had to clamp my teeth on my lip to sit and take it. As Kirk got out a check book and a pen Wolfe pushed a button on his desk, and in a moment Fritz came.

"A tray, please," Wolfe told him. "The *madrilène* is ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the pudding?"

"Yes, sir."

"A bowl of each, cheese with water cress, and hot tea."

When Fritz turned and went I would have liked to go along—to tell him that there could be something worse than having no client.

An hour later, when the doorbell rang again, Kirk was still there and still the client, and I would still have had to toss a coin to decide where I stood on the question, did he or didn't he?

Wolfe had of course refused either to talk or listen until the tray had

come and gone. Kirk had said he couldn't eat, but when Wolfe insisted, he tried, and if a man can swallow anything, he can swallow Fritz's *madrilène* with beet juice, and after one spoonful of his lemon sherry pudding with brown sugar sauce there's no argument. The cheese and water cress were still on the tray when I took it to the kitchen, but the bowls were empty.

When I returned, Wolfe had started in. ". . . so I'll reverse the process," he was saying. "I'll tell you and then ask you. Are you sufficiently yourself to comprehend?"

"I'm better. I didn't think I could eat. I'm glad you made me." He didn't look any better.

Wolfe nodded. "The brain can be hoodwinked but not the stomach. First, then, your statement that you didn't kill your wife is of course of no weight. I have assumed that you didn't for reasons of my own, which I reserve. Do you know or suspect who did kill her?"

"No. There are . . . no."

"Then attend. An item in yesterday's mail to this house was an envelope, typewritten, addressed to Mr. Goodwin. A paper inside had a typewritten note saying, 'Archie Goodwin, Keep this until you hear from me, JNV.' The envelope and paper were the engraved stationery of James Neville Vance. Also in the envelope was a four-in-hand necktie, cream-colored with brown diagonal stripes, and it had a spot on it, a large brown stain."

Kirk was squinting, concentrating. "So that's how it was. They never told me exactly . . ."

"They wouldn't. Neither would I if I weren't engaged in your interest. At a quarter past eleven yesterday morning Mr. Goodwin got a phone call, and a voice that squeaked, presumably for disguise, said it was James Neville Vance and asked him to burn what he had received in the mail. Mr. Goodwin, provoked, went to Two-nineteen Horn Street and was admitted by Vance, who identified the tie as one of his but denied that he had sent it. As Mr. Goodwin was about to go, a policeman arrived who wanted access to your apartment, and Mr. Goodwin was with Mr. Vance and the policeman when your wife's body was discovered, but he left immediately. Later he took—"

"But what—"

"Don't interrupt. He took the tie to a laboratory and learned that the spot was human blood. He gave the tie, and the envelope and letterhead, to a law officer who had been told of the tie episode by Mr. Vance, and the police have established that the blood is the same type as your wife's. You say they think they can prove that you killed your wife. Did they take your fingerprints?"

"Yes. They . . . I let them."

"Could your fingerprints be on that envelope and letterhead?"

"Of course not. How could they? I don't understand—"

"If you please. Mr. Vance told

Mr. Goodwin that he had nine ties of that pattern and gave one to somebody. Did he give it to you? Cream-colored with brown stripes."

Kirk's mouth opened—and stayed open. The question was answered.

"When did he give it to you?"

"About two months ago."

"Where is it now?"

"I suppose . . . I don't know."

"When you moved to a hotel room two weeks ago you took personal effects. Including that tie?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice. I took most of my clothes, but I wasn't noticing things like ties. I'll see if it's there."

"It isn't." Wolfe took a deep breath, leaned back, and closed his eyes. Kirk looked at me, blinking, and was going to say something, but I shook my head. He had said enough already to make me think it might have been better all around if I had burned the damned souvenirs. Kirk put his palms to his temples and massaged.

Wolfe opened his eyes and straightened up. He regarded Kirk, not cordially. "It's a mess," he stated. "I have questions of course, but you'll answer them more to the point if I first expound this necktie tangle. Are your wits up to it? Or should you sleep first?"

"No. If I don't . . . I'm all right."

"Pfui. You can't even focus your eyes properly. I'll merely describe it and ignore the intricacies. Assuming that the blood on the tie is, in fact, your wife's blood, there are three obvious theories. The police theory must be that when you killed your wife the blood got on the tie, either inadvertently or by your deliberate act, and to implicate Vance you used his stationery to mail it to Mr. Goodwin. It was probably premeditated, since you had the stationery at hand. I don't ask if that was possible; the police must know it was. You had been in his apartment, hadn't you?"

"Yes."

"Frequently?"

"Yes. Both my wife and I . . . yes."

"Is there a typewriter in his apartment?"

"There's one in his studio."

"You could have used it. Is there one in your apartment?"

"Yes."

"More subtly, you could have used that, thinking it would be assumed—but that's one of the intricacies I'll ignore for the moment. So much for the police theory. Rejecting it because you didn't kill your wife, I need an alternative, and there are two. One: Vance killed her. It would take an hour or more to talk that out, with all its twists respecting the tie. He had it on and blood got on it, and he used it to call attention to himself in so preposterous a manner that the attention would inevitably be shifted to you; but in that case he had previously retrieved the tie he had given you, so it had been pre-

meditated for at least two weeks. If the tie he gave you is in your hotel room that will be another twist. Still another: he thought it possible that Mr. Goodwin would burn it as requested on the phone, and if so he would admit he had sent it, since it would no longer be available for inspection, saying he had found it somewhere on his premises and intended to get Mr. Goodwin to investigate, but changed his mind."

"But why? I don't see . . ."

"Neither do I. I said it's a mess. The other alternative: X killed your wife and undertook to involve both Vance and you. Before considering Mr. X, what about Vance? If he killed her, why? Did he have a why?"

Kirk shook his head. "If he did . . . no. Not Vance."

"She wasn't much of a wife. Your phrase. Granting that no woman is much of a wife, did she have distinctive flaws?"

He shut his eyes for a long moment, opened them, and said, "She's dead."

"And you're here because the police think you killed her, and they are digging up every fact about her that's accessible. Decorum is pointless. At your trial, if it comes to that, her defects will become public property. What were they?"

"They were already public property — our little public." He swallowed. "I knew when I married her that she was promis—no, she wasn't promiscuous, she was too sensitive for that. She was incredibly beautiful. You know that?"

"No."

"She was. I thought then that she was simply curious about men and—well, impetuous—and a little reckless. I didn't know until after we had been married a few months that she had no moral sense about sexual relations—not just no moral sense, no *sense*. She was sensitive, very sensitive, but that's different. But I was stuck. I don't mean I was stuck just because I was married to her—that's simple enough to remedy nowadays. I mean I was really *stuck*. Do you know what it's like to have all your feelings and desires, all the desires that really matter, to have them all centered on a woman, one woman?"

"No."

"I do." He shook his head, jerked it from side to side several times. "What got me started?"

He could have meant either what got him started on that woman or what got him started on talking about her. Wolfe, assuming the latter, said, "I asked you about Mr. Vance. Was he one of the objects of her curiosity?"

"Good lord, no."

"You can't be sure of that."

"Oh, yes, I can. She never bothered to pretend—I tell you she had no *sense*. I did some work for Vance on a couple of buildings, and I had that apartment before I was married. For her he was a nice

old guy, rather a bore, who let her use one of his pianos when she felt like it. I *am* sure."

Wolfe grunted. "Then Mr. X. He must meet certain specifications. It would be fatuous not to assume—tentatively, at least—that whoever killed your wife sent the necktie to Mr. Goodwin, either to involve Mr. Vance or with some design more artful. So he had access to Vance's stationery and either to his tie rack or to yours; and he had had enough association with your wife to want her dead. That narrows it, and you should be able to suggest candidates."

Kirk was squinting again, concentrating. "I don't think I can," he said. "I could name men who have been . . . associated with my wife, but none of them has ever met Vance as far as I know. Or I could name men I have seen at Vance's place, but none of them has —"

He stopped abruptly. Wolfe eyed him. "His name?"

"No. He didn't want her dead."

"You can't know. His name?"

"I'm not going to accuse him."

"Preserve your scruples by all means. I won't accuse him either without sufficient cause. His name?"

"Paul Fougere."

Wolfe nodded. "The tenant on the ground floor. As I said, I have read the morning paper. He was an object of your wife's curiosity?"

"Yes."

"Had the curiosity been satisfied?"

"If you mean was she through with him, I don't know. I don't think so. But I'm not sure."

"Had he had opportunities to get some of Vance's stationery?"

"Yes. Plenty of them."

"We'll return to him later." Wolfe glanced up at the clock and shifted his bulk in the chair. "Now you. Not to try you, but to learn the extent of your peril. I want the answers you have given the police. I don't ask where you were Monday afternoon because if you were excluded by an alibi you wouldn't be here. Why did you move to a hotel room two weeks ago? What you have told the police."

"I told them the truth. I had to decide what to do. Seeing my wife and hearing her, having her touch me—it had become impossible."

"Did you decide what to do?"

"Yes. I decided to try to persuade her to have a baby. I thought that might make her . . . might change her. I realized I couldn't be sure the baby was mine, but there was no way out of that. That's what I told the police, but it wasn't true. The baby idea was only one of many I thought of, and I knew it was no good—I knew I couldn't take it, not knowing if I was its father. I didn't actually decide anything."

"But you dialed her phone number six times between four o'clock Monday afternoon and ten o'clock Tuesday morning. What for?"

"What I told the police? To say

I wanted to see her, to persuade her to have a baby."

"Actually what for?"

"To hear her voice." Kirk made fists and pressed them on his knees. "Mr. Wolfe, you don't know. I was *stuck*. You could pity me or you could sneer at me, but I wouldn't give a damn, it wouldn't mean a thing. Say I was obsessed, and what does that mean? I still had my faculties, I could do my work pretty well, and I could even think straight about her, as far as *thinking* went. One of the ideas I had, I realized that the one thing I could do that would settle it was to kill her. I knew I couldn't do it, but I realized that that was the one sure thing, and I wished I could do it."

He opened his fists and closed them again. "I hadn't seen her or heard her voice for two weeks, and I dialed the number, and when there was still no answer the sixth time I went there. When there was no answer to my ring from the vestibule and I went in and took the elevator I intended to use my key upstairs too, but I didn't. I simply couldn't. She might be there and—and not be alone. I left and went to a bar and bought a drink, but I didn't drink it. I wanted to know if her things were there, and I thought of phoning Jimmy Vance, but finally decided to phone police headquarters instead. Even if they found her there and someone was with her, that might—"

The doorbell rang, and I went, again giving myself even money that it was Vance, and losing again. It was a girl, or woman, and she had a kind of eyes that I had met only twice before—once in a woman and once in a man.

I have a habit, when it's a stranger on the stoop, of taking a five-second look through the one-way glass and tagging him or her—to see how close I can come. From inside, the view through the glass is practically clear, but from the outside, the glass might as well be wood. Face to face with me, her eyes, slanted up, had exactly the look they would have if she were seeing me. They were nice enough hazel eyes, but I hadn't liked it the other two times it had happened, and I didn't like it then. So not trying to tag her, I opened the door.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I believe Mr. Kirk is here? Martin Kirk?"

It wasn't possible. They wouldn't put a female dick on his tail, and even if they did she wouldn't be it, not with that attractive little face and soft little voice. But there she was.

"I beg *your* pardon," I said, "but what makes you think so?"

"He must be. I saw him come in and I haven't seen him come out."

"Then he's here. And?"

"Would you mind telling me whose house—who lives here?"

"Nero Wolfe. It's his house and he lives here."

"That's an odd name. Nero

Wolfe? What does he—is he a lawyer?"

Either she meant it or she was extremely good. If the former, it would be a pleasure to tell Wolfe and see him grunt. "No," I said. Let her work for it.

"Is Mr. Kirk all right?"

"We haven't been introduced," I said. "My name is Archie Goodwin and I live here. Your turn."

Her mouth opened and closed again. She considered it, her eyes meeting mine exactly as they had when she couldn't see me. "I'm Rita Fougere," she said. "Mrs. Paul Fougere. Will you tell Mr. Kirk I'm here and would like to see him?"

It was my turn to consider. The rule didn't apply—the rule that I am to take no one in to Wolfe without consulting him; she wanted to see Kirk, not Wolfe. And I was riled. The tie had been mailed to me, not to him; but he hadn't even glanced at me before taking Kirk on and feeding him. I was by no means satisfied that Kirk was straight, and I wanted to see how he took it when Paul Fougere's wife suddenly appeared.

"You might as well tell him yourself," I said. "Also you might as well know that Nero Wolfe is a private detective, and so am I. Come in."

I made room for her and she entered, and after shutting the door I preceded her down the hall and into the office. As I approached Wolfe's desk I said, "Someone to see Mr. Kirk," and I was right there when he twisted around and saw her and said "Rita!" She offered both hands and he took them. "Martin, Martin," she said, low, with those eyes at him.

"But how . . ." He let her hands go. "How did you know I was here?"

"I followed you."

"*Followed* me?"

She nodded. "From down there. I was there too, and when I left and was getting into a taxi you came out. I called to you but you didn't hear me, and when you got another taxi I told my driver to follow. I saw you come in here, and I waited outside, and when you didn't come out, a whole hour . . ."

"But what . . . You shouldn't, Rita. You can't . . . there's nothing you can do. Were you there all night too?"

"No, just this morning. I was afraid . . . your face, the way you looked. I was terribly afraid. I know I can't . . . or maybe I can. If you'll come—have you eaten anything?"

"Yes. I thought I couldn't, but Nero Wolfe—" He stopped and turned. "I'm sorry. Mr. Wolfe, Mrs. Fougere." Then back to her: "They think I killed Bonny, but I didn't, and Mr. Wolfe is going to —uh—investigate. That's a swell word, that is—'investigate.' There's nothing you can do, Rita, absolutely nothing, but I . . . you're a real friend."

She started a hand to touch him but let it drop. "I'll wait for you," she said. "I'll be outside."

"If you please." It was Wolfe. His eyes were on the client. "You have a chore, Mr. Kirk. I need to know if that article is among your belongings in your hotel room, and you will please go and find out and phone me. Meanwhile I'll talk with Mrs. Fougere.—If you will, madam? I'm working for Mr. Kirk."

"Why . . ." She looked at Kirk. "If he's working for you . . ."

"I've told him," Kirk blurted. "About Bonny and Paul. He asked and I told him. But you stay out of it."

"Nonsense," Wolfe snapped. "She has been questioned by the police. And she's your friend?"

Her hand went out again, and this time it reached him. "You go, Martin," she said. "Do whatever it is he wants. But you'll come back?"

He said he would and headed for the hall, and I went to see him out. When I returned, Mrs. Fougere was in the red leather chair, which would have held two of her, and Wolfe, leaning back, was regarding her without enthusiasm. He would rather tackle almost any man than any woman on earth.

"Let's get a basis," he growled. "Do you think Mr. Kirk killed his wife?"

She was sitting straight, her hands curled over the ends of the chair arms, her eyes meeting his. "You're working for him," she said.

"Yes. I think he didn't. What do you think?"

"I don't know. And I don't care. I know how that sounds, but I don't care. I'm very . . . well, say very practical. You're not a lawyer?"

"I'm a licensed private detective. Allowing for the strain you're under, you look twenty. Are you older?"

She did not look twenty. I would have guessed twenty-eight, but I didn't allow enough for the strain, for she said, "I'm twenty-four."

"Since you're practical you won't mind blunt questions. How long have you lived in that house?"

"Since my marriage. Nearly three years."

"Where were you Monday afternoon from one o'clock to eight?"

"Of course the police asked that. I had lunch with Martin Kirk and walked to his office building with him about half-past two. Then I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to look at costumes. I do some stage costumes. I was there about two hours. Then I—"

"That will do. What did you say when the police asked if you were in the habit of lunching with Mr. Kirk?"

"It wasn't a habit. He had left his wife and he . . . he needed friends."

"You're strongly attached to him?"

"Yes."

"Is he attached to you?"

"No."

Wolfe grunted. "If this were a

hostile examination your answers would be admirable, but for me they're a little curt. Do you know how your husband spent Monday afternoon?"

"I know how he says he did. He went to Long Island City to look at some equipment and got back too late to go to the office. He went to a bar and had drinks, and came home a little before seven, and we went out to a restaurant for dinner." She made a little gesture. "Mr. Wolfe, I don't mean to be curt. If I thought I knew anything that would help Martin, anything at all, I'd tell you."

"Then we'll see what you know. What if I establish that your husband killed Mrs. Kirk?"

She took a moment. "Do you mean if you proved it? If you got him arrested for it?"

Wolfe nodded. "That would probably be necessary to clear Mr. Kirk."

"Then I would be glad for Martin, but sorry for my husband. No matter who killed Bonny Kirk, I would be sorry for him. She deserved . . . no, I won't say that. I believe it, but I won't say it."

"Pfui. More people saying what they believe would be a great improvement. Because I often do I am unfit for common intercourse. You were aware of your husband's intimacy with Mrs. Kirk?"

"Yes."

"They knew you were?"

"Yes."

"You were complacent about it?"

"No." It came out a whisper, and she repeated it, "No." Her mouth began trembling, and she clamped her jaw to stop it. "Of course," she said, "you think I might have killed her. If I had it would have been on account of Martin, not my husband. She was ruining Martin's life, making it impossible for him. But she couldn't ruin my husband's life because he's too—well, too shallow."

She stopped, breathed, and went on, "I wouldn't have dreamed that I would ever be saying things like this, to anyone, but I said some of them even to the police. Now I would say anything if it would help Martin. I wasn't complacent about Paul and Bonny—it just didn't matter because nothing mattered but Martin. I was an ignorant little fool when I married Paul—I thought I might as well because I had never been in love and I thought I never would be. When they began asking me questions yesterday, I decided I wouldn't try to hide how I feel about Martin, and anyway, I don't think I could—not now. I did before."

Wolfe looked at the clock. Twenty to one. Thirty-five minutes till lunch. "You say she couldn't have ruined your husband's life because he's too shallow. Do you utterly reject the possibility that he killed her?"

She took a breath. "I don't . . . that's too strong. If he was there with her and she said something or

did something . . . I don't know. I'm not sure."

"Do you know if he had in his possession some of the personal stationery of James Neville Vance? A letterhead, an envelope?"

Her eyes widened. "What? Jimmy Vance?"

"Yes. That's relevant because of a circumstance you don't know about, but Mr. Kirk does. It's a simple question. Did you ever see a blank unused letterhead or envelope, Mr. Vance's, in your apartment?"

"No. Not a blank one. One he had written on, yes."

"You have been in Mr. Vance's apartment?"

"Certainly."

"Do you know where he keeps his stationary?"

"Yes, in a desk in his studio. In a drawer. You say this is relevant?"

"Yes. Mr. Kirk may explain if you ask him. How well do you know Mr. Vance?"

"Why . . . he owns the house. We see him some socially. There's a recital in his studio nearly every month."

"Did he kill Mrs. Kirk?"

"No. Of course I've asked myself that. I've asked myself everything. But Jimmy Vance . . . if you knew him . . . why would he? Why did you ask about his stationery?"

"Ask Mr. Kirk. I am covering some random points. Did Mrs. Kirk drink vodka?"

"If she did I never saw her. She didn't drink much of anything, but when she did it was always gin and tonic in the summer and Bacardis in the winter."

"Does your husband drink vodka?"

"Yes. Now, nearly always."

"Does Mr. Kirk?"

"No, never. He drinks scotch."

"Does Mr. Vance drink vodka?"

"Yes. He got my husband started on it. The police asked me all this."

"Naturally. Do you drink vodka?"

"No. I drink sherry." She shook her head. "I don't understand—maybe you'll tell me. All the questions the police asked me—they seem to be sure it was one of us, Martin or Paul or Jimmy Vance or me. Now you too. But it could have been some other man that Bonny . . . or someone, a burglar . . . couldn't it?"

"Not impossible," Wolfe conceded, "but more than doubtful—because of the circumstance that prompted my question about Mr. Vance's stationery. And now this question: What kind of housekeeper are you? Do you concern yourself with the condition of your husband's clothing?"

She nearly smiled. "You ask the strangest questions. Yes, I do. Even though we're not . . . yes, I sew on buttons."

"Then you know what he has, or had. Have you ever seen among his things a cream-colored necktie with diagonal brown stripes, narrow stripes?"

She frowned. "That's Jimmy Vance again—those are his colors. He has a tie like that, more than one probably."

"He had nine. Again a simple question. Have you ever seen one of them in your husband's possession? Not necessarily in his hands or on his person—say, in one of his drawers?"

"No. Mr. Wolfe, this circumstance—what is it? You say Martin knows about it, but I'm answering your questions, and I—"

The phone rang. I swiveled and got it, used my formula, and the client's voice came: "This is Martin Kirk. Tell Mr. Wolfe the tie's not here. It's gone."

"Of course you made sure."

"Yes. Positive."

"Hold the wire." I turned. "Kirk. The article isn't there."

Wolfe nodded. "As expected."

"Any instructions?"

He pursed his lips, and Rita, on her feet, beat him to it. She asked, "May I speak to him?" and held out her hand for the phone. Wolfe nodded. I pointed to the phone on his desk and told her to use that one, and she went and got it. I stayed on.

"Martin?"

"Yes. Rita?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"In my room at the hotel. You're still there?"

"Yes. What are you going to do? Are you going to your office?"

"Good lord no. I'm going to see Jimmy Vance. Then I'm going to see Nero Wolfe again. Someone has—"

I cut in. "Hold it. I've told Mr. Wolfe and he'll have instructions. Hold the phone." I turned. "He says he's going to see Vance. Shall I tell him to lay off or will you?"

"Neither. He's had no sleep and not much to eat. Tell him to come here this evening—say, at nine o'clock, if he's awake—and report on his talk with Mr. Vance."

"You tell him," I said, and hung up. Being a salaried employee, I should of course keep my place in the presence of company—and that's exactly what I was doing, keeping my place. I had had enough and then some, and Wolfe's glare, which of course came automatically, was wasted because my head was turned and he had my profile, including the set of my jaw. When Rita was through with the phone he took it, spoke briefly with his client, cradled it, and looked at the clock. Six minutes to lunch.

"Do you want me any more?" she asked him.

"Later perhaps," he said. "If you'll phone a little after six?"

I got up and spoke. "If you don't mind, Mrs. Fougere." I crossed to the door to the front room and opened it. "If you'll wait in here just a few minutes?"

She looked at Wolfe, saw that he had no comment, and came. When she had crossed the sill I closed the door, which is as soundproof as the

wall, went to Wolfe's desk, and said, "If it blows up in your face you're not going to blame it on me. I merely called your attention a couple of times to the fact that a fee would be welcome. I didn't say it was desperate, that you should grab a measly grand from a character who is probably going to be tagged for the big one. And now when he says he is going to see Vance, to handle the tie question on his own—and the tie was sent to me, not to you—you not only don't veto it, you don't even tell me to go and sit in. Also she's going there too—that's obvious—and you merely tell her to phone you later. I admit you're a genius, but when you took his check you couldn't possibly have had the faintest idea whether he was guilty or not, and even now you don't know the score. They may have him absolutely wrapped up. The tie was mailed to me and I gave it to Cramer, and I'm asking, not respectfully."

He nodded. "Well said. A good speech."

"Thank you. And?"

"I didn't tell you to go because it's lunch time. Also I doubt if you would get anything useful. Naturally I'll have to see Mr. Vance—and Mr. Fougere. As for desperation, when I took Mr. Kirk's check I knew it was extremely improbable that he had killed his wife, and I—"

"How?"

He shook his head. "You call me to account? You know everything that I know; ponder it yourself. If instead of lunch you choose to be present at a futile conversation, do so by all means. I will not be hectored into an explanation you shouldn't need."

(*Continued on page 79*)

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Early in 1963, Nigel Morland had occasion to "tidy a file" and came upon a story which, he realized, had never been submitted to EQMM. On rereading the manuscript, it seemed to Mr. Morland that it represented "the grand old truly English leisured detection," and in sending us the story he wondered if it was "perhaps too leisured and too English for EQMM."

We read the manuscript and decided that its very leisureliness highly recommended it—as a welcome change of pace these hurry-hurry-hurry days. And we decided something else too: here is a new and contemporary story which, however leisurely in tone you may think it, will remind you of the very best of Edgar Wallace (of the best exploits, for example, of Mr. J. G. Reeder and The Four Just Men) and when that Old Master was at the top of his form, he was very good indeed.

So, meet a new detective—a charming and likable (no, lovable) investigator of the old school—and may we have more of him!

INTRODUCING V. I. PYBUS

by NIGEL MORLAND

NOT EVERY CASE DEALT WITH BY New Scotland Yard disappears into the growing files of the Registry.

It is generally overlooked that though the Commissioner is an office man, he also holds a watching brief on all field work. If a case is filed as unclosed—to wait those chance additions of minor evidence which, over the years, in correct total, might bring it back to life—it is the Commissioner who sometimes uses his considerable authority to promote a *sub rosa* investigation.

Perhaps it should not be dignified by such a colorful noun: the "investigation" is in the nature of a last look round—the way a careful housewife will visually check each room after spring cleaning.

In the Commissioner's secretariat will be found certain workers among whom there is always an undesignated official, categorized as a Permanent Civil Service Clerk, grade one—the English habit of protective camouflage and understatement is sometimes baffling, even to Englishmen.

To his colleagues, who do not share his small office or his work, this

Permanent Civil Service Clerk is a combination of Commissioner's private eye, Home Office contact, medical-chemical-legal expert, and top-level snooper. His salary is reasonably good and his reward for success is an occasional note on elegant stationery bestowing cautious praise, countersigned by the appropriate official to whom "commendable" excels the wildest Hollywood superlatives.

This, then, was the background of Vernon Ivor Pybus—the initials alone were sufficient to lift him from the uniform rut traveled by his predecessors. He was Vernon after his grim old father (remember Pybus, who died so showily when his crazy aeroplane crashed on the London-Paris crossing the week before Bleriot made it?), and Ivor after a very rich uncle who, nevertheless, left all his money to a home for stray dogs.

But there had been enough cash in the estate for Mrs. Pybus to get her son past the Civil Service entrance examinations before she died, secure in the knowledge that he was established in a respectable profession.

Vernon Ivor Pybus reached the so-called Atom Age with little outward or inward change. His gray hair had finally fallen out completely; his round, pink-cheeked face and portly little body suggested a mildly jovial fellow, made negative by his sad clothing. At all seasons he wore a really ancient pepper-and-salt suit, a black Italian velour hat—which gave him a faintly swashbuckling air like that of a pirate dressed for Sunday service—and he always carried that safe badge of all decent Englishmen, an umbrella.

In Scotland Yard they thought he was married, and lived in some suburb—not that anyone really cared. Yet, after four years of V.I. Pybus, not one department in the Yard could put a finger on him except to say that he had a brain under that shining pate of his, or to dismiss him as an eccentric who wallowed in Shakespeare.

The Commissioner was wiser and knew his man—that is why he sent old V.I.P. to find out why Gannett was still enjoying the air of freedom.

On that mild October morning old Pybus tapped gently on the door of Chief Inspector Brentlake's office, and was told to come in.

Brentlake, thin, efficient, and terse, hid his annoyance at the visitor.

"You wanted me, Mr. Pybus?"

"Er—yes. I hope you don't mind?"

"No, no, of course not. Have a chair." Brentlake was quite unimpressed by the visitor's soft, kindly voice. To him old Pybus was the Commissioner's official and unavoidable nuisance.

"You see, Chief Inspector, I am *very* interested in Mark Gannett." Pybus turned meek china-blue eyes on Brentlake as if he feared a harsh word. "*If* you don't mind, you understand?"

"My dear VIP—" Brentlake went pink and stopped.

"Oh, please. I'm well aware of the modern predilection for initials, and I take your use of them as, may I say, a friendly nickname?"

"Well, if you feel like that—What do you want to know?"

"Little things. I know that Gannett stood his trial for—er—wife murder. He is, I believe, now living with another lady?"

"Jennie Carrick."

"Jennie—? I see. His—may I say—inamorata?"

"Mistress," Brentlake corrected bluntly. He detested polite phrases, particularly foreign ones. "Shot his wife in the stomach when Jennie Carrick refused to live with a married man, and Jennie still married herself!" He laughed gruffly.

"Most distressing. And he is now a free man—I mean free in the—h'm—legal sense?"

Brentlake ignored the humble witticism.

"Because he had a damn fine counsel. We couldn't break his alibi, and the dust was a factor."

"Ah, yes, the dust. The wife had remained in her bedroom for some days before her body was found. And there was Gannett's alibi, as you say."

"Tight as a drum. Poor woman, he led her a beastly life. I don't need go into it again—cat-and-dog stuff. You know what that means, Mr. Pybus."

"Do I? Of course, if you say so—furnish forth the marriage tables, as the Bard says." Pybus made a small chuckle, which Brentlake disdained. "And you're satisfied of his guilt?"

"Guilt!" The desk was slapped with a large hand. "He's as guilty as hell. I was hamstrung by Judges' Rules. In the States I could have got a confession out of the swine!"

"My *dear* Chief Inspector, you alarm me." Pybus scrambled to his feet. "You must forgive this trespass of your valuable time. Thank you very much indeed." He sidled from the room like a stout and elderly gnome, missing the brisk Anglo-Saxon adjective that the frustrated Brentlake muttered under his breath.

Pybus trotted into Whitehall, his furry hat set squarely on his round head. He admired the wreaths at the foot of the Cenotaph, baring his bald scalp reverently to the thin autumn sun. He entered into courteous discussion on the right way to grow carnations with a little man who was pleased to learn that Pybus also lived in Hornsey. This sort of thing frequently happened to Pybus because people confided in him almost without hesitation.

On reaching Trafalgar Square he was not at all surprised to see Mark Gannett getting out of a taxi in front of Cinaro's. Pybus never questioned coincidence, for he believed that the morning's chance was followed by the afternoon's related consequence—it was simply another ex-

ample of the law of averages at work.

"Gannett," a tall man in a raincoat said. "Good-looking blighter, eh, Mr. Pybus."

"Do you think so?" The blue eyes considered his confidant with interest. "I suppose he has a quality of—ah—brash good looks."

"Exactly, sir. By the way, I'm Cato, constable, Central C.I.D. I know you by sight, sir."

Pybus beamed and shook the man's unwilling hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Cato?"

"Thank you, sir. But you—well, you shouldn't shake my hand. I'm only a constable, sir."

"Oh, come. We are all God's creatures, I hope. So that is Gannett? He looks shorter than the newspaper pictures suggest."

"Funny that, sir, I've noticed it myself. He's quite a public figure."

"Let us say, notorious. Dear, dear, he's coming out again, with a lady."

"Nice little—I mean, striking, don't you think, sir?" Cato nodded omnisciently. "That's Jennie Carrick. Never photographed, of course, but *I* know, not that I'm partial to redheads myself."

"No?" Pybus came out of a deep study. "Perhaps you're right. I wonder where they're going now?"

"Richmond Hill, I expect, sir. Got a house there—'The Laurels.' He's got money all right—Mrs. Gannett left him quite a pile. That's why he married her in the first place, of course."

"We mustn't be uncharitable, Mr. Cato. Perhaps he didn't kill the poor woman."

"Him!" Cato's scorn was savage. "I'll stake a year's pay that he did!"

"Your vehemence is impressive. Does he live at 'The Laurels' with his —h'm—friend?"

"He certainly does! She kept out of the trial all right. Left her home for him, I've heard. Completely crazy about him. 'The Mystery Woman,' the papers called her."

"Well, well. You have been most informative, Mr. Cato. Thank you, and good morning." Pybus touched the brim of his velour hat and gave the constable a parting smile, then ambled toward Charing Cross.

"Old VIP," Cato told a patrolling colleague, who paused for a chat. "Funny old buzzard. Polite, too. Shook my hand." He held it out to prove it.

"Got a heart," the uniformed constable suggested. "Not like a certain ruddy sergeant I could name."

Pybus went on his way, unaware that his presence had initiated a libelous inter-Service discussion that would have shocked him.

He discovered that he could get almost to the foot of Richmond Hill by District train and reached his destination in time to eat a modest lunch in a small restaurant.

On the last leg of his journey to Richmond Hill, content after his meal, Pybus walked a little way along the bank of the Thames, ad-

miring sunny water glittering against a background of tinted leaves. He felt profoundly poetical, but there was only a sated and bleary-eyed duck as an audience for some apt quotations from Shakespeare.

He sauntered across Petersham Road and followed the ascending path, through the grass of Petersham Common, toward the Terrace, which is generally regarded as Richmond Hill. He moved thoughtfully, his umbrella trailing—a plump and beneficent old Pan, if one can visualize the gentle god garbed in the carefully circumscribed habit of the British Civil Service.

The Laurels stood well back from the road, in the usual quarter acre, hidden by screening trees. It looked like a decent, discreet house, the sort of house that always seems to appear in detective magazines, tersely captioned: *Where the dreadful crime occurred.*

But old Pybus did not pause in his progress. He found a small public house in Queen's Road and went into the empty saloon bar.

The landlord welcomed him, drew him a pint of brown ale, and joined him with a small gin.

"A visitor you say, sir? Ar, 'istorical, Richmond is. And stories? I could tell you dozens."

"I'm sure you could. And thereby hangs a tale, as Shakespeare so frequently repeats."

"Indeed, sir? Just goes to show, doesn't it? I've got one of 'is mottoes 'ere in this very 'ouse."

"No?" Pybus hid a small expression of distaste. "But you'll have a drink with me?"

"I don't mind if I do, sir. Thank you. 'Ere's to you."

"Your health, landlord."

"As I was saying, stories—dozens of 'em. The landlord became confidential. "Why, just around this very corner there's a *real* murderer living in the very 'ouse where 'e done it."

"Good gracious! Is he dangerous?"

"Don't you let that worry you, sir. You're safe enough. Gannett, Mark Gannett is the chap's name."

"Bless me, I thought he was tried?"

"That's 'e was, *and* acquitted." The landlord laid a forefinger on the side of his pink nose. "But don't let it fool you, sir. 'E 'ad a clever lawyer, real clever. And many a time this Gannett 'as 'ad a drink right 'ere at this very bar where you're standing."

"Has he indeed?" Pybus moved slightly away, taking his plump arms from the mahogany. "And he still comes here?"

"*Not* while I'm landlord 'e don't! No, sir. 'E's living in that 'ouse with 'is fancy bit. Shameful, I call it. I'll tell you something else—'e's setting 'is cap at Annie Dakers that serves in Billings' Caif, down in the Quadrant."

"He is? But what about his present—ah—lady?"

"Tired of 'er, I shouldn't wonder.

'E's the sort that throws them aside like a used glove—that's it, a used glove." Pleased with his simile, the landlord pressed another ale on Pybus—"on the 'ouse."

The little man wandered out an hour later and went into the town by devious ways. He found a cinema that was showing a violently bloodthirsty film of murder and sudden death. With a bag of toffees for company, he spent a breathless two hours in quite ecstatic enjoyment and then saw the program round again, partially disturbed by a confidential man at his side who was a martyr to his feet and insisted on whispering the whole sorry tale of his fallen arches between the gunshots.

After a refreshing tea Pybus found that it was dark and a faint mist was rising from the river. He turned up his coat collar, sauntering on the darker side of the road to The Laurels. He crept onto the grounds, moving round to orient himself.

There were no lights in the front, but at the back the kitchen was fully illuminated. The blind was up and the top of the window was down.

Pybus peered in—he was no more than a substantial shadow in the night.

The woman, Jennie Carrick, was putting on her coat. Gannett was standing by the fireplace, darkly handsome. The two were apparently at the end of a bitter argument.

"Oh, drop it, for God's sake!" His harsh voice was loud. "My life's my own, isn't it?"

"I never said it wasn't, did I?" Jennie Carrick was strident: she had been weeping. "I left a decent man for you, and here you are running round with that Dakers woman."

"So what? We're not married or anything, are we?"

"No, damn you, nor can we be. But there must be some sort of law to protect me."

"Stop nagging, if you can't do anything else. I never said I was leaving you or anything, did I?"

"Maybe not—oh, what's the good? I'm going to the flicks. You can do what you like, but I warn you, Mark Gannett, one attempt to drop *me* and I'll talk."

"About what?" His cynicism was blatant. "I've been tried and acquitted, haven't I?"

"You—" She slammed the kitchen door and stormed past Pybus, not a foot from his shrinking but invisible body.

When he heard her footsteps die away, he gave a sigh of distress and looked in the window again, watching Gannett tidy himself in front of a mirror, using a small brush on his mustache. He was frankly admiring himself in the glass; then he finally fetched his hat and coat, put them on, and turned out the light.

Old Pybus watched him go, showing no elation when he noticed the back door was left unlocked. After

thirty minutes he decided it was safe to go in, and he did so boldly.

Part of the equipment he always carried in his crowded pockets was a small pencil-flashlight. He used it on his careful excursion through the house.

He found the room where Mrs. Gannett had died—at least, he presumed it was that for the door was locked on the outside and a white chalk outline still remained on the floor, following the contours of a human body. He marveled at the callousness of a man who could still live near such a room, and wondered what mad alchemy of desire enabled Jennie Carrick to endure proximity to the echo of murder. But he shrugged off both thoughts—the queerness of human beings in such circumstances was a never-ending puzzle to this calm and passionless man.

Pybus was a natural prober. He always maintained he had a suspicious mind. He appeared to accept everything he was told, but he was seldom convinced. This attitude he also brought to material things and usually distrusted what he saw, particularly if it did not fit in with his ideas of accepted behavior.

Which was why he pondered long and carefully when he found a small hand vacuum cleaner under a loose floorboard in the attic. He considered the thing patiently, tutted gently, and put it back, replacing the floorboard.

His wanderings carried him through the bedrooms and even to the bathroom, where he paused to admire Gannett's pair of excellent Solingen razors. A user of an old-fashioned razor himself, he wondered how Gannett had acquired these finest of all shaving steels. He toured the rest of the house, down to the cellar where he scrutinized the excellent central heating boiler that served every room.

Reluctantly he then decided he had done a satisfactory night's work and began the long journey back to north London and his beloved Hornsey.

Wandering up Tottenham Lane in the chill night, he reached his own quiet and orderly house at eleven o'clock. Mrs. Dockens, twice as stout and almost twice as large as her employer, greeted him with clucks, shaking her white head.

"And you out with no overcoat, Mr. P.! You'll catch your death, you will, really. You set right down by the study fire and I'll bring you a buttered rum this very minute."

Old Pybus settled comfortably in front of the fire, donning his worn slippers, and stroking the sleek Persian head of Black Joe. His professional problems he brushed aside with the entrance of Mrs. Dockens carrying a neatly laden tray.

The Commissioner had asked for a report in the morning, and he received a carefully phrased, ambiguous statement which said precisely nothing, laced with Civil Service caution that even nothing should be

accepted with reserve. But the Commissioner made no objections. He knew Pybus and told his personal secretary, "Cagey ol devil, Sims. Utters a lot of disarming nonsense, phrased like a Blue Book, which doesn't say a thing. But brainy! Gad, I wish I had his head—he'll bring home the bacon, bet you he does." Out of perversity Sims was tempted to bet five shillings to the contrary; but he remembered his position in time.

Chief Inspector Brentlake hid his displeasure when a knock brought in Pybus with the contrite expression of a pup possessing a guilty conscience.

"Ah, Mr. Pybus. Need me? I've got a great deal to do."

"I'm sure you have. You must forgive me, but cold wisdom, as Shakespeare said, is waiting on superfluous folly. Not, let me add, that—ah—there is any personal intention in the remark. I am not, by nature, a carping man."

"I'm sure you aren't." Brentlake was openly frowning. He thoroughly distrusted the soft approach. "Do you need my help, or something?"

"Not really. Merely a trifle." Pybus put his umbrella handle to his excellent teeth—an habitual precursor, had Brentlake known it, of a fact to be used like a rapier. "Did your young men search Gannett's attic in their investigations?"

"What was that?" Brentlake leaned forward. "Exactly what are you suggesting, Mr. Pybus?"

"A loose floorboard behind the door. Did they find it?"

"I've not heard about it. Why?"

"How unfortunate. I am—h'm—in a position to know there is such a thing; but, of course, it could easily have been overlooked, particularly in such an obvious murder."

"Well?"

Pybus smiled in sweet amiability, then delivered his thrust.

"There is a hand vacuum cleaner concealed there."

"I don't—but what's wrong with that, confound it!"

"An ingenious little adjustment has been made which enables the instrument, when turned on, to blow out instead of—ah—suck in."

"But what—good God, the dust!"

"Precisely, the dust."

"You mean . . . ?" There was no doubt of Brentlake's attention now.

"I venture to suggest that as the house has a most elaborate central heating plant, Gannett probably stoked up the fires on the night of the murder to put full pressure into the pipes and set the control in the murder room wide open. That would retard the cooling of the body quite considerably. I believe Gannett used the vacuum cleaner to spray a little fine dust over the floor and over his dead wife."

"I don't really see —"

"Was there food in the stomach, Chief Inspector?"

"No."

"There you have careful timing and some forethought, particularly

as there was no stomach corollary. Gannett killed his wife, left on the central heating, which would eventually burn itself out for lack of fuel, and went away to his well established alibi, after first disposing of the gun."

Brentlake pondered this with a somewhat respectful eye on his guest, who shrank self-effacingly into his chair.

"But why the dust?" Brentlake asked at last.

"Let me ask; was not the body in a—ah—somewhat parlous state after so many days?"

"Yes, it certainly was. It was found, as you may know, when the milkman told the man on the beat that his deliveries were not being taken in—he knew Mrs. Gannett had not gone away."

"That, and the dust, made establishment of the precise time of death rather uncertain, I believe, Chief Inspector. There are scientific data relating to a decomposing cadaver, but in a dry, warm house and with atmospheric conditions controlled, the data are not—er—always reliable. Yet the impact of the fine dust could have been psychologically effective, with the other facts, to gull even well trained men. I believe Gannett's alibi was probably considerably strengthened rather than weakened by the findings? To the expert eye, the corpse must have appeared as having been in the murder room longer than it really was. Remember, even the expert can be fooled by the visual, seemingly corroborative factor which induces him to accept what he sees."

Brentlake meditated aloud. "Gannett was proved to be absent well before the supposed time of the crime and the open kitchen window suggested an intruder or a burglar. Yes, the time factor of death was very clearly on his side, and his alibi witnesses were irreproachable—" Brentlake's face darkened and he smacked his desk with a violence that made Pybus jump. "And *where* does all this get us? When a man has stood trial and been found Not Guilty—frankly, Mr. Pybus, you have merely added details to our own beliefs with which we could not convince the jury."

When Pybus eventually left Brentlake, he also left an irate officer who was out of tune with the world. The little man's plump face wore a grieved look, but because he believed the improbable can happen and because of an unusual feeling of pertinacity, he was hovering near The Laurels at tea time, gazing doubtfully at the house.

He hopped swiftly behind a tradesman's delivery truck when he heard the front door slam and saw Gannett, red with anger, come storming out and stride down the hill. Pybus diagnosed another, perhaps more violent quarrel, and waited patiently for no clear reason —unless it was because the hackles of his suspicions were up.

Boldly, an hour later, old VIP

ventured across the road and crept toward the kitchen. The house was silent.

He thrust his head round the back door and the instinct, the practiced and time-engendered instinct of the manhunter—he was that in spite of everything—told him something was wrong. The atmosphere did not "gel" (he tutted under his breath at the crude, descriptive word). The spirit of the house was somehow utterly wrong.

On light feet he entered and went through the rooms, his heart beating quickly at his own temerity.

He found Jennie Carrick in the bathroom. The sight made him shudder and he stared at the bloodied throat. He started at his own exclaimed "Oh!" and craned to read the note stuck into the mirror edge.

Mark,

I cannot endure it another moment. You're tired of me. I've asked you to give up that Dakers woman, and now I'm frightened after our row today. I'm really frightened of you and I went into *her* bedroom and saw—Mark, I hope you will be very, very sorry for what you've done to me.

Jennie

The pathos of it disturbed him deeply. He looked at the tragic corpse, his mind a fertile field where many phantoms walked; then practical considerations took charge. He crouched to study the throat gash and the razor, fallen from her hand.

"Nymph, in thy orisons—" He bit off Hamlet's words abruptly, questioning the indifferent walls. "A bad cut. He could have . . . Yes, I think so." He took up the razor, scrutinizing it.

Several emotions moved him. In his careful way he considered every factor; then, suddenly, he snapped the razor shut, put it into his pocket, and added the crumpled suicide note.

From the cupboard he took the second of the Solingen razors, holding it firmly with a pair of tweezers from his useful miscellanea. He studied the latent prints on the black bone handle with a small lens, then went to the bedroom and found one of Gannett's silver military hairbrushes. He checked both sets of prints, nodding in satisfaction.

Hesitantly, then competently, he dabbled the razor in the congealing blood. He held the dead woman's right wrist. There was cadaveric rigidity but the hand was sufficiently open for the handle of the razor to be slipped inside. Delicately and with infinite care Pybus pressed the bone handle against the unresisting fingertips so that a line of prints would appear, the print of the small finger resting just below the pinion that held the steel in place.

He considered the result. The fingerprints he had superimposed were poor, not much more than smudges; but examination would prove them unmistakable. He

dropped the open razor close to the body.

Ten minutes later he stopped a constable on patrol, produced his credentials, and suggested that all was not well at The Laurels.

The Richmond police were swift in action. The divisional surgeon spoke emphatically in favor of suicide, but the sharp-eyed Detective Inspector in charge was openly cynical.

His contempt was biting.

"These clever ones!" He held out the razor on a piece of card. "Gannett's prints—they check with dozens of others, and that woman's prints on top. Pressed on *after* she was dead—any fool can see that. And if that's not enough, he overreached his self-confidence by getting away with the first murder. Why, hang it, he put the razor upside down in her right hand so that she couldn't have used it that way, even if she *had* killed herself!"

When Gannett returned home at last, a police officer told him he was wanted at the station; and there, in the tidy charge room—in the presence of V. I. Pybus, his plump face the tautly austere embodiment of disinterested justice—the charge was made in the formal, implacable tones used in that most dread of accusations.

Mark Gannett, at first confident and cocky, then uneasy and frightened, listened and jumped back, crying out in a great shouting voice, "No, no! In the name of Almighty God—*NO!*"

The struggle was a violent and ugly thing. Gannett was fighting for his life, endowed with the bitter strength of the unjustly accused, until, borne down by impartial men, he was taken to a cell.

Pybus was weary when he reached home that night. Mrs. Dockens exclaimed at his white face and doctored him fussily.

When he was at last alone, he took a great Bible on his knees, the Bible that had guided his family for many generations.

He opened it and glanced at the pages with old and tired eyes, a sorry little man crouched in the corner of his big chair.

He took out his pen, turned to one of the flyleaves, and wrote in a date next to the last of a long list of names. The inked date against the name bracketed with his own—the name which read *Jennie Carrick Pybus*—dried, and he closed the Book.

We published Jane Speed's "first story" in the March 1963 issue of EQMM, and now we offer you Jane Speed's second story. It is a fine second effort (a writer's second story is often more difficult to sell than the first), and it justifies our original confidence in this new writer's talent. To paraphrase what we said about Jane Speed's first, her follow-up is a story of comprehension and impact—or to portmanteau the two words, her second story is compact—and subtly observed . . .

THE LISTENING GAME

by JANE SPEED

ELLIE swam lazily across the big public pool for the second time, then hoisted herself up at the side and climbed out. It was just a little after 10:30 on a Sunday morning and the pool was still invitingly uncrowded; but she decided she'd had enough.

She pulled off her cap and shook out her damp hair as she walked to the end of the pool and up the bank of broad concrete steps to the top one where she'd left her towel. She dried off her freckled young arms, dutifully applied suntan lotion, put on her dark glasses, and dropped down on her towel with a philosophical sigh.

Paid on Monday, broke by Sunday. No help for it, that's the way she was. So, of necessity, she had developed a flair for discovering the most inexpensive things to do on her day of rest. And of all the free and near-free wonders the city had thus far yielded up, this great green pool was her favorite. By two o'clock, when she usually left, the place would be so clotted with people it would be impossible to move in any direction, in or out of the water, without stepping on someone or being stepped on; but for the next few hours there was nowhere she'd rather be.

Ellie planted her chin happily on her interlaced fingers, and her bright, inquisitive eyes began to set the scene for the private little game she amused herself with.

Far below, three children darted out of the women's dressing room and flicked in and out of the shallow end of the pool. With barely a pause they came sprinting diagonally up the broad steps, flashed in a wet whirlwind of dusky limbs past Ellie, then stopped abruptly, panting and giggling, on the top step just beyond her feet. She turned to watch them as they fought playfully over their one ragged towel—two sisters (seven and eight?—or a stunted nine and ten?) with their little brother

in tow. The sagging bathing suit of the younger girl was held together across her scrawny shoulder blades with a large safety pin. The older one, clearly in charge, asserted her authority in piercing tones. "Pablito! You-don't-mind-me-I-tell-Mama-she-lick-you-good!" It was a threat that invariably quelled him—for at least five seconds. Suddenly the towel was flung down and the three of them, as if on a single impulse, sped down the steps and back into the water.

Smiling, Ellie turned back in time to witness the dainty ascent of a well turned-out thirtyish woman who was picking her way carefully among the towels and inert bodies to the space on the top step just ahead of Ellie. Most of the lower steps were filled now, but this woman would in any case have chosen a high place where she would be less disturbed by people on their way to and from the water. It was obvious she had no intention of going near it herself. She had come for the sole purpose of improving the already rich tan on her sleekly oiled body. With meticulous care she tied a triangle of bright-colored cotton over her silver-blonde hair, then removed her beach sandals and stretched out to join the company of dedicated sunbathers. Ellie always marveled at what a patient breed they must be, lying unmoving for hours, like so many glistening corpses.

Raising herself on her elbow, Ellie gazed speculatively at the refreshment stand that stood in a fenced-in area at the opposite end of the pool. A hot dog would taste good—but not good enough, she decided, to bother going for it. Instead, she contented herself with watching the progress of two women who came walking along in front of the bottom step, looking up, searching for an empty space.

They stopped and the younger one pointed up, then they started the climb toward Ellie. Even from a distance she could see a strong resemblance between them and she thought at first they must be mother and daughter—one seemed a faintly blurred and thickened version of the other. But as they settled themselves on the step just below her, Ellie saw that the younger one was not as much younger as she had thought. Sisters, Ellie amended idly, as she rolled over on her back and closed her eyes against the glare of the sun.

Instantly, magically, there took place that change of emphasis from sight to sound which never failed to astonish and delight Ellie. While her eyes were open and her mind was absorbed in the panorama of color, shape, and movement, the multitude of conversations taking place simultaneously all over the steps blended together into an indistinguishable roar, punctuated by the shrieks of children in the pool below.

But as soon as the distractions of

the eye were shut out, the sense of hearing leaped to the fore, picking up actual words in Ellie's immediate vicinity. As she listened drowsily, she was secretly entertained by entire conversations and fragments of others drifting in on one another. It was, Ellie reluctantly admitted, a kind of eavesdropping. But really now, what was the harm, she argued back at her plaguey conscience. All she ever overheard was silly, aimless chatter, nothing of any possible importance.

"Where do you suppose Clyde *is*?" came the petulant voice of the older woman seated in front of Ellie.

"He ought to be along soon. There must have been a big line in the men's dressing room."

"How's he *ever* going to find us way up here?"

"We'll just have to watch for him."

"Why you wanted to drag us over here anyhow and this our last day in New York . . ."

"I told you I thought it might be relaxing."

"Well, my *goodness*, we can do all the relaxing we want on the boat. I was hoping I'd get to see a few of the sights around here before we sailed."

"I'm sorry, Thelma."

"It's all very well for *you*, you live here now. And Clyde's always coming here on business. But I've never been to New York before. Do you realize I didn't even get to *see* Radio City Music Hall?" She heaved a gusty sigh, then droned on. "Well, maybe on our way back. Though when that's going to be, I don't know. Two months, three months—Clyde's so *vague*. I couldn't even tell anyone at home when to expect us back for sure."

Ellie felt a whoosh of motion and a shower of drops as the three children catapulted by again to pounce, with shouts of laughter, on their scrap of towel.

"Of all the nerve!" spluttered the older woman in front. "Right over our towels with their *dirty* feet." She raised her voice in the direction of the children. "You there! Where's your mother?"

The only answer was a burst of smothered giggles, half apprehensive, half derisive.

"Well . . ." the woman drew the word out threateningly, "you won't find it such a laughing matter when my husband comes, let me tell you."

"Thelma, please."

"Well, *somebody* has to teach them manners. Honestly, Ruth, it's no wonder I worry about you here alone in New York with—with all *kinds* of people."

"Oh, Thelma, please don't start that again."

"Clyde does look in on you when he comes to New York, now doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does."

"I hope so. I just *hate* the idea of going off to Europe and leaving you here alone. After all, I promised Mama when she died that I'd look after you."

"Thelma, I am a big girl now. I have been for quite some time. I wish you'd try to understand that."

"Well, I'll tell you something I *never* will understand. Why all of a sudden you just up and left a perfectly good job in Cleveland and moved here—as if you were mad at us or something."

"Well, I did. And there's no point in talking about it."

"It isn't as though we haven't always tried to make you feel at home. You didn't think Clyde minded having you, did you? Why, he thinks the *world* of you."

"Thelma—"

"Oh, there's Clyde now, isn't it? Yes, that's him. Clyde!" she called loudly. "Yoo-hoo—here we are!"

"He can't hear you with all this noise."

"It's all right. He sees us now. He's coming up. Let's move over a little and make room for him. People certainly *do* crowd in on you here, don't they?"

Surreptitiously, Ellie opened her eyes for a second behind her dark glasses and squinted up at the much heralded Clyde. Despite a receding hair line and just the hint of a paunch, he cut quite a trim and handsome figure as he spread out his towel and sat down beside his loquacious and obviously high-strung wife.

"What on earth took you so long? Ruth and I've been here for *ages*."

"Pretty jammed in the dressing room. Say, that water looks great. How about a swim?"

"Oh, of course not. I had my hair set just before we left. If I go swimming now I'll get on that boat tomorrow morning looking like a witch."

"Well. We wouldn't want that. Ruth?"

"Oh, no, Clyde. Not now. Maybe later."

"Okay. Might as well settle back and enjoy the sun, then."

"Pa-bli-to . . ." came a teasing singsong to the left.

It reminded the older woman of her recent grievance. "Those *awful* children. Do you know what they did, Clyde?"

"No, dear. What did they do?"

"Pranced right up here and stepped *all* over our towels. Look—look at that smudge in the corner."

"Too bad, dear. Children are thoughtless."

"Thoughtless! That's putting it mildly. I wish you'd say something to them about it."

"If they do it again, I'll speak to them," he said, closing the subject firmly. "Wonderful view you get from up here, isn't it?"

"Of what? A public swimming pool! That's something to write home about, I *must* say."

The man sighed, and a faintly disagreeable silence fell over the three. Then, so suddenly that Ellie jerked in spite of herself, the older woman uttered a sharp ejaculation.

"Oh, Clyde!"

"Yes—what? What's the matter?"

"Did you remember to get that prescription for my sleeping pills filled?"

"Yes, of course. You know I wouldn't forget."

"Well, that's a relief. Believe me, I don't want to go off to any strange place without those. They say the plumbing in Europe's just *awful.* Who knows what the beds will be like."

"Don't worry about it. I told you I got them."

"I've just been sitting here trying to think of anything we might have forgotten."

"Well. While you're thinking, why don't I go over to the refreshment stand and get us a little something. What would you like, Thelma?"

"Oh, I don't want anything to eat. I'm parched already and that would only make it worse. Just bring me something to drink. Though they probably don't have *anything* I really like."

"Probably not. But it'll be cold and wet. Ruth? How about you."

"Nothing for me, thanks."

"All right. I shouldn't be long."

After a slight pause the older woman laughed a little. "Poor Clyde. He just *can't* sit still this morning. He's more nervous about this trip than he likes to admit. Been edgy all week long. Well, the whole thing was his idea and I guess he wants to be sure everything comes off *just* so. Funny."

"What do you mean? What's funny?"

"To think that last spring we were having a little trouble, Clyde and I. Oh, yes. Not long after you left. I didn't write to you about it. No sense worrying you. But actually," she lowered her voice, "he asked me for a divorce."

"He did?"

"Yes. Can you *imagine?* Clyde? Well, I squashed that little notion in a hurry, I can tell you."

"Are you sure—"

"Of course I'm sure. Well, here we are, off to Europe on a second honeymoon, aren't we?"

"But Thelma—"

"Oh, Ruth, honey, you have a lot to learn about men. Take it from me, they are like little boys, especially around Clyde's age. They just don't know what they want from *one* minute to the next. The only thing a wife can do at a time like that is to stand firm and wait till it blows over. Well, you'll find out all about it for yourself when you have a man of your own. Believe *me*, though, it's no picnic."

"Thelma—I—"

"Oh, here comes Clyde already. Oh, honestly! Those children again! Did you see that? They nearly knocked the cup out of his hand. Don't they *ever* look where they're going? If they were mine they wouldn't behave like that, let me tell you."

"Here you are, Thelma." Clyde sounded harried.

"Oh, Clyde, you poor thing, you're positively *shaking*. No wonder, the way those awful children plowed right into you."

"Will you take this for God's sake before I spill it all?"

"All right, I—oh, it's orange drink, and you *know* I hate orange. Didn't they have *any*thing else?"

"Obviously not! Just drink it, will you?"

"Oh, all right." There was a pause, then an exclamation of disgust. "Ugh! Awful sweet stuff. It isn't even *good* orange drink. Here, do something with this cup, will you?"

"What?—oh, yes, here. I'll take it."

"Really, that left such an *awful* taste in my mouth. Place probably isn't even sanitary."

"Look, Thelma, if you're not going in the water, why don't you stretch out and get a little sun?"

"I guess I might as well. But the sun makes me sleepy, so don't let me lie here too long now, will you? I don't want to start out on this trip as red as a beet."

"All right, Thelma."

"Well, just don't go off swimming and *forget*. Let's see, it's ten minutes of twelve. Don't let me sleep past one."

"I'll be watching, Thelma."

After a certain amount of shifting about, quiet settled over the trio in front, and Ellie, lulled by the throb of sound all around her, dozed shallowly, half roused from time to time by disembodied words and phrases that floated in and out of a dream she was having of herself in a gigantic rowboat bound for Europe. "Pa-bli-to" . . . "Who's got the dime?" . . . "Give me the towel" . . . "So long, Thelma" . . . "The dime is for all of us" . .

"Pablito!" The sharp cry pulled Ellie abruptly awake. "You come back with those!"

Ellie sat up blearily just in time to see the children next to her in a three-way tug of war over a bag of potato chips. Almost immediately the bag split and the chips spilled out over the steps. The children scrabbled about, scooping them up and stuffing them into their mouths.

Ellie faced toward the front and sat cross-legged, gazing in a kind of contented stupor out beyond the woman who still lay on the step below. The husband and sister must have gone down for a swim. Ellie squeezed out a squiggle of suntan lotion and absently rubbed it on her nose and across her cheeks which were feeling a little tender.

She wondered how long she had slept and glanced, mildly curious, at the big clock. Her back straightened in amazement. Was it possible? Nearly two o'clock! No wonder her nose felt tender. She had intended to be gone by this time.

In a panic of haste she collected her things and scrambled to her feet. Then, as she started to go, her eye fell again on the woman directly below and Ellie paused. Somehow

she felt vaguely responsible. The woman *had* asked to be wakened no later than one. Ellie peered out over the crowd again with some hope of spotting the husband and sister. But it was impossible to pick out anyone in that churning sea of people.

Ellie shifted uncertainly from one foot to the other, shy about waking the woman herself. She was not, after all, supposed to have been listening. Still, it was plain to see the poor creature was getting a bad burn. Even in the bleaching glare of the sun, her shoulders looked pink.

Resolutely, Ellie stooped and began to reach out her hand. Then she paused. For the first time it registered on her that not only were the other two gone, their towels and everything they had brought with them were gone, too.

Now why should they have done that? Nobody took towels down to the water. Nobody took towels away unless—unless they were leaving the pool.

Numbly, Ellie stood up. Bits of the overheard conversation came crowding back into her mind. She stole a look to the right where the silver-blonde woman still lay on the step, on her stomach now, soaking up the sun.

Ellie turned her head woodenly from the blonde to the woman below her and then back again. Surely they looked no different—just two sunbathers, lying motionless the way sunbathers usually do.

Oh, please God, surely there was no difference . . .

A sudden ripple of laughter erupted at her left and the three children streaked past again, each one skimming brazenly over the towel of the woman below Ellie. The foot of one of the children struck the woman's hand, knocking it over the side of the step.

Now! thought Ellie—and waited, breathless, for the woman to raise her head in righteous fury.

The sun smiled on with unfaltering candor. But Ellie, staring at the dislodged hand as it dangled limp and unmoving, shivered.

Then she turned, clutching her cap and towel, and stumbled and pushed her way blindly through the crowd . . .

So long, Thelma, so long . . .

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE PAPERBACKS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Davis, Gordon	COUNTERFEIT KILL	Gold Medal	40¢	10/31
Williams, Charles	A TOUCH OF DEATH	Gold Medal	40¢	10/31

". . . how can you be sure about them? They are made of mercury and starlight. Their days are so much brighter and their nights so much darker . . ."

INCLUDING GOODBYE

by PAUL W. FAIRMAN

IT WASN'T A HOMICIDE CALL IN THE beginning—just a squall from this irate female taxpayer about some tenant or other. But all the local cars were busy at the moment and it was in Garth's direction, so he said he'd stop off on the way home.

The location was an old brownstone in the West Seventies—on a street still trying to look decent; a worried street, hoping desperately that some kind of reclamation would set in before the slums got there.

The complainant was a hostile old battleax in a faded blue bathrobe and Japanese sandals. She said, "I'm a reasonable woman, Officer, but enough is enough. I want that girl out of here and I want her out tonight."

Garth looked at his watch. It was late—11:40. "Does she refuse to leave?"

"How do I know? She won't even open the door."

"All right. Let's have a look. Upstairs?"

The angry woman led the way, the soles of her sandals slapping each step with self-righteous determination. As they moved higher, the sound of music increased.

It had come but faintly to the lower floor but now Garth recognized it—a standard, dreamy rendition of *Star Dust;* and even in this squalor he caught, gossamer in his memory, the magic of a single moment—the moment to which every man is entitled once. Once in each lifetime and then—never again; when the right girl and the right answer and the right time blend exquisitely into high and perfect promise.

Garth's girl of that moment had been a plump goddess, and the Olympian musicians had been a tinny combo doing a one-night stand at a long-gone Policeman's Ball. But the promise of their moment, his and Lorrie's, had been kept—years of plans that were always ten dollars ahead, with reality always four dollars behind; years of normal hopes and disappointments, but with the big promise fulfilled in their daughter Nancy and in the ascending marks on the wall to show how she grew.

Nancy. Marks on the wall. Wonderful years.

And a sentimental cop. *Good lord!* Garth thought, and asked, "Is this the door, ma'am?"

Of course it was the door. What other door would it be with the cantankerous old woman standing there tense and outraged? She said, "Officer, so help me, that racket's been going on since four o'clock this afternoon. Over and over again —that same record. I knocked and knocked and she won't answer. Because she hasn't got the rent, I guess."

"Who is she?"

"Oh, just another one of these flibbertigibbets. They come mincing along with their hatboxes, acting as though your place isn't half good enough for them."

Garth's smile was the faintest of expressions. "That's a part of what they believe—if you haven't got front you haven't got anything."

"I wouldn't know about that," she sniffed. "I'm just a hard-working woman trying to make ends meet."

Garth knocked. Only the wailing saxophone answered. "She's probably not in there. She probably slipped out when you weren't around."

"I'm never any place *but* around. She's in there all right."

"If she refused to answer why didn't you go in with your passkey? You have the right."

"I haven't had one made yet. The last tenant walked away with the other key and I had to give her the only one I had."

"The lock wouldn't be very hard to break."

"Maybe not but it would cost five dollars to get it fixed. And why should I have to go around breaking locks in my own house?"

Garth peered in and saw that the holding lug had a slanting front surface. "Maybe it won't be necessary," he said, and took out his wallet. There was a stiff celluloid calendar in it that he carried for no special reason. It slipped the lug easily, and the door opened an inch or so. Garth put his hand on the door—and froze.

A fragrance had drifted out—a common enough perfume but it affected Garth strangely. It iced his hand and bristled the hairs on the back of his neck.

It was the same kind of perfume Nancy used.

Then reality took over again and Garth put the piece of celluloid away as he heard the old woman demand, "Now I want you to go in and tell that young lady this is the end."

Garth wanted to ask: Why do you hate her so much? But he didn't. He pushed the door open and entered the room.

It was very small, with a single shaded lamp throwing more shadow than light. The phonograph sat on a chair by the bed and as Garth snapped the *Off* button it moaned

so dismally that he quickly lifted the arm away from the record.

It was a shabby room, a bleak room, a room a girl had tried to brighten up in the various small ways they have. And now, with the phonograph silent, there was the stillness of a suddenly indrawn breath—as though a sob wanted to come from somewhere and couldn't.

The girl was on her side, kitten-coiled, eyes closed, upturned face relaxed and unstrained. She was probably twenty, Garth thought—a woman, but without having achieved any of the things for which a woman is born. In that sense, she was still a child.

He put his hands on her only to the extent absolutely necessary, then he picked up a folded card that was on the bed beside her. He dangled it on its purple cord and looked at it: a dance program from the Kentville High School Senior Prom, it said—a dance program with a single name, Robert Forrest, written after every number.

Garth dropped the program back where he'd found it, picked up the bottle of sleeping tablets by its cork, and counted the six tablets left on the bottom. Then he turned and went out, his lips tight.

The landlady, waiting outside, was frightened now. She questioned him with her eyes.

"Four o'clock you told me," Garth said, and the woman nodded.

Garth closed the door. "That was probably about the time she started dying. I'll have to use your phone, ma'am."

Her name was Penelope Thurston and she was from Kentville, a small upstate town. No mystery about it. There was evidence of this and more, and before phoning Kentville, Garth put through a call to a Chicago YMCA and asked for a young man named Charles Pender. He was asleep in a dormitory where there was no phone service, but they went and got him and after he'd been told he said, "Oh, my God, no!"

"We found the letter from you she got a couple of days ago," Garth said. Not much of a letter—just a note telling Penny where he was, wishing her luck, and implying in an off-hand way that he missed her; a letter Garth felt had been written after everything including goodbye had already been said.

"It—it—I don't know, Officer. It was just no good. I tried, believe me, but I couldn't get *close* to her. One day everything would be fine between us. Then the next day she was way off in the blue and I felt like a stranger. So when I got this Chicago offer I decided I'd better cut out."

"Did your leaving seem to bother her much?"

"It was hard to tell. She was a lot gayer than usual that last night, so maybe it did. Maybe she was put-

ting on an act. She did some modeling, you know, and she'd signed up for some dramatic lessons."

"Do you think there was anybody else? Another man?"

"I don't know, but not in New York. She stuck pretty much to herself. I think I was the only fellow she ever went out with there. I met her at a pop concert at Carnegie Hall—sat beside her and then walked her home."

"Then there's nothing more you can tell me?"

"I guess not, Officer—except she was an unhappy, mixed-up kid. I tried to do something about it and when I found I couldn't, I—well, I just cut out."

"I see."

"There *is* one thing—one thing more."

"What's that?"

"I don't want anybody to get the wrong idea but—well, I loaned her some money." Before Garth could comment, Charles Pender rushed on, "She was hard up, real hard up, and I happened to have a little money and loaned her a few bucks from time to time. I wouldn't mention it but I suppose her parents will be coming down now and maybe she left some notations about it or something. But if there's no record, I'd like you to forget it. I wouldn't take it back now anyhow. They were just small loans she needed badly and I know she'd have paid them back if—if she hadn't—"

"We found no record of any such loans."

"I'm glad! I'm glad you didn't," and Pender seemed honestly relieved.

Garth thanked him and apologized for getting him out of bed. Pender said that was perfectly all right, and added, "I'm sorry, damned sorry," and as Garth hung up, he was sure the boy had spoken sincerely.

The bereaved parents arrived shortly before noon the next day. Garth met them at the station—a big, gray man with the appearance of both inner and outer strength, and a nicely dressed woman whose beauty was marred by a stiff narrow mouth. Good middle-class people—Garth could see that instantly; people who did not flaunt their grief in public. Whatever had gone on before, they were dry-eyed and silent now.

The identification was not as bad as Garth had expected it to be, but that did not mean it was in any sense good. The father went through it like an automaton, not daring to speak or not able to.

The mother made the identification in a choked whisper. "It's Penny," she said, and turned away. Then she turned back, but the attendant had worked with such quick efficiency that there was nothing more to see.

With the worst over, Garth took them to a small room reserved for

such occasions and asked if he could get them anything. They probably did not hear him, he thought. The father stared at the wall. The mother looked at him through stricken eyes and asked, "Was there a man?"

"Penny knew a young man, yes," Garth told her. "She went out a few times with a boy named Charles Pender."

"That must account for it. Probably a no-good like Robert Forrest back home."

"I can't actually vouch for Pender but I got the impression over the phone that he was all right."

"Why, then? In God's name, why?"

"I thought perhaps you could give me some idea."

Mabel Thurston shook her head. "There was *no* reason—none. Penny was our sacred responsibility from the day of her birth. We never shirked it for one single moment."

Garth did not answer, hoping she would go on, and she did. "We watched over her like a treasure from her earliest childhood, and I don't mind telling you, Mr. Garth, there were times when we were deathly frightened."

"What frightened you, Mrs. Thurston?"

"Why, the younger generation itself. The things we read, the things we saw. Cars joyriding along country roads late at night . . . Oh, we have our share of juvenile delinquency, even if we are only a small town. Why once, three years ago when Kentville lost a silly football game to Stanton, they actually tore the grandstand down!"

"Then you were very careful of Penny's companions?"

"We certainly were. When she was younger she was in the house promptly, every night, an hour before sundown. Even in her last year of high school, ten o'clock was the absolute limit. Other youngsters roamed the streets, their parents not caring—but not our Penny."

It was interesting that the mother turned out to be the stronger of the two—at least, on this occasion. The father sat mute, as though his mind groped in a fog, as though he had no voice to cry out. But when Garth said, "A small town is fairly safe even after dark, isn't it?" the mother answered, "*No* unsupervised place is safe for a young girl after dark, Mr. Garth."

"There *are* problems, of course," Garth said for want of something better.

"And we recognized them. We definitely recognized them and built Penny's character with *all* life's problems in mind. We wanted to make her strong. Do you know what the most important thing in training a young mind is, Mr. Garth?"

"I imagine ideas on that sort of differ—"

"Dependability. John and I talked that over long ago and arrived at the same conclusion. A

child must be able to *depend* on its parents—on their word."

Grief glowed sharply in Mabel Thurston's eyes and Garth was sure she would rush on to keep from breaking down.

"They must know their parents care and they learn that through discipline as well as reward. Children subconsciously *want* to be guided and directed, Mr. Garth."

"I'm sure they do," Garth said and made mental note of the fact that as yet the word *love* had not been used. But this was in no sense criticism. He was sure that love was the cornerstone of all the principles Mabel Thurston believed in, was convinced of . . . or was she only now trying to convince herself? Either way, Garth felt sorry for her and her silent husband.

"We protected her even to the point of personal embarrassment," Mabel Thurston was saying.

"Personal embarrassment?" Garth asked, but Mabel Thurston went on with no indication of having heard him.

"There was the time of that dance—the Senior Dance at the high school. John and I talked it over and decided Penny shouldn't go because there was sure to be drinking and rowdiness. But she slipped away and went anyhow—with that Robert Forrest, the boy we'd especially warned her against."

"And you?"

"John went and got her. Right out on the floor during the dancing. That should have made her realize how concerned we were for her welfare."

"How long had Penny been away from home, Mrs. Thurston?"

"Almost two years. She left just after her eighteenth birthday. We were—well, we were stunned. John came down to New York and talked to her, but it did no good. She said she was of age and that he couldn't force her back. He came home broken-hearted. We decided that boy must have somehow turned her against us although we were sure she stopped seeing him after that dance. We thought she was truly sorry for the humiliation she caused her father."

If John Thurston was following this line of thought, he gave no sign. He sat mute, still staring at the wall.

"Penny was practically without funds, Mrs. Thurston. Had she got in touch with you at all?"

"No, and she had only to call and ask."

"I see."

Mabel Thurston turned to him in sudden desperation. "She could have had anything she asked for, Mr. Garth. We were her mother and father and we *cared!* We cared so terribly and she *knew* it. So, why, Mr. Garth. Please tell me *why!*"

"I wish I could," he said sincerely. Then, realizing this was doing no one any good, he eased the interrogation to a close. A little while

later, with all the arrangements made, he took them back to the station—and that just about ended it.

Just about . . . except for later that evening when he sat looking at his paper without seeing it and Nancy came down to ask her mother for an old stocking she wasn't using.

Garth studied his daughter for a moment, then said, "Muggins—"

"Yes, Dad?"

"A couple of months ago. That, ah—that young Griffin lad—the one I didn't like—"

"What about him?"

"Well, I was just thinking. My warning you off of him didn't—well, make you feel I was being—"

She stared at him for a moment, overcome with surprise. Then his out-of-character bit struck her so hilariously that she piled into his lap—all the lithe, seventeen-year-old wonder of her. She kissed his nose and shrieked, "That drip? Daddy! You're crazy!"

He pushed her away gently. "I guess maybe. But I'll tell you what. Take a look in my jacket pocket. I brought you something."

She went and got it, and took the beautiful perfume container out of its case, and was awed to a whisper. "Oh, Daddy! it must have cost a fortune!"

"It did. And now will you get rid of that dandelion juice you've been using? Pour it down the sink. I can't stand the stuff."

She laughed. It was like the tip of a feather running down his spine and he wondered: how can you be sure about them? They are made of mercury and starlight. Their days are so much brighter and their nights so much darker than ours. We can see the mistakes of others so clearly, but does that make what we think right? How can we ever be sure about them?

A little later, after Nancy had gone to her room, Lorrie looked up from her sewing with amusement in her eyes and said, "All right, Diamond Jim. What was that all about?"

He scowled and rattled his paper. "Shaddup, woman. Make yourself useful. Go make me a nightcap."

Lorrie grinned the grin that made her, in his eyes, forever young. "Yes, lord and master," she said demurely, and went to see about it.

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 259th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Meet a "new kind" of "detective" (we mean new or relatively new to fiction)—a next-door-and-one-of-your-own-neighbors housewife serving as a School Crossing Guard; you've seen them—wearing a special police hat, shoulder belt, brassard, and, of course, a shield (all not exactly designed to be chic) . . . an interesting "first story," with high emotional content and a genuine feeling for people . . .

As to the author herself, here is a quotation from her letter: "At present I am a Speech Therapist in the New York City School System. Aside from writing, which has been both my joy and my heartache since Brooklyn College days, I have recently produced and directed 'Carousel' and 'Guys and Dolls' for the Rosedale Players Guild, a local community theater . . . I am an aficionado of pop music, the Twist, and the Bossanova . . . My son-in-law calls me a 'kookie' grandma. Hm!"

A TALE TOLD OUT OF SCHOOL

by EUGENIA KLEIN

TESSIE COX, THE SCHOOL CROSSing Guard at her post on the corner of Lafayette Street and 120th Road, rubbed away a drop of rain that had splattered into her eye from the visor of her yellow-covered police hat. She did not notice, at first, the little boy who had come up behind her so unobtrusively and who stood looking at her with such solemn gray eyes. Sniffling slightly, the boy shifted his gaze to Tessie's white shoulder-belt with the shield, then to the brassard on her arm and the thick woolen ski pants tucked into her galoshes, and finally to the police hat on top.

"Mister—Lady—" his voice fumbled, "I fell—"

Tessie's eyes examined him briefly. "No wonder you fell. You've got your galoshes on the wrong feet and they're not even buttoned. How old are you, little boy?"

"Seven. I'm in second grade."

"You're old enough to know how to put galoshes on. Can't your mother help you with them?"

There was a breath of pause. The boy's eyes did not leave Tessie's face. "She's sleeping. Could you fix them, Mister Lady?"

Tessie grunted as she bent to remove the boy's galoshes and trans-

fer them to the proper feet. She straightened up with difficulty.

"You'd better hurry to school. You're late, you know."

"I don't care," the boy said matter-of-factly. "Mrs. Albion don't like me." He sniffled again and drew out a large man's handkerchief to blow his nose. "Are you a policeman, Mister Lady?"

"I'm a kind of policeman. And I'm not a mister. I'm just a plain lady."

"Could you arrest people?"

"Well, not exactly—" Tessie's tone betrayed a slight irritation. "Mostly, I'm supposed to take care of the children crossing the street. Like I'm supposed to cross you now."

The boy sighed.

"Well—aren't you going to school?" Tessie demanded.

"I forgot my milk money."

"Why don't you go back for it?"

"I can't go back. I'm scared."

"What are you scared about?"

Again there was a guarded pause.

"Are you afraid of getting punished?" Tessie asked gently.

The boy shook his head. "I'm just scared."

"What's your name?"

"Johnny Skoura. I live two blocks down."

"Johnny, you can't stand there in the rain with that cold. How much is your milk money?"

"Sixteen cents."

"How about if I lend it to you and you can ask your mommy for it at lunchtime and give it back to me then."

The boy took the coins Tessie fished out of her pants and put them in his pocket. He sniffled again. "I can't ask my mommy for it."

"Why not?"

"I told you. She's sleeping. She'll be sleeping for a long time."

"Won't she be up by lunchtime?"

Johnny shook his head. His eyes left Tessie's face and stared bleakly at the dripping street ahead of him. Making up his mind for him, Tessie took his arm firmly. She stopped a passing car and steered the boy across the street. With a resigned look, he began to plod along toward the school . . .

On her way home Tessie puzzled over Johnny Skoura, wondering if she ought to tell Mike, her burly, good-natured husband, and Donny, her high-school son, what the boy had said to her. Tessie took her recent September appointment as a School Crossing Guard very seriously. She filled out the daily U.F. 16 report form carefully. She was tactful, patient, courteous, competent, clean, neat, and she saluted properly.

There was, however, one aspect of the job that annoyed Tessie. This was the ruling that School Crossing Guards must not respond personally to requests for police services. Johnny Skoura had touched a sensitive spot. Recently, Tessie had taken it on herself to notify the local precinct desk of a fist fight

between two boys around whom a crowd had gathered. A patrolman was promptly despatched, but by the time he arrived, the fight was over and the boys were gone. The patrolman wrote up his report, glancing at her sideways and grumbling about "eager beaver women."

That night, when she had sought justification from Mike and Donny, they had kidded her about wanting to take over the Police Department. They had called her a busybody and warned her not to make a big production out of being a School Crossing Guard. No, Tessie decided, she'd better not discuss little Johnny Skoura with them.

At noon Tessie was back on her corner. The rain had let up and the children, crossing on their way home to lunch, were splashing in the puddles and larking with their dripping umbrellas. And there was Johnny again, trudging behind, his hat pulled down to his eyebrows, his shoulders hunched and both hands stuffed into his pockets.

The boy stood quietly beside Tessie with an air of waiting.

"Aren't you going home for lunch?" she finally asked.

"I'm not hungry."

"Why aren't you hungry? It's twelve o'clock."

"I don't feel so good."

Tessie touched his forehead. It was slightly warm.

"Tell your mother, Johnny. Maybe you won't have to go back to school this afternoon."

"I can't talk to my mother. She's going to be asleep a long, long time."

Tessie felt a twinge of impatience. "Now listen, Johnny—if you don't feel well, you go wake your mother up. She won't be mad at you if it's for something like that."

Johnny shook his head.

"How about your daddy then? Can't you call him where he works?"

"He works in the house. His leg got hurt when he was a soldier and he stays in a wheel chair all the time."

"Can't you tell *him* you don't feel well?"

"Daddy doesn't want me to bother him. He gave me breakfast this morning and then he went into his workroom. But I couldn't eat breakfast because I was so scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Of—daddy—and mommy—" Johnny's voice dropped.

A warning signal—*don't get involved*—rang in Tessie's mind. But the boy's eyes and face were too much for her.

"Were—they—fighting? Your daddy and mommy, I mean."

Johnny nodded.

"Well, by now I'm sure everything's all straightened out. You go home, Johnny. You'll see. If your mommy is sleeping I'm sure your daddy will give you some lunch. And then you'll feel much better."

The boy's tearless eyes carried a reproach that Tessie did not quite understand. After a moment he drew a breath. "I'll go home, Mister

Lady," he said. He started down the block hunching his shoulders again as he walked. Tessie had a sudden urge to call him back—but after all, what else could she say? And the warning signal was ringing again.

At one o'clock, sure that Johnny's cold would keep him home, Tessie was surprised to see him tagging along after the other children.

"Hi," she called. "How do you feel now? Did you eat your lunch?"

"Nobody gave me any. My breakfast is still on the table."

"Where was your daddy?"

"In his room, with the 'remember' gun."

"The remember gun? What in the world—Look here, Johnny, where was your mother?"

"Still in the bedroom—not moving."

Tessie felt an unaccountable chill run down her back. She knelt down until she could look into the boy's face. "Johnny, you've got to tell me the truth. Is there any real trouble at your house?"

Johnny nodded. His voice was almost a whisper. "When they were fighting this morning, mommy told my daddy she was going away forever. And daddy said he wouldn't let her. He would kill her first. Mommy laughed at him and said he couldn't stop her because he couldn't kill a fly. And then daddy killed her with the 'remember' gun and she isn't going to wake up any more. And then daddy told me to go to school and not bother him."

"That's a terrible story, Johnny! You're making it up, aren't you?" Tessie asked hopefully.

The gray eyes did not waver. "Mister Lady, you could go ask my daddy—"

Tessie straightened and pulled away. She could just see herself ringing the doorbell of a perfectly strange house and asking a perfectly strange man if he had murdered his wife that morning. "Johnny, you mustn't go around telling things like that about your parents. Lots of people have arguments. But they get over it and then everything's fine again."

"It's so quiet in mommy's room, Mister Lady."

"No more stories, Johnny—promise?"

Johnny turned his head and stared with cold eyes at the school in the distance. Reluctantly, he began to walk toward it.

As she watched him disappear, Tessie swung from anxious dismay at the thought that his words might be true to anger and irritation at the things that children were capable of telling. She recalled only too well some of the gruesome tales that Donny had gleefully made up to scare her. And yet there was something about this forlorn and detached little boy that was not so easily dismissed.

Vaguely she considered making a report on the U.F. 16, when the

voice of Police Officer Garrity blasted off with his usual raucousness as the cruising police car of the neighborhood slid to a stop in front of her. Tessie saluted smartly. Police Officer Garrity shot a sly glance at her.

"Mrs. Cox, I trust there haven't been any more major calamities such as fist fights that evaporate into thin air?"

"No, sir." Tessie stood at attention, but she was fuming.

"Well, if anything serious like a runaway shopping basket turns up, you won't forget to tell us now, will you?"

There was a roar of laughter from the two officers as the motor spun and the car pulled away. At that moment Tessie quit considering a U.F. 16 report. But more than ever she was determined to get to the bottom of things, with or without approval. There was only one safe place she could go for a few answers, and as she glanced at her watch, she knew that it was now or never.

Mrs. Albion was busy at her desk when Tessie beckoned to her from the doorway. The teacher looked up surprised, but went out into the hall.

"I'm Mrs. Cox," Tessie told her, drawing her away from the door. "I want to ask you about one of the children in your class."

"Has there been any trouble?"

"It's—well, it's just something he said. I kind of want to check on it."

"Which child is it?"

"Johnny Skoura. He's a funny little boy. Maybe it's none of my business—but—well, you know how kids exaggerate. I don't really believe him—but then he shouldn't go around talking like that. He said his father and mother had a fight this morning—and—well—" Tessie felt more foolish by the minute. "He said his father shot his mother and she would be sleeping for a long, long time and—"

Mrs. Albion shook her head. "That Johnny! I don't know what we're going to do with him. We've been trying to get to see his parents. But his father is disabled and doesn't leave the house. I believe he does some kind of repair work at home. And Johnny's mother works nights in a hat-check concession, so she can't be reached either."

"What did you want to see Johnny's parents for, Mrs. Albion?"

"Because Johnny is the prize story-teller of them all."

"You mean he makes up stories about other things too?"

"Early in the term he gave us all a terrible fright. He made a big to-do about there being a fire in the wardrobe closet. Well, I hope to tell you, the building was in an uproar. I rang the fire gong, got the whole school out on the sidewalk, the Fire Department came down—and there was no fire at all."

Tessie could not repress a gasp.

"Then he pulled another beauty just a week ago," Mrs. Albion went

on. "His desk is near the window, and suddenly he screamed that he had just seen a child's body fall past the window and into the street. Well, I tell you, every teacher on the second and third floors had to count their children twice over to make sure no one was missing—and the custodial staff went over every inch of ground outside the building. Of course, no one had fallen and there was no injured child. It turned out to be just another one of Johnny's whoppers."

"You mean Johnny is an out-and-out liar?"

"Well, let's say he's just an extraordinarily imaginative child. The day of the supposed fire, one of the other boys in the class was discovered later with a box of matches in his possession. And the day Johnny thought he saw a child fall past the window was a very windy day with papers blowing about outside. Nevertheless, the things he told us did *not* happen. If I were you, I wouldn't take what Johnny says too seriously. It's just his way of getting attention. To tell you the truth, we don't bother listening to him any more."

"Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Albion. You've taken a big weight off my mind."

At three o'clock that afternoon Tessie was at her post for the last time that day. Her face was stern when she saw Johnny Skoura shuffling along, obviously reluctant to go home. Putting regulations aside, she called to the boy. He came up to her, his eyes as disturbing as ever.

"Johnny, how about my sixteen cents? Did you ask your mommy or daddy for it?"

"But I told you—"

"Now Johnny, suppose I walk you back to your house and you can ask for the money right now."

The boy gazed at Tessie gravely, then shrugged. They walked together in silence, the schoolbag knocking against his legs, leaving muddy streaks on his pants.

Johnny's house was small, unpainted, and ill-kept. A leaning fence enclosed the yard. At the front door Johnny fumbled inside his coat and shirt and brought up a key tied around his neck on a frayed string.

He opened the door slowly and stuck his head inside with an air of listening. There was no sound or movement. Johnny lowered his books to the floor in the hallway and hesitantly moved ahead of Tessie into the living room. The shades were down and it took a few seconds for Tessie's eyes to become accustomed to the dark.

The living room appeared neglected and disorderly. Johnny put his finger to his lips. He drew her farther into the house and suddenly Tessie became aware of muffled sounds coming from a room at the back. The boy froze, and for an instant Tessie's heartbeat sounded in her own ears.

"He's in his workroom," Johnny whispered.

Johnny motioned to Tessie and she followed him again. They passed through the kitchen and she could see a partially filled bowl of milk and soggy cornflakes still standing on the table. At least that much of what the boy had told her about his breakfast was true. Then with a sudden start she realized that Johnny was opening the door to a bedroom just off the kitchen.

"Johnny," she whispered fiercely, "if she's asleep, you don't have to wake her up for the money."

The boy gestured again, his eyes glittering in the dark. As if hypnotized, Tessie followed him into the room. It was even darker there than the other rooms. Tessie could make out a large double bed with a disheveled quilt on it. A blonde woman lay in a distorted position, her head tilted back over the edge of the bed, her mouth open and one arm dangling loosely toward the floor.

Tessie reached for Johnny with a shocked gasp. She tried to pull him out of the room, but he stood rooted, staring at his mother. Tessie bent over him. "Johnny, come with me —" But the boy would not move.

As Tessie straightened up, she became sickeningly aware that a man in a wheel chair was behind her in the doorway, observing her and the boy and the figure on the bed in terrible silence. There was a gun in the hand resting on his lap. Tessie released Johnny and backed away.

"I—I'm a School Crossing Guard," Tessie murmured hoarsely.

The wheel chair rolled noiselessly into the room. Johnny turned to look at his father, the boy's face white in the shadows. But Tessie had no time to wonder long what Johnny's father was going to do or say—for, unexpectedly, the woman on the bed moved.

Moisture broke out on Tessie's forehead, and it was a few seconds before she realized that the woman was moving because she was alive.

The woman sighed, stretched, then sat upright, suddenly aware that there were other people in the room. For the man and Johnny there was instant recognition, but her eyes blanked at Tessie.

"She's a School Crossing Guard," her husband explained in a low voice.

"What time is it? Are you home for lunch, Johnny?"

Johnny shook his head. His mother glanced at a little clock on the night table near the bed.

"Oh, my lord, it's after three! I slept later than usual today." Suddenly her faculties became more alert. "What's the matter? Did Johnny do something wrong?"

Tessie shook her head. She was feeling acute pangs of embarrassment. The wheel chair still barred the door or she might have run out, mumbling apologies. Now there was no help for it but to answer.

Johnny's parents listened intently, glancing occasionally at each other. Johnny looked at the ceiling and the walls as if Tessie were talking about someone else.

"—and that's how it was—" Tessie concluded. "I came home with him thinking maybe if I proved that nothing was wrong, he'd give up telling these stories of his."

The blonde woman sighed fretfully. "He's been doing this for a long time. I don't know how to stop him. We've punished him, taken his toys away—but nothing seems to help." She pointed to a dresser on one side of the room. "George, my wallet is in my bag. Take out sixteen cents and give it to the lady."

Johnny's father rolled himself to the dresser. He took a few coins from the pocketbook and counted them into Tessie's hand. Suddenly, Johnny's mother began to laugh. "Honestly, that boy's a card, when you think about it. Tell her what you were doing with that gun this morning, George."

"It's a war souvenir gun—from Korea." George said hesitantly. "I was cleaning and oiling it. Johnny calls it the 'remember' gun."

"What a kid!" Johnny's mother said, shaking her head. "I suppose he resents my having to sleep during the day, but I figure that at least George can give him his meals. After all, I have to be the main support around here—with George's pension next to nothing, and his repair business just a big laugh."

A tight frown came over George's face.

Tessie made an awkward move toward the door. "You'll have to excuse me, folks, but I guess maybe Johnny knows now that everything's all right."

Tessie murmured goodbye to the boy's father and mother. She put her arm on Johnny's shoulder and together they walked through the house and out the front door. At the gate she wagged her finger at him reprovingly. "You see, Johnny, your mommy and daddy are fine. You must never tell such awful stories again. I'll see you tomorrow when you go to school."

The boy shook his head dully. "I won't be going back to school, Mister Lady—not for a long time—"

"Now you stop talking like that, Johnny," Tessie scolded severely.

She turned to go, but halted as raised voices sounded from the house. The tones grew louder and Tessie and the boy could hear distinctly.

"—you're through making a fool of me, Mae. You're going to quit your job. You're never going back to the Club again."

"Who do you think you're ordering around? I'm the one who's been paying the bills and don't you forget it. I have news for you, George. I'm walking out today—just like I said. I'm sick of being tied to a man who's a nursemaid to a gun. I want a little fun out of life. There are greener pastures, believe you me!"

"You're not leaving this house, Mae." Skoura's voice rose even higher, then broke. "I need you, Mae, I can't let you go—"

Mae's laughter floated up mock-

ingly. "Try and stop me. Big hero with a gun, ain't you? I ought to tell people the truth—that you were kicked out of the army because you hurt your own leg with it. You don't scare me, George. You couldn't kill a fly."

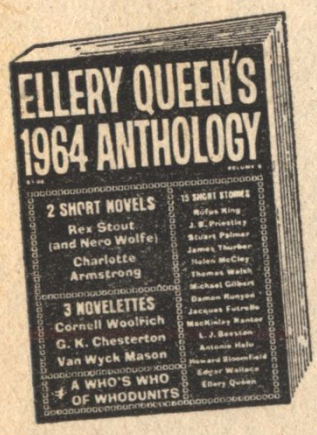
As the shots rang out, Johnny darted back into the house. Tessie followed in a desperate attempt to stop him. The boy hesitated at the door of the bedroom, shivering.

Tessie pushed him behind her and went into the room alone. When she came out, she saw the boy standing motionless near the living-room windows, his thin body silhouetted in the drab winter light.

Johnny's empty eyes turned to her.

She looked down at him, mute and shaken, as he murmured with frightening acceptance, "He killed her with the 'remember' gun, didn't he?"

There would be time enough later, Tessie thought, to tell him that he had been more than right — that his father's second shot had been for himself.



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a new story by

AVRAM DAVIDSON

The Price of a Charm

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: AVRAM DAVIDSON

TITLE: *The Price of a Charm*

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Europe

TIME: Nearly a half century ago

COMMENTS: *A curious short-short . . . and as we have said before, could anyone but Avram Davidson have conceived and written it?*

THE MOUNTAIN AIR WAS CLEAR and sweet, scented with wild herbs, and although the young man had come quite a distance, he was not at all tired. The cottage—it was really little more than a hut—was just as it had been described to him; clearly, many people in the district had had occasion to visit it.

At one side a tiny spring poured over a lip of rock and crossed the path beneath a rough culvert. At the other side was a row of beehives. A goat and her kid grazed nearby, and a small black sow ate from a heap of acorns with a meditative air.

A man with white hair got up from the bench and held out his hand. "A guest," he said. "A stranger. No matter—a guest, all the same. Everyone who passes by is my guest, and the toll I charge is that I make them drink with me."

He laughed; his laugh was infectious, and the young man laughed too—though his sallow, sullen face was not that of one who laughed often.

The hand he shook was hard and callused. "I am called Old Stevan," the peasant said. "It used to be Black Stevan, but that was a long time ago. Even my mustache is white now—" he stroked its length affectionately—"except for here, in the middle. I am always smoking tobacco. Smoking and drinking, who can live without them?"

He excused himself, and returned

almost at once with bottle, two glasses, and cigarettes.

"I do not usually—" the young visitor began, with a frown which seemed familiar to his face.

"If you do not smoke, you do not smoke. But I allow only Moslems to refuse a drink. One drink—a mere formality."

They had one drink for formality, a second drink for friendship, and a third drink to show that they did not deny the Trinity.

Stevan wiped his mustache between his index finger and thumb, thrust in a cigarette, lit it, and smiled contentedly.

"A good thing, matches," he said. "When I was a boy we had to use tinderboxes. How the world does change! You came for a charm?"

The young man seemed relieved now that the preliminaries of his visit were over. "I did," he said.

"Your name?"

"Gavrillo."

Old Stevan repeated it, nodding, blowing out smoke. "I am, of course, well-known for my charms," he said complacently. "I refer to those I make, not those with which Providence endowed me—although there was a time . . . Well, well. My hair was black in those days. I can make quite a number of charms, although some of them are not in demand any longer. I don't remember the last time I supplied one to keep a woman safe from Turks. Before you were born, I'm sure. On the other hand, charms to help barren women conceive are as much called for as ever."

Gavrillo said, scowling, that he was not married.

"My charges are really quite reasonable, too. I can guarantee you perfect protection against ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and the evil spirits of the hills and forests—their cloven hoofs and blood-red nails—"

"I am not afraid of those. I have my crucifix." His hand went to the neck of his open shirt.

"Very well," Old Stevan said equitably. "I've nothing to say against that. I also prepare an excellent charm for success in the hunt . . ."

"Ah."

"And an equally excellent one for success in love."

"Yes."

Old Stevan nodded benignly. "That's it, then, is it? The love charm?"

Gavrillo hesitated, then scowled again.

"Which one means more to you? Or, putting it another way, at which are you more proficient? Take the charm for the other."

The young man threw out his hands. "I am good at neither! And it is important to me that I must excel in one of them."

Stevan lit another cigarette. "Why only one? Take both. The price—"

But Gavrillo shook his head. "It's not the price." He looked out on the wide-spread scene, the deep and dark-green valleys with their

forest of oak and beech and pine, the mountains blue with distance, the silvery river. "It's not the price," he repeated.

"As far as you can see on all sides," the old man said quietly; "in fact, farther, my reputation is known. People have come to me from across the frontier. If it is not the price, take both." He saw Gavrillo shake his head, but continued to speak. "The hunt. A day like today. You take your gun and go off in the woods with a few friends. The road is dusty, but in the woods, in the shade, it is cool. Your friends want to go to the right, but you, you have the charm, you know that the way to turn is to the left. They may protest, but you are so confident that they follow. Presently you see something out of the corner of your eye. The others have not noticed it at all, or perhaps assume it is the branch of a dead tree. But you know better. Your eye is clear, you turn swiftly, your arm and hand are quick as never before, the bird flushes, you fire! There it is, at your feet—a fine woodcock. Eh?"

Gavrillo nodded, eyes gleaming.

"Or it might be a red doe, or a roebuck. A fine stag! You can hardly count all the points! Everyone admires you . . . Perhaps in the winter the peasants come to you. 'Master, a wolf. No one is such a hunter as you are. Come, save our flocks.' They have not even seen the beast when your shot brings it down. You wait while they fetch it. They drag the creature along, shouting your praise: 'Only one shot, and at that distance, too!' they cry, and kiss your hand. 'Brave one, hero,' they call you."

A dreamy smile played on Gavrillo's face, and he slowly, slowly nodded.

Old Stevan waited a few moments; but when his visitor said no word, he went on. "Then there is love. What can compare to that? A man who does not enjoy the love of women is only half alive—if even so much. No doubt there is a young woman on whom you have looked, often, with longing, but who never returns that look. She has long black hair. How it glistens, how it gleams! Her lips are soft and red, and sometimes she wets them with her red little tongue. Inside her bodice the young breasts grow, ripe and sweet as fruit . . ."

The young man's eyes seemed glazed. He did not stop the slow nodding of his head.

"You return, the love charm is in your pocket, against your heart, *here*. There is a dance, you join in, so does she. Presently you come face to face. She looks at you—as if she has never seen you before. How wide her eyes grow! Her mouth opens. Her teeth are small and white. You smile at her and instantly she smiles back, then looks away, shyly—but only for an instant—and you dance together.

"Soon the stars come out and the moon rises. The old women are

drowsing, the old men are drunk. You take her hand in yours and the two of you slip away. The moment you stop, she throws her arms around you and puts her mouth up to be kissed. The night is warm, the grass is soft. The night is dark and deep, and love is sweet."

Gavrillo made a sound between a sigh and a groan. Slowly he reached into his pocket, took out his purse, and began to slide its contents into his hand.

"You have made up your mind?" the old man asked. "Which is it to be, then?" There was no answer. Something caught the old man's eye. "This one is a foreign coin," he said, touching it with his finger. "But never mind, I will take it: it is gold."

Gavrillo's eyes fell to his hand. He picked up the coin, and an odd look came at once over his face. The dreamy, undecided expression vanished immediately. His eyelids became slits, his lips turned down in an ugly fashion, something like a sneer.

After a moment the old man said, "You have made up your mind?"

"Yes," Gavrillo said. "I have made up my mind." . . .

There was only an old woman before him at the ticket window. He had crossed the river just a few minutes before. The contents of his small suitcase had not engaged the attention of the customs officials for long; and from there it was only a short walk to the railroad station.

The old woman went away, and Gavrillo stepped up to the window. On the wall of the tiny office, facing him, were two framed photographs, side by side. The likeness of the older man was the same one that had been on the coin which had caught Old Stevan's attention; but Gavrillo knew the younger man's face, too—knew it very well, indeed. Once again the odd, ugly, strangely determined expression crossed his face.

The station agent looked up. "Yes, sir," he said. "Where to?"

"One ticket, one way." Gavrillo kept looking at the faces in the photographs.

"Very well, sir, a one-way ticket—but where to? Trieste, Vienna?" He was a self-important little man, and his tone grew a trifle sarcastic. "Paris? Berlin? St. Petersburg?"

Slowly Gavrillo's eyes left the picture. He did not seem to have noticed the sarcasm.

"No," he said. "Just to Sarajevo."

Are cats brighter than people? Would a highly intelligent cat, for example, do a better job of detecting than a highly intelligent human? Well, you can take it from Phut Phat (and Madame Phloi in the June 1962 issue of EQMM) that cats consider themselves not only brighter but more perceptive and more communicative than people; and surely there are many ailurophiles (people) who would heartily endorse this feline judgment. So perhaps there is still some hope—some little hope—for the human race . . .

PHUT PHAT CONCENTRATES

by LILIAN JACKSON BRAUN

PHUT PHAT KNEW, AT AN EARLY age, that humans were an inferior breed. They were unable to see in the dark. They ate and drank unthinkable concoctions. And they had only five senses; the two who lived with Phut Phat could not even transmit their thoughts without resorting to words.

For more than a year, ever since he had arrived at the town house, Phut Phat had been attempting to introduce his system of communication, but his two pupils had made scant progress. At dinner time he would sit in a corner, concentrating, and suddenly they would say, "Time to feed the cat," as if it were their own idea.

Their ability to grasp Phut Phat's messages extended only to the bare necessities of daily living, however. Beyond that, nothing ever got through to them, and it seemed unlikely that they would ever increase their powers.

Nevertheless, life in the town house was comfortable enough. It followed a fairly dependable routine, and to Phut Phat, routine was the greatest of all goals. He deplored such deviations as tardy meals, loud noises, unexplained persons on the premises, or liver during the week. He always had liver on Sunday.

It was a fashionable part of the city in which Phut Phat lived. His home was a three-story brick house furnished with thick rugs and down-cushioned chairs and tall pieces of furniture from which he could look down on questionable visitors. He could rise to the top of a highboy in a single leap, and when he chose to scamper from first-floor kitchen to second-floor living room to third-floor bedroom, his ascent up the carpeted staircase was very close to flight, for Phut Phat was a Siamese. His fawn-colored coat was finer than ermine. His eight seal-brown points (there had been nine before that

trip to the hospital) were as sleek as panne velvet, and his slanted eyes brimmed with a mysterious blue.

Those who lived with Phut Phat in the town house were a pair, identified in his consciousness as ONE and TWO. It was ONE who supplied the creature comforts—beef on weekdays, liver on Sunday, and a warm cuddle now and then. She also fed his vanity with lavish compliments and adorned his throat with jeweled collars taken from her own wrists.

TWO, on the other hand, was valued chiefly for games and entertainment. He said very little, but he jingled keys at the end of a shiny chain and swung them back and forth for Phut Phat's amusement. And every morning in the dressing room he swished a necktie in tantalizing arcs while Phut Phat leaped and grabbed with pearly claws.

These daily romps, naps on downy cushions, outings in the coop on the fire escape, and two meals a day constituted the pattern of Phut Phat's life.

Then one Sunday he sensed a disturbing lapse in the household routine. The Sunday papers, usually scattered all over the library floor for him to shred with his claws, were stacked neatly on the desk. Furniture was rearranged. The house was filled with flowers, which he was not allowed to chew. All day long ONE was nervous, and TWO was too busy to play. A stranger in a white coat arrived and clattered glassware, and when Phut Phat went to investigate an aroma of shrimp and smoked oysters in the kitchen, the maid shooed him away.

Phut Phat seemed to be in everyone's way. Finally he was deposited in his wire coop on the fire escape, where he watched sparrows in the garden below until his stomach felt empty. Then he howled to come indoors.

He found ONE at her dressing table, fussing with her hair and unmindful of his hunger. Hopping lightly to the table, he sat erect among the sparkling bottles, stiffened his tail, and fastened his blue eyes on ONE's forehead. In that attitude he concentrated—and concentrated—and concentrated. It was never easy to communicate with ONE. Her mind hopped about like a sparrow, never relaxed, and Phut Phat had to strain every nerve to convey his meaning.

Suddenly ONE darted a look in his direction. A thought had occurred to her.

"Oh, John," she called to TWO, who was brushing his hair in the dressing room, "would you ask Millie to feed Phuffy? I forgot his dinner until this very minute. It's after five o'clock, and I haven't fixed my hair yet. You'd better put your coat on; people will start coming soon. And please tell Howard to light the candles. You might stack some records on the stereo, too . . . No, wait a minute. If Millie is still working on the canapes, would you feed

Phuffy yourself? Just give him a slice of cold roast."

At this, Phut Phat stared at ONE with an intensity that made his thought waves almost visible.

"Oh, John, I forgot," she corrected. "It's Sunday, and he should have liver. Cut it in long strips or he'll toss it up. And before you do that, will you zip the back of my dress and put my emerald bracelet on Phuffy? Or maybe I'll wear the emerald myself, and he can have the topaz . . . John! Do you realize it's five fifteen? I wish you'd put your coat on."

"And I wish you'd simmer down," said TWO. "No one ever comes on time. Why do you insist on giving big parties, Helen, if it makes you so nervous?"

"Nervous? I'm not nervous. Besides, it was *your* idea to invite my friends and your clients at the same time. You said we should kill a whole blasted flock of birds with one stone . . . Now, *please*, John, are you going to feed Phuffy? He's staring at me and making my head ache."

Phut Phat scarcely had time to swallow his meal, wash his face, and arrange himself on the living room mantel before people started to arrive. His irritation at having the routine disrupted had been lessened somewhat by the prospect of being admired by the guests. His name meant "beautiful" in Siamese, and he was well aware of his pulchritude. Lounging between a pair of Georgian candlesticks, with one foreleg extended and the other exquisitely bent under at the ankle, with his head erect and gaze withdrawn, with his tail drooping nonchalantly over the edge of the marble mantel, he awaited compliments.

It was a large party, and Phut Phat observed that very few of the guests knew how to pay their respects to a cat. Some talked nonsense in a falsetto voice. Others made startling movements in his direction or, worse still, tried to pick him up.

There was one knowledgeable guest, however, who approached the mantel with a proper attitude of deference and reserve. Phut Phat squeezed his eyes in appreciation. The admirer was a man, who leaned heavily on a shiny stick. Standing at a respectful distance, he slowly held out his hand with one finger extended, and Phut Phat twitched his whiskers in polite acknowledgment.

"You are a living sculpture," said the man.

"That's Phut Phat," said ONE, who had pushed through the crowded room toward the fireplace. "He's the head of our household."

"He is obviously a champion," said the man with the shiny cane, addressing his hostess in the same dignified manner that had charmed Phut Phat.

"Yes, he could probably win a few ribbons if we wanted to enter him in shows, but he's strictly a pet. He never goes out, except in his coop on the fire escape."

"A coop? That's a splendid idea," said the man. "I should like to have one for my own cat. She's a tortoise-shell long-hair. May I inspect this coop before I leave?"

"Of course. It's just outside the library window."

"You have a most attractive house."

"Thank you. We've been accused of decorating it to complement Phut Phat's coloring, which is somewhat true. You'll notice we have no breakable bric-a-brac. When a Siamese flies through the air, he recognizes no obstacles."

"Indeed, I have noticed you collect Georgian silver," the man said in his courtly way. "You have some fine examples."

"Apparently you know silver. Your cane is a rare piece."

"Yes, it is an attempt to extract a little pleasure from a sorry necessity." He hobbled a step or two.

"Would you like to see my silver collection downstairs in the dining room?" asked ONE. "It's all early silver—about the time of Wren."

At this point Phut Phat, aware that the conversation no longer centered on him, jumped down from the mantel and stalked out of the room with several irritable flicks of the tail. He found an olive and pushed it down the heat register. Several feet stepped on him. In desperation he went upstairs to the guest room, where he discovered a mound of sable and mink and went to sleep.

After this upset in the household routine Phut Phat needed several days to catch up on his rest—so the ensuing week was a sleepy blur. But soon it was Sunday again, with liver for breakfast, Sunday papers scattered over the floor, and everyone sitting around being pleasantly routine.

"Phuffy! Don't roll on those newspapers," said ONE. "John, can't you see the ink rubs off on his fur? Give him the *Wall Street Journal*—it's cleaner."

"Maybe he'd like to go outside in his coop and get some sun."

"That reminds me, dear. Who was that charming man with the silver cane at our party? I didn't catch his name."

"I don't know," said TWO. "I thought he was someone you invited."

"Well, he wasn't. He must have come with one of the other guests. At any rate, he was interested in getting a coop like ours for his own cat. He has a long-haired torty. And did I tell you the Hendersons have two Burmese kittens? They want us to go over and see them next Sunday and have a drink."

Another week passed, during which Phut Phat discovered a new perch. He found he could jump to the top of an antique armoire—a towering piece of furniture in the hall outside the library. Otherwise, it was a routine week, followed by a routine week-end, and Phut Phat was content.

ONE and TWO were going out on Sunday evening to see the Burmese kittens, so Phut Phat was served an early dinner and soon afterward he fell alseep on the library sofa.

When the telephone rang and waked him, it was dark and he was alone. He raised his head and chattered at the instrument until it stopped its noise. Then he went back to sleep, chin on paw.

The second time the telephone started ringing, Phut Phat stood up and scolded it, arching his body in a vertical stretch and making a question mark with his tail. To express his annoyance, he hopped on the desk and sharpened his claws on Webster's Unabridged. Then he spent quite some time chewing on a leather bookmark. After that he felt thirsty. He sauntered toward the powder room for a drink.

No lights were burning, and no moonlight came through the windows, yet he moved through the dark rooms with assurance, sidestepping table legs and stopping to examine infinitesimal particles on the hall carpet. Nothing escaped him.

Phut Phat was lapping water, and the tip of his tail was waving rapturously from side to side, when something caused him to raise his head and listen. His tail froze. Sparrows in the backyard? Rain on the fire escape? There was silence again. He lowered his head and resumed his drinking.

A second time he was alerted. Something was happeinng that was not routine. His tail bushed like a squirrel's, and with his whiskers full of alarm he stepped noiselessly into the hall, peering toward the library.

Someone was on the fire escape. Something was gnawing at the library window.

Petrified, he watched—until the window opened and a dark figure slipped into the room. With one lightning glide Phut Phat sprang to the top of the tall armoire.

There on his high perch, able to look down on the scene, he felt safe. But was it enough to feel safe? His ancestors had been watch-cats in Oriental temples centuries before. They had hidden in the shadows and crouched on high walls, ready to spring on any intruder and tear his face to ribbons—just as Phut Phat shredded the Sunday paper. A primitive instinct rose in his breast, but quickly it was quelled by civilized inhibitions.

The figure in the window advanced stealthily toward the hall, and Phut Phat experienced a sense of the familiar. It was the man with the shiny stick. This time, though, his presence smelled sinister. A small blue light now glowed from the head of the cane, and instead of leaning on it, the man pointed it ahead to guide his way out of the library and toward the staircase. As the intruder passed the armoire, Phut Phat's fur rose to form a sharp ridge down his spine. Instinct said,

"Spring at him!" But vague fears held him back.

With feline stealth the man moved downstairs, unaware of two glowing diamonds that watched him in the blackness, and Phut Phat soon heard noises in the dining room. He sensed evil. Safe on top of the armoire, he trembled.

When the man reappeared, he was carrying a bulky load, which he took to the library window. Then he crept to the third floor, and there were muffled sounds in the bedroom. Phut Phat licked his nose in apprehension.

Now the man reappeared, following a pool of blue light. As he approached the armoire, Phut Phat shifted his feet, bracing himself against something invisible. He felt a powerful compulsion to attack, and yet a fearful dismay.

"Get him!" commanded a savage impulse within him.

"Stay!" warned the fright throbbing in his head.

"Get him! . . . Now . . . now . . . *NOW!*"

Phut Phat sprang at the man's head, ripping with razor claws wherever they sank into flesh.

The hideous scream that came from the intruder was like an electric shock; it sent Phut Phat sailing through space—up the stairs—into the bedroom—under the bed.

For a long time he quaked uncontrollably, his mouth parched and his ears inside-out with horror at what had happened. There was something strange and wrong about it, although its meaning eluded him. Waiting for Time to heal his confusion, he huddled there in darkness and privacy. Blood soiled his claws. He sniffed with distaste and finally was compelled to lick them clean. He did it slowly and with repugnance. Then he tucked his paws under his warm body and waited.

When ONE and TWO came home, he sensed their arrival even before the taxicab door slammed. He should have bounded to meet them, but the experience had left him in a daze, quivering internally, weak and unsure. He heard the rattle of the front door lock, feet climbing the stairs, and the click of the light switch in the room where he waited in bewilderment under the bed.

ONE instantly gave a gasp, then a shriek. "John! Someone's been in this room. We've been robbed!"

TWO's voice was incredulous. "What! How do you know?"

"My jewel case. Look! It's open—and empty!"

TWO threw open a closet door. "Your furs are still here, Helen. What about money? Did you have any money in the house?"

"I never leave money around. But the silver! What about the silver? John, go down and see. I'm afraid to look . . . No! Wait a minute!" ONE's voice rose in panic. "Where Phut Phat? What's happened to Phut Phat?"

"I don't know," said TWO with

alarm. "I haven't seen him since we came in."

They searched the house, calling his name—unaware, with their limited senses, that Phut Phat was right there under the bed, brooding over the upheaval in his small world, and now and then licking his claws.

When at last, crawling on their hands and knees, they spied two eyes glowing red under the bed, they drew him out gently. ONE hugged him with a rocking embrace and rubbed her face, wet and salty, on his fur, while TWO stood by, stroking him with a heavy hand. Comforted and reassured, Phut Phat stopped trembling. He tried to purr, but the shock had constricted his larynx.

ONE continued to hold Phut Phat in her arms—and he had no will to jump down—even after two strange men were admitted to the house; they asked questions and examined all the rooms.

"Everything is insured," ONE told them, "but the silver is irreplaceable. It's old and very rare. Is there any chance of getting it back, Lieutenant?" She fingered Phut Phat's ears nervously.

"At this point it's hard to say," the detective said. "But you may be able to help us. Have you noticed any strange incidents lately? Any unusual telephone calls?"

"Yes," said ONE. "Several times recently the phone has rung, and when we answered it, there was no one on the line."

"That's the usual method. They wait until they know you're not at home."

ONE gazed into Phut Phat's eyes. "Did the phone ring tonight while we were out, Phuffy?" she asked, shaking him lovingly. "If only Phut Phat could tell us what happened! He must have had a terrifying experience. Thank heaven he wasn't harmed."

Phut Phat raised his paw to lick between his toes, still defined with human blood.

"If only Phuffy could tell us who was here!"

Phut Phat paused with toes spread and pink tongue extended. He stared at ONE's forehead.

"Have you folks noticed any strangers in the neighborhood?" the lieutenant was asking. "Anyone who would arouse suspicion?"

Phut Phat's body tensed, and his blue eyes, brimming with knowledge, bored into that spot above ONE's eyebrows.

"No, I can't think of anyone," she said. "Can you, John?"

TWO shook his head.

"Poor Phuffy," said ONE. "See how he stares at me; he must be hungry. Does Phuffy want a little snack?"

Phut Phat squirmed.

"About these bloodstains on the window sill," said the detective. "Would the cat attack an intruder viciously enough to draw blood?"

"Heavens, no!" said ONE. "He's just a pampered little house pet. We

found him hiding under the bed, scared stiff."

"And you're sure you can't remember any unusual incident lately? Has anyone come to the house who might have seen the silver or jewelry? Repairman? Window washer?"

"I wish I could be more helpful," said ONE, "but honestly, I can't think of a single suspect."

Phut Phat gave up!

Wriggling free, he jumped down from ONE's lap and walked toward the door with head depressed and hind legs stiff with disgust. He knew who it was. He knew! The man with the shiny stick. But it was useless to try to communicate. The human mind was closed so tight that nothing important would ever penetrate. And ONE was so busy with her own chatter that her mind . . .

The jingle of keys caught Phut Phat's attention. He turned and saw TWO swinging his key chain back and forth, back and forth, and saying nothing. TWO always did more thinking than talking. Perhaps Phut Phat had been trying to communicate with the wrong mind. Perhaps TWO was really Number One in the household and ONE was Number Two.

Phut Phat froze in his position of concentration, sitting tall and compact with tail stiff. The key chain swung back and forth, and Phut Phat fastened his blue eyes on three wrinkles just underneath TWO's hairline. He concentrated. The key chain swung back and forth, back and forth. Phut Phat kept concentrating.

"Wait a minute," said TWO, coming out of his puzzled silence. "I just thought of something. Helen, remember that party we gave a couple of weeks ago? There was one guest we couldn't account for. A man with a silver cane."

"Why, yes! The man was so curious about the coop on the fire escape. Why didn't I think of him? Lieutenant, he was terribly interested in our Georgian silver."

TWO said, "Does that suggest anything to you, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, it does." The detective exchanged nods with his partner.

"This man," ONE volunteered, "had a very cultivated voice and a charming manner."

"We know him," the detective said grimly. "We know his method. What you tell us fits perfectly. But we didn't know he was operating in this neighborhood again."

ONE said, "What mystifies me is the blood on the window sill."

Phut Phat arched his body in a long, luxurious stretch and walked from the room, looking for a soft, dark, quiet place. Now he would sleep. He felt relaxed and satisfied. He had made vital contact with a human mind, and perhaps—after all—there was hope. Some day they might learn the system, learn to open their minds and receive. They had a long way to go before they realized their potential—but there was hope.

BLOOD WILL TELL

by REX STOUT

(*continued from page 32*)

When you're good and sore at someone it's simple. You cuss him out—to his face if he's available and privately if he isn't—and you take steps if and as you can. When you're sore at yourself it's even simpler: the subject is right there and can't skip. But when you're sore at yourself and someone else at the same time you're in a fix. If you try to concentrate on one, the other one horns in and gets you off balance.

That was the state I was in as I stood aside in the vestibule of 219 Horn Street while Rita Fougere used her key on the door. In the taxi on the way down I had told her about the necktie problem. She might as well get it from me as later from Kirk, and she might as well understand why Kirk wanted to see Vance.

I supposed she would want to go first to her own apartment on the ground floor; surely any woman would whose face needed attention as much as hers; but no. Straight to the elevator and up, and out at the third floor, and she pressed the button at Vance's door.

It opened and Vance was there. His face wasn't as neat and smooth as it had been the day before, and he had on a different outfit—a conservative gray suit, a white shirt, and a plain gray tie. Of course the D.A.'s office had had him down too. He said "Rita!" and put out a hand, then saw me, but I can't say what kind of welcome I would have got because Kirk interrupted, stepping over and telling Rita she shouldn't have come. She said something, but he wasn't listening because he had noticed me.

"I'm glad you're here," he said. "It's not very clear in my mind—what Nero Wolfe told me about the tie. I was just going to tell Vance about him.—Rita, please! You can't —this is *my* trouble."

"Listen, Martin," she said. "You shouldn't be here. I know now why they think it was one of us, so it's *our* trouble. You should leave it to him—Nero Wolfe. You shouldn't be talking about it with anybody, not even me.—Isn't that right, Mr. Goodwin?"

"Mr. Wolfe knew he was coming," I said. I have mentioned that I was sore. "Mr. Wolfe has been called a wizard by various people, and with a wizard you never know. Of course he had me come." I had to force my tongue to let that through, but a private scrap should be kept private.

Vance was frowning at me. "Nero Wolfe had you come? Here?"

"I went to him," Kirk said. "He told me about the necktie. That's

what I want to ask you about. You remember you gave me one, one of those—"

A bell tinkled. I was between Vance and the door, and I moved to let him by. He opened the door and a man stepped in, darted a glance around, and squeaked, "What, a party? A hell of a time for a party, Jimmy."

I say he squeaked because he did, but it was obviously his natural squeak, not the kind on the phone that had told me to burn the tie. But even a natural squeak didn't fit his six feet and broad shoulders and handsome manly face.

"It's no party, Paul," Vance told him, but Paul ignored him and was at Rita: "My pet, you're a perfect fright. You look godawful." He wheeled to Kirk: "And look at you, Martin my boy. Only why not? Why are you still loose?" He looked at me. "Are you a cop?"

I shook my head. "I don't count. Skip me."

"With pleasure." To Vance: "I came to ask you something, and now I can ask everybody. Do you know that the cops have got one of your neckties with a spot on it?"

Vance nodded. "Yes, I know."

"Where did they get it? Why are they riding me about it? Why did they ask me if I had taken it or one like it out of your closet? Did you tell them I had?"

"Certainly not. I told them one was missing, that's all."

Kirk blurted, "And you told them you gave one like it to me."

Vance frowned at him. "Damn it, Martin, I had to, didn't I? They would have found out anyway. Other people knew about it."

"Of course you had to," Kirk said. "I know that. But that one is missing too. I just looked for it and it's gone. It was taken from my room here before I left because I took everything with me and it's not there—not in my hotel, I mean. I came to ask you if you know—"

"Can it," Paul cut in. "You've got a nerve to ask anybody anything. Why are you loose? Okay, you killed her, she's dead. What kind of dodge are you trying with one of Jimmy's neckties with a spot on it?"

"No," Kirk said. "I didn't kill her."

"Oh, can it. I was thinking maybe you do have some guts after all. She decorated you with one of the finest pairs of horns on record, and you never moved a finger. You just took it lying down—or I should say, standing up. I thought it would be hard to find a poorer excuse for a man, but yesterday when I heard what had happened—"

Of course I had heard and read of a man slapping another man, but that was the first time I had ever actually seen it—a smack with an open palm on the side of the head. Kirk said nothing; he merely slapped him, and Paul Fougere said nothing either—he merely started a fist for Kirk's jaw.

I didn't move. Since Fougere was four inches broader and twenty pounds heavier, I fully expected to see Kirk go down, and in any situation I am supposed to take all necessary steps to protect the interests of a client; but if Wolfe wanted that client protected he could come and do it himself.

But I got a surprise—and so did Fougere. He landed once, a glancing blow on the shoulder as Kirk twisted and jerked his head back; but that was all. Not that Kirk had any technique. I would guess that at last he was doing something he had really wanted to do for a long time, and while spirit isn't all it's a lot.

Kirk clipped Fougere at least twenty times, just anywhere—face, neck, chest, ribs—never with enough steam to floor him or even stagger him. But one of the wild pokes got the nose fair and square, and the blood started. It was up to me because Vance was busy keeping Rita off, and when the blood had Fougere's mouth and chin pretty well covered I got Kirk from behind and yanked him back and then stepped in between.

"You're going to drip," I told Fougere. "I suppose you know where the bathroom is."

He was panting. He put his hand to his mouth, took it away, saw the blood, and turned and headed for the rear. I pivoted. Kirk, also panting, was on a chair, head down, inspecting his knuckles. They probably had no skin left. Vance was staring at him, apparently as surprised as Fougere had been.

Rita was positively glowing. With color in her face she was more than attractive. "Should I go?" she asked me. "Does he need help?"

That's true love. Martin the Great had hit him, so he must be in a bad way. It would have been a shame to tell her they had been just pecks. I said no, he'd probably make it, and went to help Kirk examine his knuckles. They weren't so bad.

"Why didn't you stop them?" Vance demanded.

"I thought I did," I said. "With a mauler like Kirk you have to time it."

"I wouldn't have thought . . ." He let it go. "Did you say he went to Nero Wolfe?"

"No, he did. But I can confirm it, I was present. He has hired Nero Wolfe. That's why I'm here. I am collecting information that will establish the innocence of Mr. Wolfe's client. Have you got any?"

"I'm afraid I haven't." He was frowning. "But of course he *is* innocent. What Paul Fougere said, that's ridiculous. I hope he didn't tell the police that. But with their experience, I don't suppose—"

The bell tinkled. Vance went to the door and opened it, and in came the law. Anyone with half an eye would know it was the law even if they had never seen or heard of Sergeant Purley Stebbins. Two steps in, he stopped for a look and saw me.

"Yeah," he said, "I thought so. You and Wolfe are going to be good and sick of this one. I hope you try to hang on." His eyes went right. Fougere had appeared at the rear of the room. "Everybody, huh? I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Vance."

He moved. "You're wanted downtown for more questions, Mr. Kirk. I'll take you."

Rita made a noise. Kirk tilted his head to look up at the tough rough face. "My God, I've answered all the questions there are."

"We've got some new ones. I might as well ask one of them now. Did you buy a typewriter at the Midtown Office Equipment Company on July nineteenth and trade in your old one?"

"Yes. I don't know—July nineteenth—about then, I guess."

"Okay. We want you to identify the one you traded in. Come along."

"Are you arresting me?"

"If you prefer it that way I can. Material witness. Or if you balk I'll phone for a warrant and keep you company till it comes, maybe an hour. With Goodwin here I've got to toe the line. He's hell on wheels, Goodwin is."

Kirk made it to his feet. "All right," he mumbled. He had been without sleep for thirty hours, maybe more. Rita Fougere aimed those eyes at me.

I bowed out. Being hell on wheels is fine and dandy if you have anywhere to steer for, but I hadn't. I opened the door, went on out, took the elevator down, exchanged no greeting with the driver of the police car out front though we had met, walked till I found a taxi, and told the hackie 618 West 35th Street; and when he said that was Nero Wolfe's house I actually said, "Such is fame." That's the shape I was in.

Wolfe was at the table in the dining room, putting a gob of his favorite cheese on a wafer. When I entered he looked up and said politely, "Fritz is keeping the kidneys warm."

I stopped three steps in. "Many thanks," I said even more politely. "You were right as usual—the conversation was futile. They had a tail on Kirk, here and to the hotel and on to Horn Street. When Purley Stebbins arrived at Vance's apartment, he knew Kirk was there and he wasn't surprised to see me. He had come for your client and took him. They have found the typewriter that addressed that envelope to me and the message. It belonged to Kirk but on July nineteenth he traded it in on another one. Since you don't talk business at meals, I'll eat in the kitchen."

I wheeled, hell on wheels, and went to the kitchen.

Nearly four hours later, at six o'clock, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Fougere were in the office waiting for Wolfe to come down from the plant rooms —she in the red leather chair and he in one of the yellow ones in front of

Wolfe's desk. To my surprise he had two marks, a red and slightly puffed nose and a little bruise under his left eye. I hadn't thought Kirk had shown that much power, but of course with bare knuckles it doesn't take much.

Nothing had happened to change my attitude or opinion. When I went to the office after finishing the kept-warm kidneys and accessories, Wolfe permitted me to report on the conversation and slugging match at Vance's apartment, leaning back and closing his eyes to show he was listening, but he didn't even grunt when I told the Stebbins part, though ordinarily it gets under his skin, 'way under, when a client is hauled in. When I was through I said it was a good thing he knew Kirk was innocent since otherwise the typewriter development might make him wonder.

His syes opened. "I didn't say I knew it. I said it was extremely improbable that he had killed his wife, and it still is. Any of the others could have managed access to his typewriter for a few minutes, in his absence."

"Sure. And when his wife told him she had let someone use it, it made him so mad he got rid of it the next day. She could confirm that, but she's dead. Tough. Or his getting rid of it just then could have been coincidence, but that would be even tougher. Judges and juries hate coincidence, and I've heard you make remarks about it."

"Only when it's in my way, not when it serves me." He straightened up and reached for his book. "Can Mrs. Fougere have her husband here at six o'clock?"

"I haven't asked her. I doubt it. They're not chummy, and he's the wrong end of the horse."

"Perhaps . . ." He considered it. He shook his head. "No. I must see him. Tell her to tell him, or you tell him, that he has slandered my client before witnesses, and he will either sign a retraction and apology or defend a suit for defamation of character. I'll expect him at six o'clock." He picked up the book and opened it.

Cut. I hadn't expected him to open up, since he is as pigheaded as I am steadfast, but he could have made some little comment. As I looked up the Fougere number and dialed it, I was actually considering something I had never done and thought I never would: retract, apologize, and ask him please to tell me, as a favor to an old associate and loyal assistant, what the hell was in his mind if anything. But of course I didn't.

When I hung up after getting no answer from the Fougere number I had an idea: I would ask Wolfe if he wanted me to phone Parker. With a client collared as a material witness and probably headed for the coop on a murder charge, it should be not only routine but automatic for him to get Parker, the lawyer he always called in when he had to use law.

But I looked at his face as he sat, comfortable, his eyes on the book, and vetoed it. He would merely say no and go on reading.

It would have improved my feelings to pick up something and throw it at him, but it would not improve the situation; so I arose, went to the hall and up two flights to my room, stood at the window, and reviewed the past thirty hours, trying to spot the catch I had missed, granting there had been one. The trouble was I was sore. You can work when you're sore, or eat or sleep or fight, but you can't think straight.

My next sight of Wolfe was at two minutes past six when the elevator brought him down from the plant rooms and he entered the office. The slander approach had got results. The fifth time I tried the Fougere number, a little after four, Paul had answered, and I poured it on. On the phone his squeak sounded more like the one that had told me to burn the tie, but of course it would. A voice on a phone, unless it's one you know well, is tricky. He said he'd come.

An hour later Rita phoned. She was too frantic to be practical. She wanted to know if we had heard from Kirk, and were we doing anything, and if so what, and shouldn't Kirk have a lawyer. Being sore, I told her Wolfe was responsible to his client, not to her, that Kirk would of course need a lawyer if and when he was charged with something, and that we were expecting her husband at six o'clock. When she said she knew that and was coming along, I said she might as well have saved the dime.

I am rude to people only when I am being rude to myself, or they have asked for it. I admit she hadn't asked for it.

For Wolfe, being rude is no problem at all. When he entered he detoured around the red leather chair to his desk, gave Rita a nod, sat, narrowed his eyes at the husband, and snapped, "You're Paul Fougere?"

It's hard to snap back with a squeak, but Fougere did the best he could with what he had. "You're Nero Wolfe?"

"I am. Did you kill that woman?"

I had known when I let them in that Fougere had decided on his line. It's easy to see when a man's all set. So the unexpected question flustered him. "You know damn well I didn't," he said. "You know who did or you ought to."

"Possibly I don't. Do you?"

Fougere looked at his wife, at me, and back at Wolfe. He was adjusting. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?" he said. "With witnesses. All right, I can't prove it, and anyway that's not up to me, it's up to the cops. But I'm not going to sign anything. I've told Vance I shouldn't have said it, and I've told my wife. Ask her." He turned to me. "You were the only other one that heard me. I'm telling you now, I

can't prove it and I shouldn't have said it." Back to Wolfe: "That covers it. Now try hooking me for defamation of character."

"Pfui." Wolfe flipped a hand to dismiss it. "I never intended to. That was only to get you here. I wanted to tell you something and to ask you something. First, you're a blatherskite. You may perhaps know that Mr. Kirk *didn't* kill his wife, but you can't possibly know that he *did*. Manifestly you're either a jackass or a murderer, and conceivably both." He turned his head. "Archie. A twenty-dollar bill, please."

I went to the safe and got a twenty from the petty cash drawer and came back and offered it, but he shook his head. "Give it to Mrs. Fougere." To Paul: "I assume your wife is an acceptable stakeholder. Give her a dollar. Twenty to one that Mr. Kirk did *not* kill his wife."

"You've got a bet." Fougere pulled out his wallet, extracted a bill, and handed it to me. "You keep it, Goodwin. My wife might spend it. I suppose his conviction decides it? Do I have to wait until after the appeals and all the horsing around?"

Obviously Rita wasn't hearing him. Probably she had had a lot of practice at not hearing him. She was gazing at Wolfe. "You really mean that, don't you?" she asked. "You mean it?"

"I expect to win that dollar, madam." His eyes stayed on Fougere. "As for you, sir, let's see how sure you are. I would like to ask some questions which may give you a hint of my expectations. If you don't care to hear them you are of course at liberty to go."

Fougere laughed. It would be fair to say that he giggled, but I'll give him a break. He laughed. "Hell, I've got a bet down," he said. "Go right ahead. You've already asked me if *I* killed her. I've answered that."

Wolfe nodded. "But you're not a mere onlooker. You're not in the audience; you're on the stage. Do you know about the envelope Mr. Goodwin received in the mail yesterday morning and its contents?"

"Yes, I do now. From Vance and my wife."

"Then you know why attention is centered on you four—both the police's attention and mine. You all had opportunity: any of you could have been admitted to that apartment Monday afternoon by Mrs. Kirk, and Mr. Kirk had a key. The means, the vodka bottle—the murder weapon—was at hand. What about motive? Let's consider that. That's what I want to discuss with you. You are well acquainted with those three people and their relationships, both with one another and with Mrs. Kirk. Your adroit handling of my charge of slander showed that you have a facile and ingenious mind. I invite you to exercise it. Start with yourself. If

you killed Mrs. Kirk, what was your motive?"

Fougere pronounced a word that isn't supposed to be used with a lady present, and since some lady may read this I'll skip it. He added, "I didn't."

"I know. I'll rephrase it. If you had killed Mrs. Kirk what would have been your motive? You're staying to hear my questions because you're curious. I'm curious too. What would have been your motive? Is it inconceivable that you could have had one? You need not be reserved because your wife is here—she has informed me of your intimacy with Mrs. Kirk. When I suggested to her the possibility that you had killed her, she said no, you were too shallow. Are you?"

Fougere looked at Rita. "That's a new one, my pet. Shallow. You should have told me." To Wolfe: "Certainly I could have had a motive for killing her. I could name four men that could—five, counting Kirk."

"What would yours have been?"

"That would depend on when. Two months ago it would have been for my . . . well, for my health."

"And Monday? I'm not just prattling. Monday?"

"It's prattle to me. Monday, that would have been different. It would still have been for my health, but in a different way. Very different. Do you want me to spell it out?"

"I think not. If your wife killed her, what was her motive?"

"Now that's a thought." He grinned. "That appeals to me. We hadn't touched each other for nearly a year and she wanted me back. I'm shallow, but I've got charm. I'm not using it right now, but I've got it, don't think I haven't."

I was looking at Rita because I had had enough of looking at him, and from the expression on her face I would have given twenty to one that she was thinking what I was: that he was one in a million. He actually had no idea of how she felt about Kirk. Not that he would necessarily have brought it in, but his tone, even more than his words, made it obvious. I took another look at him. A man that dumb could batter a woman's skull with a vodka bottle and mosey to the nearest bar and order a vodka and tonic.

Wolfe had the thought too, for he asked, "Have you no other motive to suggest for your wife?"

"No. Isn't that enough? A jealous wife?"

"There are precedents. I assume Mr. Kirk presents no difficulty. Since you think you know he killed her, you must know why."

"So do you."

"Correct—since like the others it's an if. He could no longer abide her infidelities, he couldn't break loose because he was infatuated, and he couldn't change her—so he took the only way out, since he wanted to live. You agree?"

"Sure. That has precedents too."

"It has indeed. That leaves only Mr. Vance, and I suppose he does present difficulties, but call on your ingenuity. If he killed her, why?"

Fougere shook his head. "That would take more than ingenuity. You might as well pass Jimmy Vance. He was still hoping."

"Hoping for what?"

"For her. She had poor Jimmy on a string, and he was still hoping."

"Mr. Kirk told me that she regarded him as a nice old guy—his phrase—and rather a bore."

Fougere grinned. I had decided the first time he grinned that I would never grin again. "Martin wouldn't know," he said. "She told me all about it. She had a lot of fun with Jimmy. Bore my eye! When she was bored she would go up and use one of his pianos—that was just an excuse—and dangle him. Of course it wasn't only fun. He had started it, reaching for her, and he owned the house and she liked it there, so she played him."

"But he was still hoping?"

"Oh, sure—for her that was easy. If you had known Bonny—hell, she could have played *you* and kept you hoping. Bonny could play any man alive."

"Have you told the police this?"

"You mean about Vance? No. Why would I? I don't know why I'm telling you."

"I invited it. I worked for it." Wolfe leaned back and took a deep breath, then another one. "I am obliged to you, sir, and I don't like to be in debt. I'll save you a dollar. We'll call the bet off."

"We will not," Fougere squeaked. "You want to welsh?"

"No. I want to show my appreciation. Very well; it can be returned to you." Wolfe swiveled. "Madam, it's fortunate that you came with your husband. There will be three of us to refresh his memory on what he has told me if at some future time he is inclined to forget. I suggest that you should write it down and . . ."

I was listening with only one ear. Now that I knew which target he was aiming at, I should certainly be able to spot what had made him pick it, and I shut my eyes to concentrate. If you have already spotted it, as you probably have, and are thinking I'm thick, you will please consider that all four points went back to before the body was discovered.

I got one point in half a minute, but that wasn't enough, and by the time I opened my eyes Fougere had gone and Rita was on her feet, prattling. Wolfe looked at me. I am expected—by him—both to understand women and to know how to handle them, which is ridiculous. I'll skip how I handled her and got her out because I was rude again, making twice in less than two hours.

When I returned to the office after shutting the door behind her I had things to say; but Wolfe was leaning back with his eyes closed, and his lips

were working, so I went to my desk and sat. When we're alone I'll interrupt him no matter what he's doing—with only one exception, the lip exercise. When he's pushing his lips out and then pulling them in, out and in, he's working so hard that if I spoke he wouldn't hear me. It may take only seconds or it may go on and on. That time it was a good three minutes.

He opened his eyes, sat up, and growled, "We're going to need Mrs. Fougere."

I stood up. "I might possibly catch her. Is it urgent?"

"No. After dinner will do. Confound it."

"I agree." I sat down. "I'm up with you. There were two things. Right?"

"Four."

"Then I'm shy a couple. I have his phoning and his letting me have the tie. What else?"

"Only *seven* ties. Why?"

"Oh." I looked at it. "Okay. And?"

"Well . . . take you. What have you that is a part of you? Say the relics you keep in a locked drawer. Would you give one of them to someone casually?"

"No." I gave that a longer look. "Uh-huh," I conceded. "Check. But all four points wouldn't convince a jury that he's a murderer, and I doubt if they would convince Cramer or the D.A. that he ought to be jugged."

"Certainly not. We have a job before we're ready for Mr. Cramer, and not an easy one. Phenomena needed for proof may not exist, and even if they do they may be undiscoverable. Our only recourse—"

The doorbell rang. I got up and went to the hall, took a look, stepped back into the office, and said, "Nuts. Cramer."

"No," he snapped.

"Do you want to count ten?"

"No."

I admit it's a pleasure to slip the bolt in, open the door the two inches the chain permits, and through the crack tell a police inspector that Mr. Wolfe is engaged and can't be disturbed. The simple pleasures of a private detective. But that time I didn't have it. I was still a step short of the door when a bellow came from the office, my name, and I turned and went back.

"Bring him," Wolfe commanded.

The doorbell rang. "Maybe this time you *should* count ten," I suggested.

"No. Bring him."

I went. From my long acquaintance with Cramer's face I can tell with one glance through the glass if he's on the warpath, so I knew he wasn't before I opened the door. He even greeted me as if it didn't hurt. Of course he didn't let me take his hat—that would have been going too far; but he removed it on his way down the hall. When he's boiling he leaves it on. From the way he greeted Wolfe it seemed likely that

he would have offered a hand to shake if he hadn't known that Wolfe never did.

"Another hot day," he said, and sat in the red leather chair, not settling back, and hanging on to his hat. "I just stopped in on my way home. You're never on your way home because you're always home."

I stared at him. Unbelievable. He was chatting!

Wolfe grunted. "I go out now and then. Will you have some beer?" That was logical. If Cramer acted like a guest, Wolfe had to act like a host.

"No, thanks." Pals. "A couple of questions and I'll go. The District Attorney has about decided to hold Martin Kirk on a homicide charge. Kirk was here today for over an hour. Are you working for him?"

"Yes."

Cramer put his hat on the stand at his elbow. "I'm not going to pretend that I'm here to hand you something—like a chance to cut loose from a murderer. The fact is, frankly, I think it's possible the D.A.'s office is moving a little too fast. There are several reasons why I think that. The fact that you have taken Kirk on as a client isn't the most important one, but I admit it is one. You don't take on a murder suspect, no matter what he can pay, unless you think you can clear him. I said a couple of questions and here's the second one. If I go back downtown instead of home to supper, to persuade the D.A. to go slow, have you got anything I can use?"

One corner of Wolfe's mouth went up a sixteenth of an inch, his kind of a smile. "A new approach, Mr. Cramer. Rather transparent."

"The hell it is. It's a compliment. I wouldn't use it with any other private dick alive, and you know it. I'm not shoving, I'm just asking."

"Well. It's barely possible . . ." Wolfe focused narrowed eyes on a corner of his desk and rubbed his nose with a fingertip. Pure fake. He had had his idea, whatever it was, when he bellowed me back to the office. He held the pose for ten seconds and then moved his eyes to Cramer and said, "I know who killed Mrs. Kirk."

"Uh-huh. The D.A. thinks he does."

"He's wrong. I have a proposal. I suppose you have spoken with Mr. Vance, James Neville Vance. If you will send a man to his apartment at ten o'clock this evening to bring him to you, and if you keep him until you hear from me or Mr. Goodwin, and then send or bring him to me, I'll give you enough to persuade the District Attorney that he shouldn't hold Mr. Kirk on any charge at all."

Cramer had his chin up. "Vance? *Vance?*"

"Yes, sir."

"My God." He looked at me but saw only a manly open face. He took a cigar from his pocket, slow motion, stuck it in his mouth, clamped

his teeth on it, and took it out again. "You know damn well I won't. Connive at illegal entry? Of course that's why you want him away."

"Merely your conjecture. I give you the fullest assurance, in good faith without reservation, that there will be no illegal entry or any other illegal act."

"Then I don't see . . ." Moving back in the chair, he lost the cigar. It dropped to the floor. He ignored it. "No. Vance is a respectable citizen in good standing. You'd have to open up."

Wolfe nodded. "I'm prepared to. Not to give you facts, for you already have them; I'll merely expound. You shouldn't need it, but you have been centered on Mr. Kirk. Do you know all the details of the necktie episode? Mr. Goodwin getting it in the mail, the phone call he received, and his visit to Mr. Vance?"

"Yes."

"Then attend. Four points. First, the phone call. It came at a quarter past eleven. You assume that Mr. Kirk made it, pretending he was Vance. That's untenable, or at least implausible. How would he dare? For all he knew, Mr. Goodwin had phoned Vance or seen him immediately after opening the envelope. For him to phone and say he was Vance would have been asinine."

Cramer grunted. "He was off his hinges. The shape he was in, he wouldn't see that."

"I concede the possibility. Second point. When Mr. Goodwin went to see Vance he showed him the envelope and letterhead and let him take the tie to examine it. Vance was completely mystified. You know what was said and done. He inspected the ties in his closet and said the one that had been mailed to Mr. Goodwin was his. But when Mr. Goodwin asked for it he handed it over without hesitation. Preposterous."

Cramer shook his head. "I don't think so. The body hadn't been discovered. He thought it was just some screwy gag."

"Pfui. One of his ties taken from his closet, his stationery used to mail it to a private detective with a message ostensibly from him, and the phone call; and he was so devoid of curiosity or annoyance that he let Mr. Goodwin take the tie, and the envelope and letterhead, with no sign of reluctance? Nonsense."

"But he did. If he killed her why isn't it still nonsense?"

"Because it was part of his devious plan." Wolfe looked at the clock. "It's too close to dinnertime to go into that now. The plan was ill-conceived and ill-executed, and it was infantile, but it wasn't nonsense. Now, the third point; *two* missing neckties. He had nine and had given one to Mr. Kirk, and there were only seven left. Of course you have accounted for that in your theory. How?"

"That's obvious. Kirk took it

from Vance's closet. Part of *his* plan to implicate Vance."

Wolfe nodded. "As Vance intended you to believe. But have you examined that assumption thoroughly?"

"Yes. I don't like it. That's one reason I think the D.A. is moving too fast. Kirk would have been a sap to do that. Someone else could have taken it to implicate Kirk. For instance, Fougere."

"Why not Vance himself?"

"Because a man doesn't smash a women's skull unless he has a damn good reason and Vance had no reason at all."

Wolfe grunted. "I challenge that. But first, the fourth point. Those neckties were an integral item of James Neville Vance's projection of his selfhood. Made exclusively for him, they were more than merely distinctive and personal; they were morsels of his ego. Conceivably he might have given one of them to someone close and dear to him, but not to Martin Kirk—not unless it was an essential step in an undertaking of vital importance. So it was."

"Damn it," Cramer growled, "his *reason!*"

A corner of Wolfe's mouth went up. "Your new approach is an improvement, Mr. Cramer. You know I wouldn't fix on a man as a murderer without a motive, so I must have one for Mr. Vance, and you want it. But not now. You would get up and go. That would be enough for you to take to the District Attorney; and while it would postpone a murder charge against my client it would by no means clear him permanently, because I strongly doubt if you can get enough evidence against Vance to hold him, let alone convict him. My knowledge of Vance's motive is by hearsay, so don't bother to warn me about withholding evidence; I have none that you don't have. If I get some I'll be glad to share it. I need to know with certainty where Mr. Vance will be this evening from ten o'clock on, and when Mr. Goodwin told me you were at the door it occurred to me that the surest way would be for you to have him with you. Do you want it in writing, signed by both of us, that there will be no illegal act—under penalty of losing our licenses?"

Cramer uttered a word about the same flavor as the one Fougere had used, but of course there was no lady present. He followed it up: "I suppose I'd send it to the Commissioner so he could frame it?" He flattened his palms on the chair arms. "Look, Wolfe. I know you. I know you've got something. I admit your four points taken together add up. I'll take your word that you won't send Goodwin to break and enter. I know I can't pry any more out of you even if it wasn't time for you to eat, and anyway I eat too. But you say I'm to keep Vance until I hear from you or Goodwin, and that might mean all night, and he's not just some bum.

Make it tomorrow morning, say ten o'clock, and limit it to six hours if I *don't* hear from you or Goodwin, and I'll buy it."

Wolfe grunted. "That's better anyway. I was rushing it. I said send a man to get him."

"I heard you."

"Very well." Wolfe turned. "Archie. Mr. Cramer and I need a few minutes to make sure of details. Tell Fritz. And use the phone in the kitchen to get Mrs. Fougere. I must see her this evening. Also get Saul and Fred and Orrie. I want them either this evening or at eight in the morning."

I rose. "Does it matter which?"

"No."

I beat it to the kitchen.

If you ever need an operative and only the best will do, get Saul Panzer if you can. Ten bucks an hour. If Saul isn't available get Fred Durkin or Orrie Cather. Seven-fifty an hour and they usually earn it. That was the trio who entered James Neville Vance's apartment with me at a quarter past ten on Thursday morning.

What made the entry legal was that when I rang the bells, both downstairs and upstairs, the doors were opened from the inside. Who opened them was Rita Fougere. Upstairs she held it open until we were in and then closed it. I preferred not to touch the door—not that it mattered, but I like things neat.

The door shut, Rita turned to me. She still had those eyes, but the lids were puffy, and her face had had no attention at all. "Where's Martin?" she asked. Her soft little voice was more like a croak. "Have you heard from him?"

I shook my head. "As Mr. Wolfe told you last evening, he's being held as a material witness. Getting a lawyer to arrange for bail would cost money—his money. This will be cheaper and better if it works. Mr. Wolfe told you that."

"I know, but . . . what if it doesn't?"

"That's his department." I turned. "This is Mr. Panzer. Mr. Durkin. Mr. Cather. They know who you are. As you know, you're to stay put, and if you'd like to help you might make some coffee. If the phone rings answer it. If the doorbell rings *don't* answer it. Right?"

"Yes."

"Okay. —Gentleman, sick 'em."

The way you prowl a place depends on what you're after. If you're looking for one large item—say, a stolen elephant—then of course it's simple. The toughest is when you're just looking. We did want one specific item—a necktie; but we also wanted anything whatever that might help, no matter what, and Saul and Fred and Orrie had been thoroughly briefed.

So we were just looking after Saul found the necktie, and that means things like inspecting the seams of a mattress and unfolding handkerchiefs and flipping through the pages

of books. It takes a lot longer when you are leaving everything exactly as it was.

We had been at it over an hour when Saul found the tie. I had shown them the seven on the rack in the closet so they would know what it looked like. Saul and Orrie were up in the studio, and when I heard them coming down the spiral stair I knew they had something and met them at the foot, and Saul handed it to me. It was folded, and pinned to it was one of Vance's engraved letterheads on which Saul had written: "Found by me at 11:25 a.m. on August 9, 1962, inside a piano score of Scriabin's *Vers la Flamme* which was in a cabinet in the studio of James Neville Vance at 219 Horn Street, Manhattan, New York City." He had signed it with his little twirl on the tail of the z.

"You're my hero," I told him. "It would be an honor to tie your shoestrings and I want your autograph. But you know how Orrie is on gags and so do I. We'll take a look."

I entered the bedroom, with them following, and went to the closet. The seven were still on the rack; I counted them twice. "Okay," I told Saul, "it's it. I'll vote for you for President." I took the seven from the rack and handed them to him. "Here, we'll take them along."

After that it was just looking, both in the apartment and in the studio, and that gets tedious. By two o'clock it was damn tedious because we were hungry and had decided not to take time out to eat; but Cramer had agreed to keep Vance for only six hours, and while we had Exhibit A and that was all Wolfe really expected, an Exhibit B would be deeply appreciated. So we kept at it.

A little before three o'clock I was standing in the middle of the living room frowning around. Rita was lying on a couch with her eyes closed. Fred was up in the studio with Saul and Orrie. I was trying to remember some little something that had been in my mind an hour ago, and finally I did. When Fred had taken a pile of gloves from a drawer he had looked in each glove but hadn't felt in it, and he hadn't taken them to the light.

I went to the bedroom, got the gloves from the drawer, took them to the window, and really looked; and in the fifth glove, a pigskin hand-sewed number, there was Exhibit B. When I saw it inside the glove I thought it was just a gob of some kind of junk; but when I pulled it out and saw what it was I felt something I hadn't felt very often—a hot spot at the base of my spine. I don't often talk to myself either, but I said aloud, "Believe it or not, that's exactly what it is. It has to be."

I put it back in the glove, put the glove in my pocket, returned the other gloves to the drawer, went to the phone on the bedstand, and dialed a number.

Wolfe's voice came: "Yes?" I've

been trying for years to get him to answer the phone properly.

"Me," I said. "We'll be there in less than half an hour. Saul found the tie. It was in a piano score in a cabinet in the studio. I just found Exhibit B. I can tell you what he did. After he killed her he cut off a lock of her hair with blood on it, plenty of blood, and took it for a keepsake. After the blood was dry he put it inside one of his gloves in a drawer, which is where I found it. That has to be it. You may not believe it till you see it, but you will then."

"Indeed." A pause. "Satisfactory. Very satisfactory. Bring the glove."

"Certainly. A suggestion—or call it a request. Tell Cramer to have him there at a quarter after four, or half-past. We're starving, including Mrs. Fougere, and we need time to—"

"You know my schedule. I'll tell Mr. Cramer six o'clock. Fritz will—"

"No." I was emphatic. "For once you'll have to skip it. The six hours is up at four o'clock, and if you put it off until six, Cramer may let him go home, with or without an escort, and he might find that both the tie and the keepsake are gone. Would that be satisfactory?"

Silence. "No." More silence. "Confound it." Still more. "Very well. Fritz will have something ready."

"Better make it half-past and—"

He had hung up.

Inspector Cramer settled back in the red leather chair, narrowed his eyes at Wolfe, and rasped, "I've told Mr. Vance that this won't be on any official record and he can answer your questions or not as he pleases."

He wouldn't have settled back if he had been the only city employee present, since he knew that almost certainly some fur was going to fly. Sergeant Purley Stebbins was there at his right on a chair against the wall. Purley never sits with his back to anyone, even his superior officer, if he can help it.

James Neville Vance was on a chair facing Wolfe's desk, between Cramer and me. Rita Fougere was on the couch at the left of my desk, and Saul and Fred and Orrie were grouped over by the big globe.

"There won't be many questions," Wolfe told Cramer. "Nothing remains to be satisfied but my curiosity on a point or two." His head turned. "Mr. Vance, only you can satisfy it." To me: "Archie?"

I regretted having to take my eyes away from Vance. Not that I thought he needed watching; it was just that I wanted to. You can learn things, or you think you can, from the face of a man who knows something is headed for him but doesn't know exactly what and is trying to be ready to meet it. Up to that point Vance's face hadn't increased my knowledge of human nature. His lips were drawn in tight, and that made his oversized chin even more

out of proportion. When Wolfe cued me I had to leave it.

I got the seven ties from a drawer, put them in a row on Wolfe's desk, and stood by.

"Those," Wolfe told Vance, "are the seven ties that remained on the rack in your closet. I produce them—"

A growl from Cramer stopped him. It would have stopped anybody. It became words: "So you did. —Stebbins, take Mr. Vance out to the car. I want to talk to Wolfe."

"No," Wolfe snapped. "I said there would be no illegal entry and there wasn't. Mr. Goodwin, accompanied by Mr. Panzer, Mr. Durkin, and Mr. Cather, rang the bell at Mr. Vance's apartment and were admitted by Mrs. Fougere. She was in the apartment with Mr. Vance's knowledge and consent, having gone there earlier to talk with him. When an officer came to take him to you she remained, with no objection from him. —Isn't that correct, Mrs. Fougere?"

"Yes." It came out a whisper, and she repeated it. "Yes." That time it was a croak.

"Isn't that correct, Mr. Vance?"

Vance's drawn-in lips opened and then closed. "I don't think . . ." he mumbled. He raised his voice: "I'm not going to answer that."

"You might answer me," Cramer said. "Is it correct?"

"I prefer not to answer."

"Then I'll proceed," Wolfe said. "I produce these seven ties merely to establish them." He opened a drawer and produced Exhibit A. "Here is an eighth tie. Pinned to it is a statement written and signed by Mr. Panzer, on your stationery. I'll read it." He did so. "Have you any comment?"

No comment.

"Let me see that," Cramer growled. Of course he would; that's why I was standing by. I took it from Wolfe and handed it over. He read the statement, twisted around for a look at Saul, and twisted the other way to hand the exhibit to Stebbins.

"It's just as well I haven't many questions," Wolfe told Vance, "since apparently the few I do have won't be answered. I'll try answering them myself, and if you care to correct me do so. I invite interruptions."

He cocked his head. "You realize, sir, that the facts are manifest. The problem is not what you did, or when or how, but why. As for when, you typed that envelope and message to Mr. Goodwin, using your own stationery and having found or made an opportunity to use Mr. Kirk's typewriter, at least three weeks ago, since that machine wasn't available after July nineteenth. Mr. Kirk's disposing of it just then was of course coincidental. So your undertaking was not only premeditated, it was carefully planned. Also you retrieved the tie you had given Mr. Kirk before he moved from his apartment. Using the typewriter and retrieving the tie presented no diffi-

culty, since you owned the house and had master keys. Any comment?"

No.

"Then I'll continue. Only the whys are left, and I'll leave the most important one—why you killed her—to the last. For some of them I can offer only one conjecture—for instance, why you wished to implicate Mr. Kirk. It may have been a fatuous effort to divert attention from yourself; or, more likely, you merely wanted it known that Mrs. Kirk had not been the victim of some chance intruder; or you had an animus against Mr. Kirk. Any of those would serve. For other whys I can do better than conjecture. Why did you take a tie from your closet and hide it in your studio? That was part of the design to implicate Mr. Kirk, and it was rather shrewd. You calculated—"

"I didn't," Vance blurted. "Kirk did that, he must have. You say it was found in a piano score?"

Wolfe nodded. "That's your rebuttal, naturally. You intended the necktie maneuver to appear as a clumsy stratagem by Mr. Kirk to implicate you. So of course a tie had to be missing from the rack in your closet. But if Mr. Kirk had taken it he wouldn't have hid it in your studio; he would have destroyed it. Why then didn't *you* destroy it? You know; I don't; but I can guess. You thought it possible that the situation might so develop that you could somehow use it, so why not keep it?"

Wolfe's shoulders went up a quarter of an inch and down again. "Another why: why did you send the tie to Mr. Goodwin? Of course you had to send it to someone—an essential step in the scheme to involve Mr. Kirk. But why Mr. Goodwin? That's the point I'm chiefly curious about, and I would sincerely appreciate an answer. Why did you send the tie to Mr. Goodwin?"

"I didn't."

"Very well, I can't insist. It's only that he is my confidential assistant, and I would like to know how you got the strange notion that he would best serve your purpose. He is inquisitive, impetuous, alert, skeptical, pertinacious, and resourceful—altogether the worst choice you could possibly have made. One more why before the last and crucial one: why did you phone Mr. Goodwin to burn the tie? That was unnecessary, because his curiosity was sufficiently aroused without that added fillip; and it was witless, because whoever phoned must have known that he had not already phoned you or gone to see you, and only you could have known that. Do you wish to comment?"

"I didn't phone him."

I must say that Vance was showing more gumption than I had expected. By letting Wolfe talk he was finding out exactly how deep the hole was, and he was admitting nothing.

Wolfe turned a hand over. "Now

the primary why: why did you kill her? I learned yesterday that you probably had an adequate motive, but as I told Mr. Cramer, that was only hearsay. I have to have a demonstrable fact, an act or an object, and you supplied it. Not yesterday or today; you supplied it Tuesday afternoon when, after killing Mrs. Kirk, you stooped over her battered skull, or knelt or squatted, and cut off a lock of her hair, choosing one that had her blood on it. With a knife, or scissors? Did you stoop, or squat, or kneel?"

Vance's lips moved, but no sound came. Unquestionably he was trying to say "I didn't"—but he couldn't make it.

Wolfe grunted. "I said a demonstrable fact. To demonstrate is to establish as true, and I'll establish it. Mr. Goodwin found the lock of hair, caked with blood, some two hours ago, in a drawer in your bedroom. He called it a keepsake, but a keepsake is something given and kept for the sake of the giver, a token of friendship. 'Trophy' would be a better term." He opened a desk drawer.

I can move fast and so can Purley Stebbins; but we both misjudged James Neville Vance—at least, I did. When he started up at sight of the glove that Wolfe took from the drawer I started too, but I wasn't expecting him to dart like lightning, and he did; and he got the glove, snatched it out of Wolfe's hand.

Of course he didn't keep it long. I came from his left side and Purley from his right, and since he had the glove in his right hand it was Purley who got his wrist and twisted it, and the glove dropped to the floor.

Cramer picked it up. Purley had Vance by the right arm and I had him by the left.

Wolfe stood up. "It's in the glove," he told Cramer. "Mr. Goodwin will furnish any details you require, and Mrs. Fougere." He headed for the door. The clock said 5:22. His schedule had hit a snag, but by gum it wasn't wrecked.

A little before five o'clock one afternoon last week the doorbell rang, and through the one-way glass I saw Martin Kirk.

When I opened the door, snow came whirling in. Obviously he was calling on me, not Wolfe, since he knew the schedule, and I was glad to see an ex-client who had paid his bill promptly; so I took his hat and coat and put them on the rack, and ushered him to the office and a chair.

When we had exchanged a few remarks about the weather, and his health and mine, and Wolfe's, and he had declined an offer of a drink, he said he saw that Vance's lawyer was trying a new approach on an appeal, and I said yeah, when you've got money you can do a lot of dodging. With that disposed of, he said he often wondered where he would be now if he hadn't come straight to Wolfe from the D.A.'s office that day in August.

"Look," I said, "you've said that before. I have all the time there is and I enjoy your company, but you didn't come all the way here through the worst storm this winter just to chew the fat. Something on your mind?"

He nodded. "I thought you might know . . . might have an idea."

"I seldom do, but it's possible."

"It's Rita. You know she's in Reno?"

"Yes, I've had a card from her."

"Well, I phoned her yesterday. There's some good ski slopes not far from Reno, and I told her I might go out for a week or so and we could give them a try. She said no. A flat no."

"Maybe she doesn't know how to ski."

"Sure she does. She's good, very good." He uncrossed his legs and crossed them again. "I came to see you because . . . well, frankly, I thought that maybe you and she have a—an understanding. I used to think she liked me all right—nothing more than that, but I thought she liked me. I know she was a friend in need—I know what she did that day in Vance's apartment. But ever since then she has shied away from me. And I know she thinks you're quite a guy. Well . . . if you *have* got an understanding with her I want to congratulate you."

I cleared my throat. "Many thanks," I said. "For the compliment. It's nice to know that she thinks I'm quite a guy, but it's nothing more than that. There's not only no understanding, there's no misunderstanding. It's possible that she actually likes you. It's possible that she would enjoy skiing with you, though in my opinion anyone who enjoys skiing is hard up for something to enjoy, but a woman in the process of getting a divorce is apt to be skittish. She either thinks she has been swindled or she feels like a used car. Do you want my advice?

"Yes."

"Go to Reno unannounced. Tell her you want her to go skiing with you because if you tumble and break a leg, as you probably will, she is the only one you can rely on to bring help. If after a week or so you want to tell her there are other reasons, and if there *are* other reasons, she may possibly be willing to listen. She might even enjoy it. You have nothing to lose but a week or so unless you break your neck.

His jaw was working exactly the way it had that day six months back, but otherwise his appearance was very different. "All right," he said. "I'm glad I came. I'll go tomorrow."

"That's the spirit. I don't suppose you'd consider playing pinochle with her, or dancing or going for a walk, instead of skiing?"

"No. I'm not a good dancer."

"Okay. We'll drink to it." I got up. "Scotch and water, I believe?"

"Yes, please. No ice. I think you're quite a guy too, Goodwin."

"So do I." I went to the kitchen.

Mrs. Behney writes with the "feel" of nature in almost every word, with the "feel" of emotion in nearly every line, with the "feel" of people in nearly every sentence. She is a "writer," and her mind is instinctively a writer's—but even more important (oh, ineffable gift!), her heart is as big as a boy or a man or a woman—or the world . . .

THE WAGES OF SIN

by L. E. BEHNEY

COLE DAMERON WAS SEVENTEEN, a tall boy with the lanky unfulfilled look of his age. He was barefooted and bareheaded in the hot sun and he came gratefully into the shade of the willows around the spring. In its thick mat of fern and wild berry the water bubbled cold and dark with specks of golden sand dancing in it, catching the patterns of sunlight through the green-gold leaves.

Cole knelt on the edge of the pool and filled the burlap-wrapped jug he carried. Then he thrust his face into the cold water and drank and bathed his head and arms and sat back on his heels letting the green coolness fill his mind. It was his favorite place, this spring, a secret hidden spot where he could be by himself. But he couldn't stay; his grandfather would be after him again for wasting time, for dreaming when he should be working.

In the tangle of plant growth across the bubbling water he saw a flicker of movement, a motion half caught, half seen. He stared into the dense thicket and slowly a long, gray something took shape, like the outline of a trout in the shadowy depths of a rocky pool. It looked like a long, gray, mud-caked log—but there had been no log there the day before.

Puzzled, the boy stood up, circled the pool, and splashed through the bog below the spring. A man lay hidden in the thicket—a man thin and tall with torn and muddy clothing, a man whose glassy, feverish eyes glared from a bristle-whiskered, mud-gray face.

"Who are you?" the boy asked, pushing through the willow thicket. "Are you hurt?"

The man said nothing. His eyes stared up at the boy with a trapped, desperate anguish.

"If you're hurt," the boy said eagerly, "I'll go get help for you. My grandpa and my uncles are working right down there in the hayfield."

Cole pushed aside a thick-leaved alder sapling and saw the man's face clearly. In spite of the growth of

beard and the caked muddy skin he recognized the man and his breath caught in his throat.

"Jed Tarbow," he exclaimed hoarsely, and stepped back poised and tense, his heart thudding.

Tarbow had escaped from jail a week ago, escaped from the cell where he was waiting transfer to State Prison where he was to be hanged for murder. The boy had been present at the trial. His grandfather had taken him so that he might gain a valuable lesson from the proceedings. Standing there in the crowded, hot courtroom, his eyes blazing above his beard, the old man had shouted triumphantly at the verdict, "The wages of sin is death!" His big hand had clamped down on Cole's shoulder. "You take notice, boy, and mend your ways."

Cole had said, "Yes, sir," but his sympathies had been silently and agonizingly with the convicted man who seemed so fiercely proud, so contemptuous of his tormentors.

The boy had probably been the only person in court who had believed the prisoner's angry plea of innocence. He had been glad when the man escaped from jail, and sorry again when he was believed dead in the quicksand of the black slough where he had taken refuge . . .

Cole stared down at the man hardly believing his senses. The fugitive was looking up at him with the look of hate and defiance that trapped animals have—the hawk caught in a snare, the bobcat with one foot in a steel trap.

"You go get your grandpa and your uncles," Tarbow said with difficulty. "I can tell you're a Dameron by the look of you—skunks favor skunks any place." His dry, cracked mouth formed the motion of spitting. "Nothin' to eat for a week but tule shoots and a slug through my leg—I can't crawl no farther. Make it quick, boy. Don't keep me waitin'." His lips drew back from his stained teeth in a savage grin.

"I'll help you," Cole promised.

Tarbow's dark, feverish eyes blazed up at him. "I won't take no help from a Dameron," he rasped weakly. "It was their lyin' got me into this fix!" There was a venomous hate in his voice. He struggled up onto his elbows, then fell back gasping for breath.

Cole drew back and turned and ran with the filled water jug thumping against his thigh. He came from the shade of the willows into the dazzling glare of the sunlight. He ran down the hill through the dry summer grasses, feeling their crisp sharpness on his feet and ankles. Long-legged grasshoppers shot away before him on shimmering wings. He ran all the way to the hayfield and stopped to slide his feet into his shoes and put on his broad-brimmed straw hat.

His grandfather and his two uncles worked down the shimmering windrows, thrusting in their forks,

lifting and piling the shining hay into shocks. They moved across the stubble with effortless ease, their flat, hard muscles bunching beneath their sweat-soaked shirts. They were big men, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, narrow-hipped; the older man was as straight and vigorous as his sons.

Damerons had come into the valley with the earliest settlers. There had been four of them, all brothers—God-fearing, Bible-reading men. They had seen the promised land and taken it ruthlessly, with the Book in one hand and a gun in the other. Cole's grandfather, Spain Dameron, was the last of the four brothers and the patriarchal head of the family. He lived quietly with his two sons on the old homestead. Cole was afraid of them, especially of his grandfather, and he did everything he could to avoid the old man's terrible wrath.

He ran across the field with the jug of cold water.

The old man thrust his fork into the hay and took the jug. He swung it across his arm, tipped his head back, and drank deeply. Beneath his outthrust beard, his craggy throat jerked, and drops of shining water trickled down from his mouth. When he had finished, he put the cork back in the neck of the jug and handed it to Cole.

The boy stood hesitantly a moment looking up at the old man's face. There was a crinkle of indecision between Cole's dark brows. Spain slapped him hard across the mouth.

"The devil finds mischief for idle hands," he said in his deep resonant voice. "Mend your slothful ways, boy. Take the water to your uncles. Be quick and get back to your work."

Cole's sweaty, heat-flushed face had turned pale. He touched his bruised mouth and turned away without a word.

The long hot afternoon passed slowly. The sun had dropped below the top of Deadwood Peak with the slight cooling of evening before they finished the field and started toward the cluster of whitewashed barns and sheds behind the big log house in the grove of oaks on the creek bank.

The soft dark of mid-summer dark had fallen before the chores were finished, and Cole and the older men came to the pump in the back of the house to wash for supper.

Cole pumped for the others, the clear water splashing into the wooden trough, the yellow lamplight streaming out across the yard from the kitchen windows with the smells of meat, hot bread, and apple pie.

When the others had gone inside, Cole peeled off his shirt and pumped for himself, catching the icy stream in his hand. He scrubbed with the gritty soap and dried on the soggy towel and went up onto the dark back porch to find the clean shirt 'Lissa always laid out for him.

The men were waiting, seated around the oilcloth-covered table, his grandfather frowning angrily, gray eyes cold beneath his bushy brows.

"We are waiting for you, Cole, as we always need to do," he said heavily. "I am a patient man but your slow-witted dawdling tries my forbearance."

"I tried to hurry," the boy said, slipping into his chair.

The housekeeper, 'Lissa Grant, a straight-backed, spare little woman, with tight-braided, graying hair and a brown gnome face, was setting the food on the table. She poured coffee into their cups and sat in her place beside Cole.

Spain Dameron had the kerosene lamp beside his plate and one gnarled finger held his place in his big leather-bound Bible. He opened the Book and began sonorously to read. "As snow in summer and as rain in harvest, so honor is not seemly for a fool. As the bird by wandering, as the swallow by flying, so the curse causeless shall not come. A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool's back—"

The deep voice read on. Cole bowed his head. Through his thick lashes he watched his grandfather's face, majestic, dark-shadowed in the yellow lamplight. He should have told the old man about Jed Tarbow. He should have come running, shouting the news. It was too late to tell now—they would want to know why he hadn't told them sooner. He might even get a lashing with the drover's whip his grandfather kept hanging on the wall. Twice the old man had struck him with it, both times for a panicky lie. He couldn't even remember what the lies had been—the dreadful pain of the whipping had driven it from his mind.

This was a far worse thing he was doing: by his continued silence he was really helping a dangerous criminal to escape.

Cole could hardly explain to himself why he hadn't told his grandfather. Tarbow had savagely rejected his impulsive offer of help. Maybe he had killed and robbed a man as the witnesses at the trial had sworn. There had surely been a murderous hate in the fugitive's dark eyes that day—and today.

The old man finished reading and closed the Book. He fixed his flaming eyes upon the boy. "Wicked and disobedient are thy ways as thy father's were before thee. He would not heed my commands and he yielded to temptation and was cursed by the terrible wrath of God. Is that not so, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"When he came to repentance and lay dying, I swore upon the Holy Book that I would raise you up to be humble and obedient to my voice and to the word of God. It was your father's final wish. Is that not so, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will keep my oath if I have to

crush your proud, deceitful spirit as I crush a worm beneath my foot. You must be brought to humble obedience and sincere repentance and love for a just and merciful God. It was repentance that saved your father from the hungry fires of Hell and freed his soul from the imps of Satan!" The old man raved on, his face congested, his voice a thunder.

Cole trembled. He watched his grandfather with an almost hypnotic fascination. The old man seemed to swell and grow ever larger. A darkly luminous cloud seemed to hover about his monstrous bearded head. Cole wouldn't have been surprised to see God's wrathful lightnings shooting out at him like tongues of fire. The glaring eyes seemed to penetrate all his secrets, to lay bare his hidden guilt.

The old man shouted, "The black and sinful blood that runs through your veins shall not bring the righteous curse of God upon this house again!"

Cole crouched against the table. He was accustomed to his uncle's tirades. No telling what would bring one on. Usually the old man took his spleen out in ranting; sometimes the boy got a thrashing. His uncles were watching, dark heads piously bowed, cold eyes watching, hungrily anticipating.

'Lissa Grant put her hard hand on Cole's arm. "You men better eat your supper," she said, sharply matter-of-fact. "Your food'll get cold."

Spain Dameron shouted at her, "Be quiet, woman!" But he filled his plate and began to eat.

After the meal Cole's uncles went upstairs to their room, the old man sat in the cooler living room with a lamp and his Bible, and Cole slipped into the housekeeper's room and lighted the lamp on her dresser. She never minded his going there and her dresser had the only good mirror in the house.

The boy peered at his image in the glass. Jed Tarbow had said, "I can tell you're a Dameron by the look of you,"—hating.

The mirror reflected 'Lissa Grant's small figure and elfin face. She put her strong hands on Cole's shoulders, her small mouth tight and angry. "I was with your father when he died," she said. "They tried to keep me out but they couldn't. He died with your mother's name on his lips and he made no last repentance. If your mother had lived he would never have come back here. Never. But he was dying and he was alone and he had you to take care of. So don't blame him, Cole. Don't ever blame him."

"I don't," the boy said. "I guess grandpa just wants me to be good."

"He's a cruel, hard man," the housekeeper said. She touched his face with a rough finger and smiled her one-sided smile. "You are a good boy and have fine blood. Not a drop to be ashamed of."

"Tell me about my mother. Do I look like her at all?"

"She was a gentle sweet little thing and kind. You have the Dameron look in your gray eyes and your black hair and your long nose but your mouth is like your mother's. And may it plague your grandfather every time he sees you, to think how he turned his youngest son away because he loved her. A woman from a traveling show wasn't good enough for a Dameron."

"You knew her, 'Lissa?"

"I only met her once, when your father took me to her. She was dead and he was dying when he brought you back here to his father. You know all this, Cole. Why do you ask me?"

"I like to hear it," the boy said, smiling at her.

'Lissa Grant was the only mother he had ever known, the only source of love and affection in this bitter house. She had come to Spain Dameron as his housekeeper when she was a thin, pigtailed, freckle-faced girl, and now she was an aging woman. She had known Cole's father. They had been young together so long ago and, Cole knew, she had loved him.

Now she smiled at Cole, the quick lopsided smile that made her thin face look like an impish boy's, and stroked his cheek with her rough hand. "Something bothers you, Cole?"

"No," he said quickly. "No."

"There is so," she said, studying him.

"No," he said. He wanted to tell her, to ask her advice. She had a way with sick people so that families for miles around came to her for doctoring. The long barn loft was fragrant with her racks of drying herbs, and most of the babies in the valley were delivered by her skilled hands. Cole was sure she would help Jed Tarbow, never caring about the risk to herself. In a moment of clarity he knew what he must do—there had really been no doubt about it from the first.

He said frowning, "Suppose you were walking in the woods and you found a—a calf that had been shot and had laid in the mud for days and was just about starved to death and sick—what would you do for it?"

"I'd put it out of its misery, Cole. Poor thing."

"No, no. You'd want to make it well."

She looked at him for a long questioning moment. Her eyes widened and darkened, and then she knelt on the floor beside a scarred oaken chest, opened the lid, and took things out of the herb-fragrant depths.

"If'en I'd found this—calf," she said slowly, "I'd cut the wound and let it drain and I'd wash it out with whiskey and I'd put a poultice on it and I'd bandage it up seeing that it was kept clean and I'd feed this calf some calamus tea for the fever and I'd get some meat broth down him. Then I'd pray a lot."

She put a wrapped bundle on the

dresser. "Here's some of the stuff you'll need. You better take an old quilt and some clean clothes, seeing as how this calf laid in the mud." She looked directly at Cole. "Let me go with you. Let me help."

"No," the boy said. "I know you'd help and you aren't scared, but it's something I got to do by myself. Please, 'Lissa. I want it this way."

"All right," the woman said, smiling up at him with a tight-lipped pride. "You're most a man. Your pa'd be pleased with you. He was a brave and gentle man—if he was a Dameron!"

Jed Tarbow was still lying beside the spring. He was unconscious and tossing and muttering in a fevered delirium. In the lantern's pale light his glazed eyes rolled at Cole without recognition and he did not protest as the boy stripped the tattered mud-caked clothing from his gaunt body.

The wounded leg was a puffed, discolored mass of swollen suppurating flesh. Cole stared down at it, stomach heaving. How could he ever care for a wound like that? He had gone with 'Lissa on many of her doctoring trips but he had never seen a wound so badly infected.

For a moment he wished he hadn't come—or had let 'Lissa come with him. Then his lips tightened. He sponged off the wounded leg and picked up the knife. Tarbow's emaciated body jerked at the thrust of the blade, but then it lay quietly as Cole cleaned and dressed the wound.

"Gimme that whiskey. Don't go wastin' it like that!" The boy started at the sound of the man's hoarse voice. The sick man was conscious, his dark eyes lucid and watching.

Cole held the bottle to his lips.

"Damn it, that's better," the sick man said. His eyes fastened on Cole's face. "What're you helpin' me for? Ain't you a Dameron?"

"Cole. My pa's dead. I live with my grandpa, Spain Dameron."

"That's where I got to," Tarbow said with grim humor. "Right into the skunk's nest." He studied the boy. "Why didn't you tell your grandpa? How come you're up here helpin' me?"

"I dunno," Cole said slowly. "I seen the trial. I guess I figured maybe you didn't do it."

"I didn't," Tarbow said with weak vehemence. "I'm no saint. I've done a lot of things—some of 'em mighty bad— but I never knifed a man for his money."

It was late night when Cole came back to his grandfather's house. The moon hung high in the west and there was a cool dampness in the air. An owl swept low over his head on velvet wings like an evil omen. The boy shivered.

He slipped into the house and tiptoed into his small bedroom under the stairs. He pulled off his clothes and slid into bed. He was filled with a fearful exhilaration, and

though he was exhausted, it was a long time before he could sleep . . .

The crisis passed, and the fugitive rapidly got better. Cole went to the spring every night with food for him and soon his feeling of rather fearful obligation toward the fugitive changed to a strong affection. He would be sorry when the man was well enough to go, though he knew that every day that Tarbow stayed at the spring increased the danger of discovery.

The fifth night the man said to Cole, "You better not come up here no more. I'm 'bout well and ready to get goin'. Your grandpa might catch you and there'd be hell to pay. You'd be in bad trouble."

Cole sat on the ground watching Tarbow limping up and down the sandy clear spot beside the spring. The lantern was turned low, its yellow light making a small warm pool of brightness around them.

"I wished I could go with you," the boy said suddenly. "I wouldn't be no trouble. I'm strong and I could help."

Jed Tarbow stopped his painful walking and stared at him. "I'd like to have you," he said finally, "but I ain't goin' to let you go with me. Lot of folks shoot first and get curious afterwards. They'd see me. Wham! You'd be dead 'fore you knew what hit you."

"No, I wouldn't," Cole said eagerly. "You could stay hid and I'd get us stuff to eat."

"Do you think every Dameron in the country wouldn't be after us? They'd find out where I'd hid, they'd figure you was with me." Tarbow said plainly, "They don't know 'bout me. They think I'm dead. One man hides out a lot better'n two." He sat beside Cole and put his arm across the boy's shoulders. "I'm damned sorry, but that's the way it is and I don't want to get you into no trouble."

Cole blinked. "All right," he said huskily. "But some day I'm leaving. Some day."

"Don't till you have to, boy. I been movin' from one place to another all my life. I left my pa's place when I was fourteen. Me and him had a fight 'bout somethin'. I went back once but the old man was gone, moved off, and nobody knowed where. I guess I ain't sorry. The way I lived, I've seen a lot and done a lot and been a lot of places—but I'm tellin' you, boy, don't leave home till you gotta—no matter what."

Cole worked his bare feet into the sand. "When do you want to go?"

"Tomorra night," Tarbow said. "Don't you come back. You chanced it enough."

"You gotta have shoes and a coat and you oughta have some money—"

"Don't risk it!"

"I'll be real careful. Uncle Jesse's shoes oughta just fit you."

The next day was a Saturday. August and hot. The hours dragged

by. Cole was so infuriatingly absent-minded and slow that his grandfather cuffed him soundly and sent him up to the house to clean out the stalls in the barn.

The boy welcomed the opportunity. 'Lissa was out gathering herbs along the creek and Cole slipped into the empty house and made up a package of things for the fugitive—his Uncle Jesse's best boots, an old jacket of his grandfather's, bread and jerky, socks, and two five-dollar gold pieces from his grandfather's desk.

Cole promised himself that somehow he would replace the money. It was stealing—but Jed Tarbow had to have it. He tied everything up in his grandfather's jacket and hid the bundle under his bed.

The night was still except for the chorus of peepers by the creek and the shrill trilling of the crickets in the dead grass. Cole lay impatiently on his bed in his hot cubbyhole of a room and waited for his uncles and grandfather to go upstairs to their bedrooms. 'Lissa Grant had been called to a neighbor's house to deliver a baby.

At last the house was dark and quiet. Cole was dressed except for his shoes and he stealthily drew the bundle from under his bed and tiptoed across the kitchen and out onto the porch and across the yard. The moon was just rising above the black ridge of Pine Mountain. The valley still lay in dark shadow. Startlingly close, a coyote yapped a frenzied greeting to the rising moon.

Holding his bundle tightly, Cole skirted the porch and started across the yard by the pump. A darker shadow moved and became a man that leaped on Cole and seized his arms.

His Uncle Jesse shouted, "I've got him, Sam!"

Cole fought his captor until the big man clamped his arm around the boy's neck, nearly choking him. Samuel came up with a lamp.

Jesse said, dragging Cole toward the house, "Bring that thing he was carryin' and go up and fetch Pa."

Cole sagged weakly. The enormity of the catastrophe numbed him. An icy sweat covered his body, and his stomach twisted coldly.

Jesse's grip relaxed as Cole fell limply against him and in an instant the boy had torn himself free and was racing off into the night. He had to warn Jed Tarbow, to give him a chance to get away. He ran away from the spring toward the barn. Behind him his uncles' boots pounded on the dusty earth.

Cole ran silently and fear winged his feet. He raced into the darker shadow of the barns and across the yard behind them to the edge of the creek. There he crouched under the sheltering limbs of the willows, his heart thundering in his throat, and listened to the sounds of the pursuit. His grandfather had joined the search. His deep voice called out angrily.

They had lanterns, and the bobbing lights circled the barns and climbed to the mows and entered the various sheds and peered into dark corners. The men's black, elongated shadows stretched across the corrals and up the whitewashed barn walls. They gathered, they turned toward the creek, three of them coming striding along with deadly purpose, their bearded faces grim in the flickering light.

Cole inched back under the trees. The thick dry brush crunched beneath his weight and the men stood a moment listening and then ran forward. Cole plunged through the thicket fighting the tough clinging branches that seemed like a thousand grasping hands. The bank gave way under his feet and he dropped into deep and stagnant water and fought to the surface bursting through the tangle of floating plants.

He saw the watery gleam of the lanterns close over his head and let himself sink silently beneath the scum and swam with all his strength downstream. The pool shoaled rapidly with a slope of oozy mud. Cole, lungs fighting for air, kept as near the bank as he could and came up in the shelter of the willows.

His uncles and his grandfather were peering into the deep pool. They were holding the lanterns out over the broken surface mat, muttering together, low-voiced.

Cole slipped through the warm currentless water keeping as much below the surface as he could. The moon swung up into the eastern sky now, spreading a silver radiance over the fields and painting pools of inky darkness beneath the trees.

Far below the barns the boy pulled himself up onto the grassy bank and lay panting, listening to the night sounds of cricket and frog and the distant yap of coyotes. He thought the men must have given up the search. The lantern lights had disappeared and his grandfather was no longer calling to him. Moving cautiously in the tree shadows and crawling across the moonlit open fields, Cole made his way toward the spring. When he had put a hill between himself and the house, he began to run.

He burst into the willow thicket around the spring and gasped, "Mr. Tarbow, Mr. Tarbow! You've got to get out of here! They caught me! They'll find out!"

Something in the silence warned him even before the lantern flared and revealed in its yellow light his uncles and his grandfather standing around the fugitive, bound and gagged and lying on the churned and bloody sand.

Jesse said, "I told you he was sneakin' off up here. Gonna give this muck my good boots!"

Cole's knees folded abruptly under him. His throat burned with tears. It was his fault. If he'd only listened to Jed Tarbow—if he hadn't been such a fool, risking everything one more time. Capture would

mean death for the fugitive—death by hanging. They'd send him back to prison. Cole saw the rope dangling and the black hood. He had done it —as much as if he had put the noose around Tarbow's neck with his own hands.

Cole cried out, "You can't! He's not guilty! He didn't kill anybody!"

His uncles laughed. Old Spain Dameron looked down at the boy and his bearded face was expressionless and cold as granite. "Get up," he said in a terrible voice. "Get up and bring thy murdering friend!"

They went back down the mountain, Cole leading, half carrying the condemned man. Jesse had cut the bonds from Tarbow's ankles and torn the gag from his mouth, but he was still weak from hiding in the slough, and the fight at the spring had reopened the wound in his thigh and one of the brothers had struck him with an ax handle on the head. He had tried to walk proudly by himself and had fallen. In the cold white moonlight they stumbled down the steep and grassy hillside. The three Dameron men followed like three implacable black demons.

They came at last to the yard beneath the huge white oaks in front of the big log house. Cole stretched Tarbow's gaunt body on the porch and dropped beside him too exhausted to do more than fight for breath. Vaguely, numbly, he heard his grandfather order his sons to bring a rope and wood for a fire.

When the flames were leaping, gilding the pale, arching oak branches with a sinister glow, Cole sat up, watching without understanding while his Uncle Jesse fashioned a long many-looped knot in one rope end. His dazed mind didn't understand what they were planning to do until Jesse and Samuel carried the fugitive beneath a low bough beside the fire and placed the rope around his neck.

Cole plunged from the porch screaming with horror. "You can't!" he shouted. "You can't!"

He saw his uncles' grinning faces, the glitter in their eyes. He whirled to face his grandfather. The old man was watching him, smiling triumphantly, "The wages of sin is death, Cole. Death and eternal damnation! He is a murderer and so he shall die!"

"You have no right!" the boy shouted. "No right to hang him!"

"We're gonna shoot him afterwards, if you're so all fired worried." Jesse called. "Say we caught him runnin' and we yelled and he wouldn't stop. Who's gonna know? Who's gonna care anyway—long as Tarbow's dead!"

Samuel threw the end of the rope over the limb. The condemned man straightened himself and looked up into the deep sky. He looked past the fire's red light toward the circling mountain ridges. He looked at the graceful branches, at the delicate notched leaves. His wide dark eyes fixed on Cole's face. He

said, "I know what you're feelin'. Don't take it hard. It weren't your doin'. I'm sorry for what I got you into. I shouldn't have let you help me."

He spat full in Jesse's grinning face and shouted, "The boy's worth more than the whole damn lot of you! May you rot in Hell for what you'll do to him for this!"

Samuel lunged with all his weight on the rope and Tarbow's body seemed to elongate. Jesse seized the rope beside his brother and the body swung clear of the ground, writhing.

Cole stared frozen with horror. The unbelievable was happening. The unthinkable thing was a reality. In desperation he glanced around the yard, at the porch, and saw his grandfather's Winchester leaning against the log wall. He bounded across the yard, across the splintery porch boards, and grasped the rifle. He whirled, leveling it, and shouted, "Let him go! Let him go! I'll kill you!"

Jesse and Samuel dropped the rope. Tarbow's body slumped to the ground. Old Spain Dameron ran toward the porch with a lithe quickness. His eyes flamed, his beard streamed across his broad chest. To the frightened, desperate boy he seemed to fill the sky with thunder.

Cole raised the rifle and squeezed the trigger. The butt kicked against his shoulder. The old man came on. The boy raised the rifle again and Jesse slammed into him, his big hands shoving the barrel aside.

They rolled down the porch steps into the dusty yard, the rifle clamped between them. They were jerked apart and Cole, lying on his back in the dust, saw his grandfather towering over him with the Winchester in his hands and Jesse standing beside him wiping the dust from his face.

"Finish what you were doing," the old man commanded, his deep voice calm, "then bring me my whip."

Cole rolled over and buried his face in his hands. He had failed. In everything he had failed. He cried and the salt of his tears ran into his mouth. He was not crying from fear, and he would not cry from the pain of the whip; it was hatred like a consuming fire—hatred and the terrible sense of his own helplessness.

He heard them coming back to him—the thud of their booted feet —and knew they had finished with Jed Tarbow. He stood up swaying dizzily and looked with slow deliberation at the murdered man that he might sear the sight deeply in his mind. The lifeless body hung without shape. It looked unhuman, boneless, like a bundle of old clothes. But Tarbow's naked feet swung gently, slowly turning.

Cole faced his grandfather, "I wish'd I'd killed you," he whispered.

The old man smiled. He held his

black-leather drover's whip in his big hands and he smiled at Cole while the whip slowly uncoiled as if it had a sinister life of its own.

"I prayed that this time would never come, that you would mend your sinful ways, my son. The Lord has laid the yoke upon me and I cannot fail Him."

The old man drew back the whip. Through a burning red haze Cole saw his grandfather's gleaming eyes, the open mouth like a gaping cave in the stained beard, and he knew that the old man intended to beat him to death. Cole was the symbol of the evil that had stolen his son away so long ago, the hated reminder of a rebellion against his authority.

The whip came down across Cole's shoulders and drove him to his knees, knocking the breath from his body. The numbing pain of it filled the world. The old man's face seemed to dance above him, swelling, black with fury. And the whip came down again and again and again . . .

He heard himself groaning and he was lying on something rough and scratchy with a cold cloth around his head and someone was gently stroking a soothing aromatic-smelling salve on the agony of his back. He turned his head and pushed the cloth from his face.

He was lying on the rough wool quilt on top of his own bed and 'Lissa Grant was bending over him with tears spilling down her leathery cheeks.

"Lie still, Cole," she said sharply. "Oh, those devils! I'd like to show them what a whip feels like!"

The boy sat up slowly, painfully, and pushed her away. He staggered into the living room and peered out of the front window. The fire had burned to coals and Tarbow's body was gone.

"They took him into town," the housekeeper said behind him. "When I got home from Mrs. Bentley's, they were just putting him into the wagon and you were laying out there on the ground. Oh, Cole, I thought they'd murdered you too. I made Jesse carry you into the house."

She stood beside Cole, a shadowy figure in her long gray dress. She touched his cheek with her rough finger. "Come let me finish doctorin' your poor back. You can't help him any more. I figured you'd found Mr. Tarbow—who else was running and hiding? If I'd helped you, maybe things would have worked out different."

"Yes," the boy said savagely. "Maybe he'd have used his whip on you too."

He went to his bedroom and got the lamp. He carried it to his grandfather's big oaken desk. He had been careful to open the locked drawer without damaging it when he had taken the money for Tarbow; now he pushed his knife blade roughly against the splintered wood.

"You tell him I took twenty dollars, no more," he said to 'Lissa. "I'll send it back to him. I don't want anything from him."

The woman stood quietly. Slowly her face twisted as though she suffered an almost unbearable pain; but when she spoke her sharp voice was steady. "So you're leaving, Cole. I knew it would come. Sooner or later."

"I'll never come back," the boy said, his voice choked. "Not ever."

He went into his bedroom and found a soft clean shirt. Slowly and painfully he put it on over his bruised, torn back. He picked up his coat and looked around the cramped space that had been his room for as long as he could remember. One wall held an oriole nest neatly fashioned of horsehair and string. Another was festooned with the graceful curved spikes of cattails. There was a collection of butterflies on the box that served as his dressing table. But there was nothing here to hold him now.

'Lissa came into the small room. She was holding a package tied up in a clean handkerchief. "Here's some bread and meat for you," she said, smiling her one-sided smile with trembling lips. "Do take care, Cole. I couldn't love you more if you were my own son. It will be a sad cruel house without you." She fought her tears and mopped her eyes on her sleeve.

The boy put the food in his coat pocket. "When I get a place I'll send for you," he said impulsively.

She shook her small head. "I'm well enough here. I'm used to it. Sometime write to me, and let me know how you get along. They'll be after you, you know."

"I know," the boy said, "but I'll get away."

She put a small, flat lace-wrapped object in his hand. "Here's something I want you to have."

Wondering, the boy undid the age-yellowed lace and stared down at a small tintype of a man and a woman, stiff in their best clothes; the man was seated and the woman was standing beside his chair.

"That's your mother and father a little while after they got married," 'Lissa said. "Your father gave it to me when he came back here, knowing he was dying and knowing I'd treasure it for you."

The boy stared down at the faces. They seemed to be alive, the woman's lips a little apart as if she wanted to speak to him. The man looked like Cole's older self, and the woman was beautiful with great dark eyes and pale soft hair.

Cole wrapped the little picture back in its lace cover and pressed it into 'Lissa's hand. "You keep it safe for me," he said. "I might lose it."

But it was not that. The picture was a part of the past—a past that belonged far more to this lonely woman than it ever would to him.

He leaned down and kissed her gently and went out into the moon-bright night.

a new Father Crumlish story

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ALICE SCANLAN REACH**

TITLE: ***The Gentle Touch***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Father Francis Xavier Crumlish

LOCALE: Lake City, United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Through the long years at St. Brigid's, Father Crumlish had engaged in many a battle with Satan. Sometimes he lost, sometimes he won; but each encounter increased the good Father's strength . . .*

JUST AS FATHER FRANCIS XAVIER Crumlish was about to take the first sip from his second cup of tea, the arthritis in his finger joints acted up; the cup teetered—

"Hellfire!"

Testily, St. Brigid's pastor swabbed the offending liquid dribbling down the front of his brand-new red, orange, and purple sports shirt. Never mind the shirt; Emma Catt's rectory housekeeping chores included removing tea stains. But would there be no end to these increasingly frequent reminders that he was growing old?

Father Crumlish believed his mission on earth was to shepherd his Flock, to tend his Lambs—the faithful and the strays; but he also believed in indulging his fondness for colorful sports shirts. And why not? Every time he drove along Lake City's waterfront and saw a red-gold rainbow shimmering over the water's outer rim, every time he passed a clump of purple bouncing bet, even a straggling orange-tipped dandelion, he was reminded that the good Lord surely had an eye for color, hadn't He?

Gulping the remains in his cup,

the priest rose and made his slow way to the rectory office. It was time for his customary after-Mass chore —the counting of the Sunday offerings. Seating himself behind the worn desk, he loosened the string of the canvas bag containing the collection and spilled out its contents.

Gloomily he eyed the mound of coins, the pitifully few bills. First he would count the currency. The five dollar bill was there as usual. Father knew whom it came from and why. Next, the ones. Three—four—five—

"Bless us!"

Father's dark blue eyes stared at the piece of paper in his hand. A $10 bill? In St. Brigid's collection basket? Surely not! But there was no mistaking the bill's denomination. Thoughtfully, Father figured it.

After more than forty years in the priesthood, mostly at St. Brigid's, Father Crumlish knew his people. He knew where they spent their time and their money. He also knew that only precious few, if any, of his parishioners could afford a $10 offering. Therefore, it seemed probable that some poor sacrificing soul had dropped the ten in the basket thinking it was a one.

Well, perhaps during the week he might just happen to find out which of his Lambs had mistakenly contributed a sorely needed extra nine dollars. Father put the bill in an envelope, slipped it in his top drawer, and began to count the coins.

But the week slipped by and the bill lay forgotten. By the following Sunday, Father Crumlish had only one thought in mind—to get his counting chore over and done with as speedily as possible. God willing, he could spend the afternoon uninterrupted in front of his television set. The Giants could do with a little rooting from someone in His corner. Moreover, what better medicine for the misery plaguing his bones than, say, a home run by Willie Mays?

Now, seated at his desk, the priest quickly upturned the moneybag. Then he stiffened. Confronting him was another $10 bill. Puzzled, Father Crumlish ran a hand through his still-thick, snow-white hair. Two $10 bills in St. Brigid's collection? Two Sundays in a row? The questions nagged at him as he attacked the mound of nickels.

The traditional luck of his native Tralee, County Kerry, was with the pastor. It was the top of the third inning before he was interrupted—pleasantly. For Father never minded a visit from Lieutenant Thomas Patrick Madigan of Lake City's police force. Presently, during a commercial, the priest shifted his glance from the TV and gazed affectionately at his guest.

"It's plain you're not here on business, Tom," he said. "That Blarney tongue of yours has been still too long."

"Talk, Father? While you're watching the Giants?" Big Tom shook his head. "Anyway, business is slow."

"Thank the Lord."

"Oh, we've had a few beefs. The usual brawls." Tom lit a cigarette. "Mike Bannon was clouting Maggie around again last night."

Father frowned. The policeman was referring to two of St. Brigid's "strays"—Mike Bannon, one of the waterfront's worst hooligans, and his poor befuddled daughter.

"Anything come of it?"

"Nope. Same old story. No matter how much that big bully belts her around, Maggie refuses to bring charges."

Thoughtfully the priest stared into space.

"We're having a little run of phony ten-dollar bills," Madigan remarked.

Father Crumlish's heart stumbled. "In the parish?"

"Yeah." Tom exhaled smoke and grinned teasingly. "Come across any, Father?"

Unnecessarily, St. Brigid's pastor blew his nose. "And where in the name of Heaven do you think I'd be finding counterfeit ten-dollar bills, Tom?" he asked innocently. "In the collection basket?"

Tom chuckled. "Hardly. St. Brigid's plate is the last place you're likely to find a ten-dollar bill, phony or not."

Father had no intention of commenting. Besides, the ball game resumed. But at the next commercial he decided to risk a question. "How do you go about detecting counterfeits, Tom?"

Madigan shrugged. "Banks. Stores. We alert 'em to the serial numbers."

Hopefully, Father waited.

"This time it's an easy number to spot."

Father held his breath.

"B12341234C."

The pastor fastened his gaze on the TV.

"Who's that lad on second, Tom?" he inquired mildly.

As soon as the rectory door closed on Big Tom's broad back, Father Crumlish seated himself at his desk and proceeded to examine the contents of the envelope in his top drawer. For a long moment he looked at the two bills in his hand. Big Tom was wrong; someone, innocently or not, *had* dropped two $10 bills into St. Brigid's collection basket—two counterfeit bills!

"What's the Devil up to now?" Father wondered out loud. The priest made a steeple of his fingertips, brought his hands to his chin, leaned back in his chair, and rocked a little.

Through the years Father Crumlish had engaged in many a battle with Satan. Sometimes he won, sometimes he lost, sometimes it was a draw. But each encounter increased the old priest's knowledge of his people. It was this knowledge that sharpened his sword, gave him strength to strike another blow.

Now, uneasily, the pastor returned the bills to the envelope and put it in his drawer. Well, with God's

help, he'd puzzle it out. No need to stir up Big Tom—not if Father could spare some troubled soul.

It was the top of the sixth inning when he settled down once more by the TV set. But his mind persisted in straying from the game. Madigan's words about Mike and Maggie Bannon plagued him.

Of all the thorns in Father Crumlish's crown, tough, mean-mouthed Mike Bannon, whose record of arrests for disorderly conduct, vandalism—and worse—was awesome, rendered the most piercing pain. Let alone that the evil in the man had sent his long-suffering wife to an early grave, the Lord only knew what miserable life Mike led his daughter.

Despite Father's frequent admonishments, St. Brigid's parishioners, old and young, referred to the poor creature as "Mad Mag." That Maggie was "peculiar," there was no doubt. But, as Father had thought so many times, little wonder!

Annoyed at himself for his lack of attention to his beloved Giants, Father determined again to thrust the thoughts of his two "strays" out of his mind. But that very morning he had preached a sermon on the Sins of Commission and the Sins of Omission. Now, the echo of his own words thundered in his ears: "You are responsible to God for what you do. But you are also responsible to Him for what you don't do."

Father shifted in his chair, asking himself, as he had time and again through the years: *How many hearts have I known were broken that I never even tried to mend? How many times have I known there was trouble—?*

"Hellfire!"

Wincing from the stiffness in his knees, Father limped to the TV set and gave the Off button a resigned snap. Then swiftly he began to conceal his green and vermilion sports shirt with the dark cloth of his calling.

Swinging the wheel around a curved concrete shoulder, Father eased his foot from the gas pedal and guided the car off the road. Directly ahead of him a weather-eaten sign lurched in the lake breeze: *Bannon's Boats & Bait.*

Abandoning the car, the priest cautiously proceeded down a debris-littered path, side-stepped a couple of leaking tin pails containing listless minnows, and gave a dismayed glance to the few wave-sloshed wooden hulks tossing drunkenly at their moorings in the murky water. Finally he reached the Bannons' sagging shack. The door hung half open, affording him a glimpse of the jungle of broken furniture sprawled on a newspaper-strewn floor.

Well, he'd seen worse in his time. Father Crumlish braced his shoulders. "Anybody home?" he called.

Immediately the door swung open. Father swallowed his Adam's apple and blinked. The stranger grinning

foolishly at him was a sight to behold, from the top of his oiled-down blond hair to the pointed toes of his equally shiny shoes. Inbetween, he flaunted a shirt advertising tropical palm trees, fruit, and native dancers, complemented by a pair of thigh-hugging, lemon-colored trousers.

"I—I'm Father Crumlish," the priest said, somewhat uncertainly.

"Huggins is the name," the man said jovially. "Albert Huggins. C'm-on in."

Wonderingly, Father entered the shack as Albert Huggins turned and called in the direction of a grime-streaked red curtain.

"Hey, Mag!" He swung back to the priest. "I'm the Bannons' new boarder, Father."

"Boarder?"

Huggins' grin stretched wider as he pulled a cigar out of his pocket. "I'm working the grain boats."

"So that's why you're a stranger to me," Father said, understanding.

"Yeah. Only in port a couple of times a month." Albert puffed strenuously. "This shack's a handy place to hang my hat."

Where? Father thought, eyeing the clutter. Then his gaze was arrested. The red curtains parted. Standing in the tattered opening was Maggie Bannon.

Through the years, in manner and appearance, Maggie had given St. Brigid's parishioners good reason to call her "Mad Mag." Rain or shine, she wore a shapeless gray coat, a pair of leaky galoshes, and a tired tail of black scarf which encircled her thin neck, then almost obscured her sunken, sallow cheeks, and finally wound itself over and around a muddy pancake of a hat. Father had long ago grown accustomed to Maggie's outlandish get-up. But today the woman's appearance robbed him of speech. For in place of her customary headgear there was an enormous purple rose!

Maggie's off-hand greeting was typical. "How do you like my new hat, Father?" she said in her usual high, taut voice.

"Well, now—it's—it's quite colorful, to say the least," Father replied, striving for facial control. Pityingly, he watched Maggie shuffle over to a cloudy mirror and peer at herself. Didn't the poor creature also see the ugly bruise, almost the same color as her hat, under her left eye?

"Haven't had a new hat in a long time." Maggie patted the purple rose affectionately.

"It's a fine, fine hat," Father said kindly.

Maggie gave a cracked laugh. "Mike ain't even seen it yet." The thought seemed to sober her. "When he does I'll bet he belts me good."

Father drew an uncomfortable breath. "I was hoping I'd be finding Mike here."

"I'll tell you where to catch up with him, Father," Albert said importantly.

The priest eyed him. He was well-acquainted with the type. A floater. Strong on brawn but weak on brains.

Any fellow with a smidgen of sense would know better than to board with the Bannons.

"Patsy's Barber Shop."

Father sighed. He might have known. "I'll be getting along then." He turned to Maggie. "Drop by the rectory any time, lass. We'll have a little talk. And a cup of tea."

Grimly, Father Cumlish walked to the door. The sooner he caught up with Mike Bannon the better . . .

Patsy's Barber Shop was patronized by a goodly number of St. Brigid's parishioners in quest of a haircut, a shave, or a bet on a horse. Well, the priest thought wryly, Patsy Cardina would get the shock of his life to see that the caller at his rear door this day was his pastor.

He wasn't mistaken.

"Father!" The rotund barber obviously was startled as he admitted the priest to the room. "What—?"

Father looked beyond Patsy and fastened his gaze on a burly, red-faced man slouched at a corner table. The priest's expression hardened.

"I've just come from seeing your daughter, Michael Bannon." He took a step toward the table. "It's a sorry sight she is."

Slowly Mike rose to his feet. The color in his face deepened. "I got a right—" he began.

"You've no right to beat that poor befuddled lass," the priest said with barely controlled anger, "and you've done it for the last time." He raised a finger and pointed it at Bannon. "Now I'm warning you. If Maggie won't prefer charges against you, then I will. And I'll see that you rot in jail. D'you hear and understand me, Michael Bannon?"

The perpetually sullen expression on Mike Bannon's face remained unchanged. But the priest noticed a flicker in his mean, crafty eyes. Father stared contemptuously at the man for another moment. Then abruptly he swung on his heel.

At the door Patsy caught his sleeve. "Father." Perspiration dotted the barber's balding pate. "At Mass this morning you said the second grade needed new desks?"

Father nodded.

Patsy fumbled in his pocket and drew out a $10 bill. "I won a little in the fifth yesterday." He grinned sheepishly. "Maybe this will help."

Thanking him, Father reached inside his coat and dickey and tucked the $10 bill in the breast pocket of his sports shirt.

"Keep an eye on this nag, Father. He's called Gentle Touch—a real good thing."

"I'll remember the creature's name," Father said solemnly, closing the door.

Father Crumlish was dreaming. The bases were loaded. Willie Mays was up to bat, and—

The rectory telephone rang.

Instantly alert, the pastor reached for the receiver while glancing at his bedside clock. Two A.M.

"St. Brigid's."

"Father—"

The priest recognized Big Tom Madigan's voice.

"Yes, Tom."

"It's Mike Bannon."

Father felt an apprehensive chill.

"Murdered—"

"God help us!"

"Maggie did it, Father. She admits it."

The Sins of Omission! What had he failed to do?

"I'll be along in ten minutes, Tom."

With an unsteady hand Father Crumlish replaced the telephone receiver.

Mindful of his arthritis, the pastor eased himself into the chair and leaned closer to the desk separating him from Big Tom Madigan.

"What happened, Tom?"

"Maggie says Mike came home and began beating her. She admits hitting back at him with everything she could lay her hands on." The policeman broke open a fresh pack of cigarettes. "From the looks of the shack, she sure did. '

"I warned the fellow," Father said, reflecting.

"Maggie cracked him over the head with something—she doesn't remember just what. He fell on the floor and she ran out." Tom lit a cigarette. "A scout car picked her up on the highway."

"Who found Mike?"

"A real clown. A guy who works the grain boats between here and Duluth. Stays at Bannons' when he's in port."

"Albert Huggins?"

"You know more waterfront characters than we do."

Father waved an impatient hand. "What happened?"

"Huggins says the Bannons were having a go. He cut out for Murphy's Bar, came back a couple hours later, and found Mike dead on the floor. We checked him and the story. He's clean."

For a long moment Father sat silently.

"Mike was a big fellow, Tom. Would Maggie have the strength—?"

"She had plenty of motive."

"Entirely."

"But don't worry. She'll never be convicted of murder. Not in her mental condition."

The priest got to his feet. "I'd like to see her, Tom."

"Sure, Father."

"Alone?"

Madigan pushed his desk buzzer.

There was little in life that could shake him, Father Crumlish had thought. But at the sight of Maggie Bannon he wasn't too sure. Her shapeless coat had been removed, revealing old and new welts on her scrawny arms, and there was a fresh bruise on one gaunt cheekbone.

The priest's stomach lurched. Nevertheless, he noticed that the purple rose was still rooted on her head, although not too firmly.

"Sit down, lass," Father said gently. "I want to know about you and Mike."

"I told you he'd belt me around when he saw my hat." She patted the purple rose. "But this time I belted him back real good."

Father tried to conceal his dismay. "The man was your father—"

"He was not," Maggie contradicted him flatly.

Father stared incredulously. "Do you know what you're saying?"

Maggie plucked at the tatters holding her together. "Bannon was a no-good bum." She looked down at her lap. "But my mother was—worse."

"Mike told you this?" Father asked after a shocked moment.

"Nearly every day. Ever since I can remember." Abruptly, Maggie buried her face in her hands.

Father Crumlish watched the purple rose bob about crazily from the violent heaving of Maggie's slight frame. He ought to have known there was the Devil's own purpose behind Mike Bannon's deliberate persecution of his wife and this poor creature. He ought to have sensed the enormity of evil in the man, realized Mike had some terrible hold over Maggie which kept her slaving for him and stoically accepting his inhuman treatment of her.

Guiltily, Father reproached himself. After a while he went over to Maggie and gave her shaking shoulders a reassuring, gentle touch.

"Put yourself in the hands of the Lord, Maggie. He'll not desert you." Father added a final word just before he left the room. "Nor will I."

Father Crumlish sank back in his easy chair and was about to slip off his left shoe to ease the corn on his little toe when the rectory doorbell rang.

"Hellfire!"

Emma Catt was in the kitchen punishing the pots and pans and doing the Lord knew what to last night's leftovers, which she would shortly dish up to the pastor as Irish stew. Tiredly, Father rose and limped to the door. He knew very well that neither the promise of Heaven nor the threat of Hell nor a raise in pay could tempt Emma to break her Eleventh Commandment: Thou Shalt Not Interrupt Thy Scullery Tasks.

The sight of Patsy Cardina only heightened Father's annoyance. But something was obviously bothering the man. Resigned, the priest led Patsy nto the office.

"A funny thing's happened, Father." Patsy rubbed his hands together nervously. "Remember that nag I told you about—that real good thing—Gentle Touch?"

Father remembered vaguely.

"Well, just before you came in Sunday afternoon looking for Mike Bannon, he gave me two tens to play on the horse. On the nose." Patsy coughed. "I stuck 'em in

my pocket and—to tell the truth, Father—I gave one of 'em to you for the new second-grade desks."

"Get on with it, lad," Father said irritably.

"So I played the dough for Mike and darned if Gentle Touch didn't win today!"

Turning to stare out the window, Father Crumlish wondered at the ways of the Lord.

"I been thinking maybe 'Mad'—" Patsy caught himself. "—Maggie could use this." He held out an envelope.

Wordlessly, Father took it.

"Mike's half."

"Half?"

"Like I told you, Father, Mike gave me two tens. One for himself and one for a pal of his."

"Who?" Father asked, curious.

"I dunno—Al Something-or-other, I think Mike said." Patsy shrugged. "All I know is the guy is sure to show up for his share."

"No doubt," Father said slowly, thinking of Albert Huggins' extravagant lemon-colored trousers. "I'll see Maggie gets this." He rose, signifying to his parishioner that the interview was over.

Sinking once more into his easy chair, Father was about to close his eyes for a little doze when he saw St. Brigid's housekeeper looming in the doorway. For 22 years Emma Catt had ruled the rectory with two steel-gray eyes, an equal number of steel-gray chins, and the breadth and bellow of a well-fed Brigadier-General. Despite himself, the very sight of the woman gave Father Crumlish the uncomfortable feeling that he ought to rise and salute.

"Yes, Emma?" Father inquired meekly.

"I've often asked myself what your parishioners would say if they knew their pastor was wearing every-color-of-the-rainbow sport shirts underneath his God-given garments." Father cringed at the lash of Emma's latest attack against his taste. "I was scrubbing my knuckles to the bone over the tea stains in that red, orange, and purple horror," Emma said severely, "and in the breast pocket, I found this." She held out a $10 bill.

Father took it as Emma did an about-face and marched away. He looked at the bill.

"Bless us!"

It was another counterfeit.

Now where in the name of heaven—?

Suddenly Father remembered. This was the $10 bill Patsy had given him for the second-grade's new desks—the same bill that Patsy had just told him he had got from Mike Bannon to play on Gentle Touch.

When Father Crumlish was sorely troubled he invariably sought the solace of St. Brigid's church. Now, seated in the last pew, the priest leaned back, seeking an answer to

the question tormenting him: how had the counterfeit money come into Mike Bannon's hands?

In the soothing hush of the old church, with the flickering vigil lights lulling him to rest, Father almost dozed. But suddenly a small faint ray from the late afternoon sun illuminated one of the stained glass windows in a rich, purple glow.

He gazed admiringly at the sight. The color reminded him of the purple haze over the hills of Tralee. It was almost the color of the sports shirt he was wearing, almost the color of the rose on Maggie Bannon's hat—

"Glory be to God!"

Father Crumlish sank to his knees. He thought he knew the answer now. And with the good Lord's help . . .

As swiftly as his arthritis would permit, the priest made his way down the church aisle to the side door which opened out on the brief winding path to the rectory.

When Father Crumlish walked into Big Tom Madigan's office he wasn't the least surprised to find Albert Huggins lounging easily in one of Madigan's austere office chairs, puffing on a cigar and still wearing his foolish grin, tropical shirt, and lemon-colored trousers.

"We sent a car right out when you called saying you wanted a word with this fellow," Madigan said. "Found him where you thought we would—Murphy's Bar."

"Just as I was getting a refill, too," Albert said jauntily. "What did you want to see me about, Father?"

"A horse," Father replied promptly. "By the name of Gentle Touch. Did you know the creature won today?"

Albert's pale eyebrows shot upward. "Yeah?"

"Mike Bannon placed a ten-dollar bet on the nose. Just a few hours before he was killed."

"Bannon?" Madigan shook his head disbelievingly. "Mike never had that kind of dough."

"Yes, he did." Huggins waved his cigar excitedly. "I just paid him my board. He told me he was going to put it on the nag." He grinned. "So I gave him another ten to bet for me. Guess I'm in luck."

Father Crumlish breathed a trifle easier. "Well, now," he said conversationally, "I'm not so sure just how lucky you are. It so happens I've one of those tens you gave Mike." The priest took the bill from his pocket and passed it to Madigan. "Take a look at it, Tom."

In the instant it took Big Tom to scan the bill, Father Crumlish could sense an unhappy change in Albert Huggins.

"Phony." Tom looked questioningly at the priest, then he turned to Huggins. "Know anything about this?"

"No—nothing." Albert shifted in his chair.

Big Tom studied him for a mo-

ment. "Then for all you know," he said mildly, "there might be a few more in your wallet. Let's take a look."

Huggins sat motionless. Big Tom rose and walked around the side of his desk.

"Okay." Reluctantly, Albert handed Madigan his wallet. "I—I just got paid."

The priest leaned closer as Tom drew out a sheaf of bills.

"You just got paid $210?" Madigan asked dryly. "In phony tens?"

Huggins feigned astonishment. "I swear, I don't know—"

"I can make a pretty good guess." Madigan swung back to his desk and sat down. "You work the grain boats. You've been buying two hundred bucks or so of phony tens. Probably in Duluth. And you've been passing them when you shipped back here to Lake City."

"Now listen—" Huggins began protestingly.

"I've come across a lot of dumb, small-time passers," Madigan interrupted, "but you cop the big prize. So dumb you even passed 'em to pay your board." He looked at Father Crumlish. "Don't worry. We'll find out where this bird bought his wings."

"There's a little something else on my mind, Tom," Father said quietly. "Tell me, Albert," he turned toward Huggins, "did you ever give Maggie any money?"

"Never! And I don't know nothing about this phony dough." The man was determined to brazen it out.

"I'd like you to send for Maggie, Tom."

"Sure, Father."

Maggie was brought into the office, still wearing the purple rose.

"That hat your're wearing, Maggie," Father asked her. "Could you be telling me where you got the money to buy it?"

Maggie wrung her hands.

"Was it from Albert Huggins?" When she didn't answer, Father went on, ever so gently. "Maybe, Maggie, you—ah—found it?"

Maggie remained silent but her sudden flush convinced the priest he was on the right tack. "That's why Mike beat you, isn't it? He came home from Patsy's, saw your new hat, and knew you must have found some money. Did you tell him where, lass?"

Maggie's only response was to rub her bruised cheekbone.

"What you're saying, Father," Madigan said slowly, "is that, whether Maggie told him or not, Mike Bannon found the money."

Father nodded. "And he probably recognized it as counterfeit, Tom . . ."

Maggie came to life. "You mean that dough wasn't real?"

"What would a fellow like Mike do, Tom, if he came across a bundle of counterfeits?"

Madigan thought about it for a moment. "Probably find the guy who owned the stuff. Make him

cough up to protect his racket."

Father Crumlish worried an earlobe. "I've a notion Mike found the money in his own shack."

The policeman swung about to Huggins who shifted uneasily under Madigan's relentless stare. "Did he?"

"I don't know nothing!"

"Did Bannon demand a cut?"

"The last time I saw Bannon, he and Maggie were knocking each other around. I was in Murphy's Bar, remember?"

"Isn't that saloon generally pretty crowded, Tom?" Father asked.

Again Madigan thought it over. "Crowded enough for a guy to come and go unnoticed." He looked at Huggins. "You were in Murphy's all right. But how many times?"

"Twice, maybe," Father said. He turned to Albert and watched fear begin to flood the man's face. "Once, maybe, while Maggie and Mike were fighting. And maybe again after Maggie had run out—the second time when you came back and saw Mike hurt but still alive." Father paused.

Big Tom walked over and planted himself squarely before the man. "So that's it. Mike was pretty well battered up anyway, so you grabbed the chance to finish the job, the chance to rid yourself of a guy who was trying to shake you down."

"I didn't!" Albert's voice was a thin whine.

"Not only did you murder the man," Father said, "you were willing to sit by and let Maggie, poor soul, spend the rest of her life in jail—or possibly worse—for your crime."

"I got an alibi!"

Madigan grasped Huggins' arm, yanked him to his feet, and led him to the door. "After we book you for possession of counterfeits, we'll ask you a lot more questions about Mike Bannon's murder. Then we'll see how well your alibi holds up."

After Big Tom and the wilting, frightened Albert Huggins left the room, Father Crumlish deliberately remained silent. It was a while before Maggie spoke.

"The money was under Albert's mattress, Father. I wouldn't have stole any of it except—" Her voice broke. "The hat cost ten bucks." She stroked the purple rose. "It's so pretty."

Poor tortured lass. Father Crumlish was convinced now that Maggie Bannon was suffering, not from a broken mind, but from a broken heart. The priest asked himself the same old haunting question: *How many hearts have I known were broken that I never even tried to mend?*

"Father." Maggie leaned forward in her chair. "There's something else I gotta tell you—."

Father Crumlish held up his hand to silence her. "Hear me first, Maggie." Then he begged His forgiveness for what he was about to say. "I knew your mother." He paused until the words sank in. "She was a

good woman. A saint on earth. She would do no wrong, lass."

Maggie stared at the priest uncertainly. "Then," she said wonderingly, "Mike really was my father?"

"Take my word for it, lass."

Again Father paused, waiting patiently until Maggie had recovered some semblance of self-control. Then he stood up. "Now," he said firmly, "with the good Lord's help, you and I will straighten things out. It's going to be all right, lass . . ."

The last of his nightly lock-up chores completed, Father Crumlish bolted the worn oaken doors at the rear of the church and slowly climbed the winding stairs to the choir loft. Seating himself at the organ, he murmured a prayer of thanks. The good nuns at Kildare Convent had responded to his plea; so for the first time in her life Maggie Bannon would have a warm bed, food, clothing, and more than a little kindness.

The descendant of a long line of shillelagh wielders ran his arthritic fingers over the organ's ivory keys and with only his Maker to hear, Father Crumlish raised his voice in the song of his homeland.

The cool shades of evening
Their mantle were spreading—

The flickering vigil lights beneath the altars reminded Father Crumlish of the small flame he had recently set to ignite and consume the two counterfeit $10 bills placed in St. Brigid's collection basket by his most befuddled, guilt-ridden, and penitent Lamb. The lights cast a purplish glow and as the old priest sang *The Rose of Tralee*, he couldn't help but think that the glow almost matched, in shape and color, the purple rose on Maggie Bannon's hat.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Brown, Fredric	MRS. MURPHY'S UNDERPANTS	E. P. Dutton & Co.	$3.50	Nov.
Chapel, Charles Edward	THE GUN COLLECTOR'S HANDBOOK OF VALUES, 1964–65	Coward-McCann,	12.50	Nov.
Durham, Philip	DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS A MAN MUST GO: RAYMOND CHANDLER'S KNIGHT	University of North Carolina Press		Nov.
Lamott, Kenneth	WHO KILLED MR. CRITTENDEN?	David McKay Co.	4.95	Oct.
Marsh, Ngaio	DEAD WATER	Little, Brown & Co.	3.95	10/28
O'Grady, Rohan	LET'S KILL UNCLE	Macmillan Co.	3.95	10/28
Ross, James E.	THE DEAD ARE MINE	David McKay Co.	4.95	Oct.
Zimmerman, Isidore and Bond, Francis	PUNISHMENT WITHOUT CRIME	Clarkson N. Potter	5.00	Nov.
Williams, Charles	DEAD CALM	Viking Press	3.50	10/10

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

For short-story addicts, this is the splendid time of the year, when Ellery Queen and Alfred Hitchcock and Mystery Writers of America all bring out anthologies. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MIX . . . #18 (Random, $4.95) contains 20 stories and an essay from EQMM 1962-63, mostly from the last (and decidedly rewarding) prize contest. ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS STORIES MY MOTHER NEVER TOLD ME (Random, $5.95) offers 25 stories, largely of the preternatural, plus Theodore Sturgeon's remarkable novel, SOME OF YOUR BLOOD. A PRIDE OF FELONS (Macmillan, $4.95), the MWA collection edited by the Gordons, includes 20 stories, crowned by gems from EQMM contributors Lillian de la Torre and Robert L. Fish.

★★★★ **THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME, *by Gavin Lyall*** (Scribner's, $3.95)

Lyall's second novel, about intricate intrigues in Lapland, should fix him firmly in the Ambler-Household class of great storytellers.

★★★★ **THE MIRROR CRACK'D, *by Agatha Christie*** (Dodd, Mead, $3.75)

Miss Jane Marple returns, after six years' absence, in an exquisitely well-shaped and challengingly fair murder puzzle.

★★★ **THE SEA MONKS, *by Andrew Garve*** (Harper & Row, $3.50)

The endlessly informed Garve knows all about lighthouses, too, as he sets a firm tight melodrama in the Swirlstone Light.

★★★ **THE VENETIAN AFFAIR, *by Helen MacInnes*** (Harcourt, Brace & World, $5.95)

Drama critic forced by fate into involuntary espionage—familiar enough material, but developed with enviable smoothiness and readability.

★★★ **CLOSE QUARTERS, *by Michael Gilbert*** (Walker, $3.50)

Gilbert's first novel (1947) now at last published here: fine formal detective story with interesting cathedral setting.

Reprints of outstanding quality include Jorge Luis Borges' unique FICCIONES (1962; Evergreen, $2.45); Shelley Smith's prize-winning THE BALLAD OF THE RUNNING MAN (1962; Popular K48, 40¢); and two of Robert van Gulik's wonderful Judge Dee mysteries, THE CHINESE BELL MURDERS (1956; Avon G-1177, 50¢) and THE CHINESE GOLD MURDERS (1961; Dell 1265, 50¢).

NEW *short stories* *in forthcoming issues . . .*

Death of an Old-Fashioned Girl	**STANLEY ELLIN**
When Love Turns	**CORNELL WOOLRICH**
a new Secret Service series	**MICHAEL GILBERT**
The Needle Sharp As Ever	**HUGH PENTECOST**
Honor Among Thieves	**GERALD KERSH**
The Loves in George's Life	**HOLLY ROTH**
The Purple Is Everything	**DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS**
Miss Phipps in the Hospital	**PHYLLIS BENTLEY**
a new police procedural series	**LAWRENCE TREAT**
The Chocolate Dog	**MARGERY ALLINGHAM**
Tales of the Minerva Club	**VICTOR CANNING**
A Quiet Room With a View	**AVRAM DAVIDSON**
a new Francis Quarles series	**JULIAN SYMONS**
Why, Benny, Why?	**FREDRIC BROWN**
Danger at Deerfawn	**DOROTHY B. HUGHES**
Mink Coat, Very Cheap	**CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG**
Flair for Murder	**FRANCES & RICHARD LOCKRIDGE**

magic names, magic titles, magic stories . . .

As promised last month, here is another adventure-in-deduction by our favorite criminological collaborators (fictional)—Martin Leroy (? Manfred Ellery Lee) and King Danforth (? Queen Dannay) . . . Stop over in Zanzibar—and solve the mystery of the unique sports shirt photographed in Bububu—with a few Zanzibaric (or Zanzibarbaric) "lyrics" for incidental music . . .

THE ZANZIBAR SHIRT MYSTERY

by JAMES HOLDING

"NEXT VILLAGE," THE BLACK ARAB driver announced in barely intelligible English, "is name Bububu."

Helen Leroy said, "He's joking!"

King Danforth was consulting a map of Zanzibar. "Incredible as it sounds," he said, "the next village *is* Bububu."

"That's not a name," Martin Leroy said. "That's the way Bing Crosby used to start his theme song."

Carol Danforth touched a hand to her dark hair and sniffed through the broken window of the ancient sedan in which they were riding. "M-m-m!" she said softly. "Isn't that heavenly? What a lovely smelling place!"

"If you like the smell of cloves," her husband said, also sniffing the perfumed air.

"I happen to prefer the smell of Hershey, Pennsylvania," Leroy said, grinning. "It's chocolate-flavored, rather than clove. But I'll grant you, Zanzibar smells pretty good."

Their cruise ship, Valhalla, had dropped anchor that morning in Zanzibar harbor, and her complement of touring Americans had hastened ashore to sightsee the fabulous spice island off the coast of East Africa. The Leroys and the Danforths, after an hour in the narrow, crowded, dirty streets of Zanzibar city, had elected to hire a car and take a circular tour of the island, away from the souvenir hawkers and the overpowering scents of the town.

"That's an extremely provocative name, Bububu," Leroy said in a rapt voice. "It's put me in a lyrical frame of mind."

"Spare us, darling," his wife said affectionately. "No poetry, please. It's too hot."

"When it comes over me, it comes over me, baby." Leroy winked at Danforth. "Listen:

"I love you, and I'd follow you
From Zanzibar to Bububu—"

"Oh, a love poem," Helen conceded, pleased. "That's different. Please go on."

King said, "African place names! May I add a couplet?"

"Feel free. Be my guest."

So Danforth intoned:

"From Machadadorp, or even Cuba,
"I'd trail you to Mtubatuba."

"Great!" Leroy said, and added:

"And we'd build a little cottage cozy
On the swampy banks of Umfalozi—"

"All right, boys, knock it off," Carol interrupted inelegantly. "Here's Bububu."

"Some village," Helen said. "Two houses!"

The driver pulled up under an enormous coconut palm, turned off his wheezing engine, and said with a spacious gesture, "Bububu."

Helen and Carol restrained their laughter.

On the dilapidated building beside the car, a sign bore the faded letters: *Post Office—Bububu*. Through the glassless windows, they could see that the building was falling into ruin and completely deserted.

"No one live here," the driver explained. "No need post office."

"That figures," said Danforth looking around him. "How about that building over there, Ali? What's the red rooster on the wall mean?"

"Rooster mean hotel."

"Whew!" Carol breathed. "I can smell it from here, right through the cloves!" She fanned herself with her handkerchief. "Let's stay in the car, Helen."

Danforth and Leroy got out of the car, sweating in the sticky tropical heat. Together they strolled across the road to inspect the hotel. It had only one ground-floor room, open across the front. Inside was a packed-mud floor, indescribably filthy; a rickety zinc-topped table stood in a near corner with two chairs beside it; an untidy shelf displayed three bottles—evidently the hotel's bar; and at the back of the room a stairway ascended uncertainly to an upper floor where, presumably, a bedroom waited to welcome the weary traveler.

For the moment, however, it looked as if two weary travelers had decided to pass up the bedroom for the bar. Huddled under the liquor shelf on the mud floor slept a short, dirty-robed Arab, breathing in long, phlegmy snores. The bartender? And seated on one of the chairs by the table, with his head and arms sprawled helplessly in a puddle of spilled liquor on the table top, was a second man, quite obviously a white man. He wore a very loud sports shirt and he was dead drunk. There was an overturned liquor bottle, empty, on the table near where his cheek rested.

"That boy is well and truly bagged," Danforth said, grinning. "White man's burden got too heavy for him, I guess. Makes me think of Gauguin and Tahiti and the decay of the tropics."

He took his Polaroid camera off his shoulder, aimed it at the drunken

patron of the Red Rooster Hotel, focused and snapped a picture, his wink light flashing. "I've got to have a record of this. A mood piece, a tropical tone poem."

Leroy wrinkled his nose. "Why do you suppose he picked a God-forsaken place like this to do his drinking in?"

"Who knows?" Danforth checked his watch, then stripped the finished print from his camera. "I'll show this to the girls. Make them glad they stayed in the car. Anything else you want to see here?"

"Let's go. I need some of that clove-scented air, after this." They turned and walked back to their car. "There's another car," Leroy said idly, "behind the hotel. It's even more ancient than ours."

"Nobody in it," Danforth said. "Must belong to the drunk."

They reached their own car.

Leroy said, "We've got a punch line for you, girls.

"You'll never make your dreams
come true
By buying booze in Bububu!"

They climbed into the car and Danforth exhibited the photograph. The driver headed back to the city on a narrow, paved road lined with feathery clove trees, tall palms, and broad-leaved banana plants.

Carol took one look at the Polaroid picture of Bububu's drunken hotel guest and exclaimed in a startled voice, "Why, that's Harry Gardiner, King!"

Her husband stared at her. "Harry Gardiner? You mean, from the ship? Are you cracking up, dear?"

Helen leaned over and looked at the print. "Of course, it's Harry Gardiner," she said sharply. "Carol's right."

Danforth glanced at Leroy and shrugged. "What makes you think so?"

"The sports shirt," Helen said confidently. "What else? I'd recognize it anywhere." She tapped the picture. "There's only one shirt like that in the whole world. Literally. And it belongs to Harry Gardiner on our ship."

Danforth said in astonishment, "It's just a loud shirt. There must be thousands like it."

"Oh, no, there aren't! Harry had that shirt made especially for him when we were in Tahiti on this cruise—from a bolt of cloth freshly loomed by a left-handed princess or something. He told us all about it. And the princess absolutely guaranteed there was no other shirt in the whole world exactly like it—it was a brand-new material, never on the market before. She designed it herself. Harry bought the whole bolt."

"The old sales pitch," Danforth said. "Exclusive shirt, jack up the price."

"No." Leroy looked thoughtful. "I remember something about it, too, now you mention it, Helen. The shirt *was* an original. Unique. One of a kind. Didn't Harry show you a written guarantee to that effect?"

"He certainly did. Passion flowers

and frangipani blossoms entwined in a crazy pattern on a brown and gold background. There couldn't be another like it—certainly not here in Zanzibar, on the other side of the world from Tahiti."

"It *has* to be Harry," Carol said, "in your picture." She clicked her tongue against her teeth in disapproval. "And I thought Harry didn't drink! How wrong can you be?"

"I tell you, the guy wasn't Harry Gardiner," King said. "It was some local drunk wearing a shirt just like Harry's, that's all."

"All we saw was the top of his head," Leroy demurred.

"And his arms," Danforth pointed out. "On top of the table. Look." He pointed to his snapshot. "See his left arm? A tattoo big as an apple on his forearm. Anchor and snake. Does Harry Gardiner have a tattoo on his left arm?"

"No-o-o," Helen admitted grudgingly, "he hasn't. I'd have noticed it in the swimming pool."

"So it's not Harry," Danforth said. "Q.E.D. Or, if you still doubt it, let's go back and pull his face out of the schnapps puddle and make sure."

"Oh, no!" Carol protested. "Even if it *was* Harry, we have no right to do that—after all, it's none of our business, not really."

"I'm glad that's settled." Danforth leaned back against the car's torn upholstery. "Old Harry would love to know you thought he's plastered in Bububu. A teetotaler like him!"

"I still say there's only one shirt in the whole world like his," Helen murmured. "So maybe somebody stole it from him. After all, he's a bachelor, you know, with no wife to look after his wardrobe."

Leroy hooted. "Poor Harry! No wife. Only three million dollars of Texas oil money at the tender age of thirty-two! Nothing to do but take leisurely cruises around the world on luxury ships, paying his cousin Justin's fare, just for company and kicks."

"And not likely to be soaking up Zanzibar booze in a filthy tavern in Bububu," Danforth finished. "Is he?"

They were forced to admit that it was most unlikely. But they agreed not to hurt Harry's feelings by telling him the grim news that a drunk on Zanzibar Island owned a passion-flower-frangipani shirt exactly like the one he thought was guaranteed to be exclusively his.

At 6:30 that evening, with the sun's golden disk dropping spectacularly behind the Sultan's white-arcaded palace on the waterfront, the *Valhalla* sailed majestically out of Zanzibar harbor. The Danforths and the Leroys sat in the Horseshoe Bar, languidly sipping preprandial gimlets, pleasantly wearied by the day's excursion ashore.

All at once Martin Leroy said softly, as though to himself, "Sup-

pose it *was* Harry Gardiner's shirt on that drunk?"

Helen and Carol looked at him blankly. But Danforth slowly sat up straighter in his chair, his lanky body tense. "You've been thinking about it, too," he said.

"Couldn't shake it. We both know that wasn't Harry Gardiner. And there must be other shirts like his. But just suppose it *was* his shirt."

Carol spoke up before her husband could answer. "I know that tone, Mart," she admonished gently. "You two are plotting a mystery again!"

"Why not?" Leroy asked innocently. "It's our business, after all."

A speculative gleam appeared in Helen's sapphire eyes. She spoke with a trace of pride. "I did suggest this afternoon that the shirt could have been stolen from Harry, didn't I?"

"You did, my sweet. So I repeat, King: what if it *was* Harry's shirt we saw on somebody else?"

"A new perspective opens. Hypotheses present themselves. Egregious villains menace Harry Gardiner."

"Stop talking like Nero Wolfe. Say for the nonce that there *is* only one shirt like Harry's." He glanced across the room to where Harry Gardiner and Justin Lewis, his cousin and traveling companion, were sitting together, nibbling hors d'oeuvres and drinking short glasses of tonic water with no gin in it. "Why would anyone want to steal it?"

"It's a pretty shirt," Carol said. "I'd steal it myself it it were a dress."

They ignored her. "If it's genuinely a one-of-a-kind shirt, owned only by Harry Gardiner, then the only reason to steal it would be for purposes of identification—to make sure whoever wore that shirt would be identified as Harry Gardiner."

"But who could identify a strange drunk in Bububu as Harry Gardiner? Even if they wanted to?"

"Maybe us," Danforth said thoughtfully. "After all, we nearly did."

"*We* did," Helen said. "Not you. You had to ring in an old tattoo to spoil the scandal."

Leroy shook his head. "How would anybody know we were going to Bububu? We decided to do it on the spur of the moment. How could they be sure we'd recognize the shirt as Harry's? How could they expect to fool us with a transparent masquerade like that when we know Harry in the flesh? And know that he never touches a drop of the stuff."

Danforth rubbed a big hand over his crewcut and grinned at his partner. "If the man in that shirt was supposed to be Harry, then old Harry was also supposed to look gloriously stoned. But to whom?"

"There was another car behind the hotel," Leroy reminded them.

"Belonged to the drunk. Or the bartender."

"Maybe not. Maybe a third party was present."

"Hiding?"

"Hiding in a grove of clove," Helen laughed. "There's a song title for you."

"Wait! Danforth's stupendous brain is at work," King said immodestly. "How's this? The bad guy in this drama, whoever he is, set up the drunk scene with Harry's shirt not for our eyes, nor for anyone's—but for the keen impersonal eye of the camera!"

"Hear, hear!" his wife said.

"I'd like another gimlet," Helen said.

"King's right." Leroy waved to the bar steward. "Didn't you girls immediately jump to the conclusion that it was Harry you saw in King's picture?"

"True."

"So maybe the bad guy wasn't finished with the setup when we interrupted him. He hid from us. But after we left, he might have taken another picture of the drunk with all the little inconsistencies like the tattoo not showing—a picture that would say 'Harry Gardiner' to everyone who saw it and knew Harry. And it would say not only 'Harry Gardiner' but also that 'Harry Gardiner is as tight as a tick!' " Leroy laughed. "How about that?"

"Delicious," Carol acknowledged, tasting her fresh drink.

"If you young men will listen to a word of advice from a jaded old woman," Helen interposed, "there is a very simple way to stop all this speculation and have our dinner in peace. I hate to point out the obvious."

"Ask Harry about his shirt?" Leroy smiled at her.

"Exactly. Just ask him if somebody stole his shirt."

"Okay." Leroy arose. "Don't let anybody steal my drink."

He walked over to Harry Gardiner's table. For a few moments they could see him chatting animatedly with Harry and his cousin, Justin Lewis. Then he came back and sat down, somewhat glumly.

"The shirt was in Harry's drawer, clean, when he dressed for dinner tonight at six. Harry spent all afternoon at a Hindu dentist's, ashore. Justin was with him. The name Bububu meant nothing to either of them, as far as I could tell. End of report."

"So let's eat," Danforth said. "We can't win 'em all, pal. Finish your drink."

They went down to dinner.

Halfway through his roast ptarmigan leg and asparagus tips, Leroy suddenly arrested his fork in midair, fixed his eyes sternly on his wife, and said, "The shirt could have been laundered and returned to Harry's drawer before he came back from the dentist."

"Whoops!" Carol said. "Here we go again."

"We saw the shirt on the drunk

at about three o'clock," Danforth said. "So there would have been time to get it back to the ship."

"Laundered?" asked Helen skeptically. "Washed and dried and ironed—all in an hour or so?"

"Why not? Somebody who has the run of the ship could easily have done it in the ship's laundry."

"But who?"

Leroy said, "The 'who' might become evident if we knew the 'why.' Why would anybody go to all that trouble? Steal Harry's shirt, put it on a drunken bum in Bububu, take a photograph, then rush back here and get the shirt laundered and returned to Harry's stateroom before Harry got back on board?"

"Because they didn't want Harry to know about it," Carol said.

"I marvel at your deductive powers," King graciously allowed, "but I submit that you answered only the last, and the simplest, part of the question."

Leroy held up his hand for attention. He was peering across the dining room. Beyond the central smorgasbord table, they could see Harry Gardiner and his cousin at their table for two. Harry was reaching under the table to retrieve his napkin from the floor, his cheek almost touching the tabletop, his face distorted with the effort. At that moment a flash bulb flared as the ship's photographer, Jerry Nicholas, passed by, taking pictures, as usual, of various groups in the hope of selling souvenir prints to them.

Danforth followed Leroy's gaze. His eyes narrowed. "Who was Jerry photographing?" he asked Leroy. "Just then? That last flash?"

"Harry Gardiner," Leroy said.

"As he is now? Groping under the table for his napkin?"

"Yes."

They watched the photographer laugh, say something to Harry Gardiner, then take another picture of the tablemates. Danforth grunted.

"What's got into you two?" Carol asked.

"Nothing," Leroy said softly. He finished his ptarmigan in silence. Only then did he murmur to his partner, "Was it deliberate, King? Just as Jerry approached?"

"It's a gag," Danforth replied, suddenly gay.

"And still none of our business."

"I'm finished," Carol announced. "Let's go up and play Bingo."

The next day, among the photographs Jerry Nicholas posted on the Promenade deck, Danforth and Leroy found a picture of Harry Gardiner and Justin Lewis sitting conventionally at their dining table. As expected, there was no picture of Harry groping under the table for his napkin.

Leroy said, "The way I see it, there are three possibilities. One, there's another shirt like Harry's and we saw it yesterday in Bububu. Two, the whole thing is rigged for a gag and there's no real harm in it. Three, it could be a build-up for a serious crime."

Danforth nodded. "I think we ought to talk to Harry. Just on the off-chance that it's for real, Mart."

"Me, too. He's a pleasant fellow, although rich."

"I'll find him and invite him for a cocktail before lunch," Danforth offered. "You warn the girls to let us handle all the talking."

Harry Gardiner met them in the Viking Lounge, forward, deserted before luncheon except for them and a bartender. Harry ordered plain tonic water. They ordered their usual gimlets.

"This is very pleasant," Harry said, puzzled as to why they had invited him without his cousin.

Danforth began abruptly, "Harry, you know what we do for a living? We write mystery stories, Mart and I, and we're inveterately curious about anything that seems to contain even a hint of mystery. It's our business. So please try to understand and forgive us for what you will no doubt consider in extremely bad taste on our part. We want to ask you some questions. Personal questions."

"Fire away," Harry said agreeably. "I'm not sensitive. And you've got me curious, too."

With a sense of climax that made his hand tremble slightly, Danforth drew from his jacket pocket the Bububu snapshot. He handed it to Harry. "We took this in a village on Zanzibar Island yesterday," he said. "Is that your sports shirt?"

Harry looked. "It sure is. You told me yesterday you thought you'd seen one like mine. But this isn't like mine—it *is* mine. The only one there is."

"Do you recognize the man wearing the shirt, Harry? The drunk with the anchor and snake tattoo on his arm?"

"Never saw him before to my knowledge. It's hard to tell just from the top of his head."

Leroy took over. "Fine, Harry. We needed to know that. But we need to know something else even more. Why don't you ever take a drink?"

Carol and Helen winced at the bluntness of this question. Harry's face flushed; he dropped his eyes and hesitated before he replied, but they sensed no reservation in his answer.

"When I was younger, before my father died, I had a little trouble with liquor," he confessed in a low voice. "Hell, let's face it, I had *big* trouble with liquor. I was an alcoholic, or as near as made no difference. I was a great disappointment to my father. He never swallowed a drop in his life, although he was as tough and hard-bitten a wildcatter as any in Texas. For his sake, I finally managed to pull myself loose. I quit cold. Spent months in a sanitarium. And I haven't touched a drop since. I'm afraid to. That answer your question?"

"Yes." Danforth lit a cigarette. "Yes, it does. And thanks for being

frank, Harry." He smoked silently for a few moments, then said, "You say your father was disappointed in you. How disappointed?"

"Plenty." Harry was emphatic. "Enough to make my continued sobriety a condition in his will."

Leroy and Danforth let out their breath together.

"Ah," Leroy said. "Then a photograph purporting to show you dead drunk in a dive in Zanzibar wouldn't be considered exactly a good joke by the folks back home, would it?"

Harry Gardiner didn't even smile. "You're talking about the income from approximately three million bucks," he said, "to get grossly commercial about it. I get the income, or I don't get it, depending on my staying off the juice. That's how my father fixed it. So if a photo of me drunk were presented to my father's trustees, I could kiss my income goodbye. Provided it was a legitimate photograph, of course—recognizably me and indubitably drunk."

"A photo like that is exactly what somebody's planning to show your trustees, I'm afraid," Danforth said.

Harry laughed uneasily. "That snapshot of yours? It's not me—even if he is wearing my shirt. The tattoo gives it away, the face doesn't show—it's all wrong but the shirt. And where the hell they got my shirt—"

"There's such a thing as retouching a tattoo mark *out* of a picture," Danforth offered quietly. "And there's also such a thing as stripping your face *into* the negative of a different man's picture—so that even an expert can't tell whether it's a fake or not."

Harry digested this in silence. Finally he said skeptically, "It would take a professional photographer to do something like that."

"We have one on the ship," Leroy said.

"Jerry Nicholas? He's a nice kid. Why should he do such a thing? And where would he get a photograph of me that he could 'strip' into a setup like this?" He waved the Bububu snapshot in his hand.

Leroy told him about the picture that Nicholas had taken of Harry the night before—bending down groping for his napkin, his cheek almost on the tablecloth, his face twisted.

"Remember?" Leroy prodded. "Jerry took another shot after that one—the one that's on the board now. But the first one may have been what he really wanted. It would give him just the face he needed to strip into the picture he took of the drunk at Bububu yesterday. Proper positioning of your head to show your face clearly from the side—drunken expression—lying in a pool of spilled whiskey."

"My God!" Harry said, aghast. "You boys don't fool around, do you? Tell me this. Who would want to ruin me with a phony trick like that? Not Jerry Nicholas. He doesn't even know me, except to say hello."

For a moment there was silence.

Carol and Helen finished their drinks and set their glasses down woodenly. Then Danforth said carefully, "It's possible that your cousin Justin got you into the proper position for Jerry to photograph last night. It's possible he deliberately brushed your napkin off your lap without your knowledge, then told you it was on the floor just as Jerry Nicholas approached your table with his camera."

Harry's eyes changed. "He *did* tell me I'd dropped my napkin."

"Which he couldn't have noticed unless he had engineered it," Leroy added.

"But Justin! He's my closest friend as well as my cousin. I take him on every one of my trips. He'd know damn well what such a picture would do to me."

"Let me ask one more question," Danforth said gently. "Who gets the income from your three million dollars if you forfeit it by hitting the bottle?"

They could hardly hear his answer, his voice was pitched so low. "It would be divided equally among my three cousins."

"Of whom Justin is one?"

"Of whom Justin is one." Harry shivered a little. "You're joking, aren't you? Just pulling my leg? This isn't on the level, is it?"

"We can find out pretty quick," Danforth said. "I left word that we'd like to see Jerry Nicholas here at twelve thirty."

The ship's photographer appeared a few moments later, carrying his Graflex. He came over to their table. "Hi," he said breezily, "Want a picture of this happy group?"

"No," Leroy said quietly. "We want to see the picture you made of Mr. Gardiner yesterday at Bububu."

Nicholas stopped smiling and stared. "What? I didn't take any picture of Mr. Gardiner at Bububu."

"That's right," Danforth said. "You didn't. The picture Mr. Leroy means is the one you took yesterday of that drunk at Bububu wearing Mr. Gardiner's sports shirt. And with the tattoo touched out. And the shot of Mr. Gardiner's face that you took last night substituted for the drunk's face—you know, Jerry, the gag shot you're building for Mr. Lewis."

For what seemed an eternity Jerry Nicholas continued to stare at them, wordless. Then he grinned disarmingly, shrugged his camera strap higher on his shoulder, and visibly relaxed.

"So you know about that," he said, "Mr. Lewis' gag birthday gift for you, Mr. Gardiner. Too bad. Mr. Lewis will be awfully disappointed you found out about it. He wanted it to be a surprise. He gave me a hundred bucks to rig it and make it look genuine. And he swore me to secrecy. I haven't told a soul. Who gave it away?"

Harry Gardiner swallowed hard. "These people figured it out," he said.

Nicholas nodded. "I was afraid they might recognize the shirt in Bububu yesterday on the waterfront drunk I hired to wear it for the trick shot."

"Where were you when we stopped there?" Leroy asked.

"Hiding in my car. I heard you coming and ducked. No time to hide the drunk though. He was already as stiff as a coot." Jerry sighed heavily. "All that work wasted! Even laundering that damn shirt. And my shot of you going after your napkin last night, Mr. Gardiner—it was beautiful, perfect. Oh, well."

In a grim voice Harry finally said, "You can keep the hundred bucks, Jerry. But I want all the negatives you took of this whole business—all the prints, too. It's not that I don't appreciate a sense of humor, but this gag doesn't seem very funny to me, not really. Shall we go to your office now?"

"Sure, Mr. Gardiner," Jerry said. "It was just a gag. No offense, I hope?"

They left together. But not before Harry Gardiner turned to Danforth and Leroy and said simply, "Thanks. Thanks very much."

Danforth took a deep breath. "A-okay," he murmured to Leroy.

"All systems 'go'," his partner nodded. Gravely they shook hands with each other, as much in relief as in triumph.

Carol, her imposed silence ended at last, called loudly to the bar steward for another round of gimlets.

And Helen, rising a few moments later with a drink in her hand, paraded solemnly around the table and chanted an extemporaneous paean of praise:

"If you have dirty work to do,
Stay far away from Bububu,
For villainy cannot get far
When Leroy King's in Zanzibar!"

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One of the oddest stories we have ever published — yes, odd — and charming, and provocative, and meaningful . . . We just couldn't resist it . . . Can you?

THE MAN WHO WAS A STATION WAGON

by FRED A. RODEWALD and J. F. PEIRCE

THE ROAD WAS ROUGHER NOW, the pavement cracked, the chugholes impossible to miss. Mike's press camera jounced against his leg, and he pushed it from him, then slowed to twenty miles per hour.

This couldn't be the highway.

His eyes burned from the steady glare, his skin from the dry wind set up by the movement of the car.

Without warning the road gave way to wagon tracks and the dust swirled up behind. Mike braked slowly and reached for his map.

Where the hell was he?

The map told him nothing. The mileage gauge and his sense of direction said that he was about a hundred miles south of the border.

But where?

He took a quick glance at the sun. It seemed to be sitting on the canvas top of his convertible. And now that the hot dry air had stopped, sweat beaded his forehead and ran in rivulets down his body.

He looked around at the hard-baked clay, the torture-shaped mesquite trees.

Not a sign of life—

Then he saw him, an old man as misshapened as any of the mesquites, standing in the drainage ditch that flowed with dust when the wind blew. He would have dismissed him as a scarecrow, but there were no cornfields.

Dust was now all that Mike could smell and taste, and he made the convertible crawl the hundred yards to where the tattered figure stood.

Poking his head from the car, Mike called, "*¿Habla usted inglés, señor?*"

"*Sí.*"

"How far is Monterrey?"

The old man shrugged, then pointed down the dirt road and across it to the right. "*¿Quién sabe?* Who can say?" he said.

"Can you tell me where I am?"

"*Sí*, one kilometer from Rio Escondido."

Mike couldn't remember any Rio Escondido on the map. Probably a small place. But at least he seemed to be going in the right general direction.

"Well, thanks. Thanks a lot," he said. "Can I give you a lift somewhere? Into town maybe?"

"*Gracias, señor*, but it is not

possible. I cannot ride. I am a station wagon."

"You're a what?"

"I am a station wagon."

"Oh? Oh, I see! Well, thanks a lot."

Mike let out the clutch and the convertible moved forward. "Damned old coot," he muttered. "Some stupid con game he's got to bleed the suckers. Well, I'm not *that* green."

He glanced in the rear-view mirror. The old man was standing exactly as he had left him. "Aw, the bloody hell," he said and braked to a stop, then backed to where the old man stood.

Mike opened the door and got out, glancing warily about as he did. He lit a cigarette, then held out the pack to the old man. "Cigarette?"

"*Gracias, señor*, but I cannot smoke. I am a station wagon."

"Yeah, yeah, I forgot." Again Mike looked about. "Okay, I'll bite. What's your angle?" The old man did not answer. "What's your racket? Your business—what do you do? Wait, don't tell me. I know. You're a station wagon."

The old man smiled and nodded his head. "*Sí. Sí.*"

Mike took a drag from his cigarette and looked both ways along the road. Taking a one-dollar bill from his wallet, he stepped over to the ditch and held it out to the old man.

"Look, old man, let's say I don't mind paying for information. I know the ropes; I'm willing to play the game. I've a little larceny in my blood too—who hasn't? Now just tell me what your angle is and I'll slip you the one-spot before your buddies get here."

The old man ignored the money. "I am a station wagon," he said.

"I know. I know. Now, here," Mike took the old man's hand and put the bill into it, closing the gnarled fingers over the money. "Now," he said and smiled, "you can level with me. Hurry before they get here and you won't have to split with them."

The old man let the bill fall into the dust. "I am a station wagon," he said.

"I'll be damned!" Mike said. "You really do believe it." He took a final drag from his cigarette and gave it a flip. "You're a station wagon?"

"I am a station wagon."

"Prove it to me! Prove it!"

The old man shook his head sadly. "I am a station wagon," he said, "but I am not official. I have no license."

"License? You mean a license plate?" Mike said, pointing to the plate on the rear of the convertible.

"*Sí.* I am not official, but I am a station wagon."

"Why don't you have a license?"

"Carlos will not give it to me. He says I am not a station wagon."

"Carlos?"

"The official in Rio Escondido."

"Well, I don't blame him. You're not a station wagon," Mike said. He squatted down in the ditch to retrieve the dollar, and when he stood up the heat hit him. "Damn but it's hot! Now, look," he said, "you have eyes, ears, a nose. Sure you do! You're a person."

"I am a station wagon."

"You're not a station wagon. Listen, you're like me. Do you understand? You've got feet, legs, arms, a head—just like me. You and me, we're humans. We're not station wagons. We're not machines."

"I am a station wagon."

"If you're a station wagon, what am I, a truck? A bus?"

"You are no vehicle."

"And you're no station wagon."

"I am a station wagon."

"Well, I'll be double-damned!" Mike said, and ran his fingers through his crew-cut hair. "Okay, now let's say just for a minute that you *are* a station wagon—mind, I don't say you are, but let's just suppose you are. What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"I have no gasoline."

"Okay, that explains your being here. But why are you standing in the ditch?" Mike took out his handkerchief and wiped his face.

"It was night and a vehicle might strike me."

"You mean you ran out of gas and you pulled off the road so you wouldn't be hit by a passing car. Okay, that follows—I'll buy that. But you said it was night."

"*Sí*, it was night."

Mike made a rapid calculation. "You mean you've been standing here in this damned sun for seven hours?"

"*Sí*."

"Well, look now," Mike said, shaking his head, "seven hours in this sun . . . you're sure I can't give you a lift?"

"I cannot ride. I am a —"

"Yeah, I know. I know. Well, what can I do to help you? You can't stay here, not in this heat."

"You could give me a pull?"

"You mean a tow? With my car?"

"*Sí*."

"Sure, I guess so. But can you make it into this town, this Rio Escondido?"

"*Sí*."

"Okay," Mike said, shaking his head.

He crossed to the car and opened the trunk compartment. Taking out a chain he hooked it onto his bumper; then he carried the other end over to the old man. "I've got to fasten this onto your bumper," he said.

The old man held out his hands and grasped the end of the chain that Mike handed him.

"Now when the chain straightens out, when it gets tight, be sure to move. You could get hurt. Understand?"

"*Sí*. My wheels work fine, but slow. I am an old station wagon."

"Okay, easy does it then."

Mike returned to the convertible, climbed behind the wheel, and started the engine. Keeping his eye on the old man through the rear-view mirror, he let the car roll forward taking up the slack in the chain, and as the chain grew taut, the old man clambered out of the ditch.

Mike drove, shifting his gaze back and forth from the rear-view mirror to the speedometer. Only occasionally did he glance at the road ahead.

The old man seemed to be doing fine. He held the end of the chain tightly in his hands.

Mike felt more relaxed now. He hoped he wasn't asking for trouble by believing in the old man, by trying to help him. The old coot seemed harmless enough, and he felt a certain responsibility for him. Why? Why?

They had gone about a quarter of a mile when a sharp turn in the road revealed the town some distance ahead.

Rio Escondido? *Rio* meant river. But *Escondido?*

He dredged the word up from the past, from high-school.

Hidden. Hidden River. If the drainage ditch were any indication, it would be a river of rich red dust.

The mesquites gave way to cornfields. A farmer still grubbed in his field, though it was time for the *siesta*. The old man behind the car was moving awkwardly but steadily along. A spotted goat at the side of the road bleated.

Adobe dwellings of different shapes and sizes were becoming more and more frequent. They were now in what would be the city limits of Rio Escondido. There appeared to be a municipal building of some sort down one of the side streets, but for the most part there were only adobe houses and places of business. nearly all of them *cantinas.*

The only signs of life were an old dog lying under a wringer-type washing machine tilted against the side of a house and two half-naked children playing at bullfighting in the afternoon sun.

One boy, his hands tight against his head, two fingers projecting outward like horns, charged a mincing *torero*, who called, "Huh, huh, *toro!* Huh, *toro!*" then executed a perfect *verónica* with a faded *rebozo* as the bull swept past.

But at the sight of the old man and the convertible, the *torero* and the bull became children again and followed them down the street calling, as near as Mike could make out, "Hey, Pepe! Hey! Give us a ride in your station wagon!"

They passed what looked to Mike like the village market, but except for a listless wave from one of the attendants, they went unnoticed.

It was a quiet town.

Mike stuck his head out of the car and called back, "Hey, old man. where do you get your gasoline?"

Still clutching the chain, the old man lifted both hands and pointed down the street. "*El Perro Negro!*"

Mike followed the gesture with his eyes and saw the words painted in orange and blue on the side of an adobe *cantina*.

El Perro Negro. The Black Dog. What a wonderful name for a bar! Like most Spanish names, it lost nothing in translation.

Mike braked the convertible to a stop in front of the *cantina*. Cutting his engine, he got out and walked back to the old man.

"Well, we made it," he said. "Let's unfasten the chain." He took the chain, and the old man let go. Disengaging the hook from the bumper of the convertible, Mike threw the chain into the trunk compartment. The old man didn't move.

"Isn't this where you get your gas?" Mike asked.

"*Sí.*"

"I get it — you're waiting for service. Who waits on you?"

"Juan."

"Okay, I'll send him out *mucho pron o.*"

"*Gracias, señor Gracias!*"

Mike crossed the unpaved street toward the batwing doors of *El Perro Negro*, but stopped just short of the board sidewalk. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said and put a hand on a shiny, new parking meter stuck in the loose dirt. Looking along the street he saw two rows of parking meters, but not a single car—nor could he remember having seen one since entering the village.

But why hadn't he noticed the parking meters before? Probably because he was too busy looking out for the old man. And what the hell were parking meters doing in a town too poor to afford pavement? Or street lights, for that matter?

"Damn!" he said under his breath and stepped through the batwings of *El Perro Negro*. Pausing just inside, he let his eyes adjust to the gloom. He could make out a bar on the right, and he crossed the room toward it, stumbling over a chair, but managing to catch it before it hit the floor. Reaching the bar, he sat down near a large man in uniform.

A fat man with a towel tied around his waist was behind the bar, and Mike addressed him. "*¿Habla usted inglés, señor?*"

The bartender nodded and pulled at his walrus mustache.

"You are Juan?" Mike asked.

"I am Juan," the bartender answered.

"There's a station wagon out front that needs gas, and I need some coins for the meter."

"Did you hear, Carlos?" Juan said to the man in uniform. "It is Pepe!"

Carlos. That would be the official who wouldn't give the old man a license.

Carlos shrugged his massive shoulders. "*Sí*," he said, "it is Pepe."

The bartender took a bottle of tequila from behind the bar and was almost to the door when Carlos' voice stopped him. "You should not, my friend, Juan," he said.

"You should not give Pepe gasoline. He is no station wagon."

Juan turned without speaking and stepped through the batwings into the glare of the street.

Carlos sighed heavily and looked at the tequila bottle in front of him. With his heavy, right arm he swept a saltcellar and a small bowl of cut limes into position beside the bottle.

"What's wrong with the old man?" Mike asked.

Carlos licked the top of his left hand below the first joint of the thumb and poured salt on it. "Old Pepe?" he said. "Five years ago he was hit by a station wagon in Monterrey. Now he is a station wagon."

"And everyone believes him?"

"*Sí.* They say he has been touched by the hand of God."

"And you? Do you believe he is a station wagon?"

Carlos licked the salt, drank from the bottle of tequila, bit and sucked the lime. "Me? I believe that he was hit by a station wagon. It is wrong to let him believe he is a vehicle. It does him no good. But the people will not understand. It is different in your country. But here the people believe in such things."

"How does he live? Who takes care of him?"

"The people. Juan gives him tequila. Others, food and clothing. I tear up his traffic tickets. He has a shack. He calls it a garage. He is happy, but he could be happy without being a station wagon."

Coughing and sputtering sounds issued from the street outside, then gave way to loud honks and beeps that faded off down the street.

"He is disturbing the *siesta* again," Carlos said, shaking his head as Juan returned to the *cantina*. "I told you to keep him quiet on the street. Now I will have to give him another ticket for honking his horn. It is a terrible horn. It is the loudest horn in all Mexico."

"Pepe means no harm," Juan said, "and the people do not care."

He raised his hand and pulled at his mustache. As he did, a piece of cardboard approximately five inches deep and a foot wide slipped from beneath his "apron" and fell to the floor. The cardboard had numbers and letters penciled heavily across its face. Juan picked it up hurriedly.

"What is that, my friend?" Carlos asked.

Juan looked away. "The license for Pepe," he said.

Carlos jumped to his feet. "You have no right to give it to him!" he shouted. "It is no license! It is wrong to give it to him!"

"It's only cardboard," Mike said. "What's the harm if it makes the old man happy?"

"It is wrong!" Carlos shouted. "It is not official!"

"*Sí.* It is not official," Juan said. "Pepe, too, said it is not official. He would not take it. Only Carlos can make it official. It is a paper license. It cost nothing. But it could make Pepe happy if you gave it to him. Only you can make Pepe official.

Carlos, you must! Please, I beg of you."

Carlos made no reply, and Juan pulled with both hands at his mustache. The two men glared at each other.

"Look," Mike said, and ran his fingers through his hair, "how about me buying the two of you a drink? I could use a cold beer."

Juan quit pulling at his mustache and leaned his hands on the bar. "We have beer," he said, "but it is not cold."

"Not cold?"

"There is no ice. We have no electricity in Rio Escondido."

"No electricity? But— You can't be serious! You don't have electricity, you don't have pavement, but you do have parking meters, don't you?"

"*Sí.*"

"For cat's sake, why?"

"We are a poor village," Juan said. "We cannot afford these things. Our government told us that electricity is too expensive; they could not give it to us. They told us they would sell us the meters to make the money to pay for the electricity."

"But where are the cars?"

Carlos threw up his hands. "We have three—all government vehicles. And they do not pay."

Mike whistled. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said. "You've been taken—and by some A-one con men. Which reminds me, I need some coins for the meter."

"No, my friend," Carlos said, "the meters are forever free to the first to use them. We have waited seven weeks. You are the first."

"We told the government there were no vehicles," Juan said, "but they told us if we had meters we would have many *touristas*. You are the first. The others will soon follow."

"But this place is nothing! Nowhere! You won't get any tourists here."

Juan shrugged. "The government told us."

Carlos pounded the bar. "*Sí*, the government told you, but the government was wrong. You would not listen to me. You never listen! I, Carlos Rodriguez, told you that it was not so. But you would not listen."

Coughing and sputtering noises could be heard approaching along the street outside. In front of *El Perro Negro* they stopped and gave way to loud honks and beeps.

"Pepe needs more gasoline," Juan said. He reached for the tequila, but Carlos took it from him.

"No," Carlos said, "Pepe is no station wagon—he is a man. He does not need gasoline—he needs tequila. I will take it to him."

At the batwings Carlos stopped and turned to Juan. "You are all Pepes in this town. You are children. Foolish children. You believe when Pepe tells you he is a station wagon. And Pepe is no station wagon. You believe when the government tells you there will be rich

touristas, that there will be much money if you have parking meters. And there are no *touristas*. There is no money. *Sí.* You are all Pepes. You have spent your *pesetas*, and for nothing!"

Carlos strode through the batwings and Mike turned to Juan.

"What's his story?" Mike asked.

"He is the village conscience."

"Why isn't he like the rest?"

"A woman."

"It figures."

"He no longer believes. He would not hurt Pepe. But he cannot believe. He is a good man. His heart tells him that Pepe should have the license, but not his head. So he cannot give it to him."

A stream of high, staccato Spanish exploded like a string of firecrackers outside. Mike could understand none of it—it was hardly high-school Spanish, but it was obvious that Carlos was very angry. It was impossible to hear Pepe's calm replies.

Then all was quiet—a quiet broken at last by Pepe starting his engine and chugging and sputtering down the street.

Moments later a dirty, half-naked boy entered carrying the tequila.

Mike recognized the boy who had played the bull.

The boy handed Juan the bottle, and the two spoke rapidly, Juan pulling at his mustache.

Mike caught the words "Pepe" and "*cárcel.*" The latter word was repeated several times, but he could not recall its meaning.

Juan and the boy finished talking, and Juan fished a coin from his pocket and tossed it to the boy, who once again became a bull. With head lowered and horns pointing outward, he went charging through the cape-like doors.

Juan unfastened the towel from around his middle and turned to Mike, his manner quite serious. "Carlos has taken Pepe to jail."

"This is something new?"

"*Sí.* It has never happened before."

"What will happen?"

"I do not know, but we must help Pepe." He paused as if realizing it was none of Mike's affair. "You will help," he said. It was a statement, not a question.

"Of course. If I can."

Juan took the cardboard license from behind the bar and stuffed it under his shirt, then hurried outside.

Mike followed him into the street and was again struck by the suddenness of the heat, the brightness of the sun.

Carlos and Pepe were nowhere in sight. All was quiet. It was still the *siesta*.

Juan led the way along the dusty, unpaved streets till they came at last to a squat, adobe building with *Estación de Policía* in neat black letters above the door.

They entered a bare, cheerless room containing a desk and two straight-backed chairs.

Carlos glared at them from behind the desk as they entered.

"How is Pepe?" Juan asked.

"He is *loco!*" Carlos said, waving his arms. "That is how he is! He is *loco*, *loco*, *loco!* He will not understand he is no station wagon!"

"Maybe he is a station wagon," Mike said.

"What? You say this? No, my friend, you think as I do. You cannot believe him. He is *loco!*"

"How do you know Pepe is *loco?*" Mike asked. "How do you know he is not a station wagon?"

"Because he is no vehicle," Carlos answered, turning away as if not wanting to discuss it.

"Our friend Juan here," Mike said, "is he a bartender?"

"*Si.*"

"Why is he a bartender? What makes him a bartender?"

"He serves tequila."

"If you come to my home and I serve you tequila, am I a bartender?"

"It is not the same thing, my friend. Pepe is human—he cannot be a vehicle."

Juan could contain himself no longer. "What have you done with Pepe?" he demanded.

"Pepe! Pepe! Pepe!" Carlos shouted, waving his arms. "Why will you not understand? Pepe is no station wagon. I say to him, 'Pepe, where are your wheels?' and he tells me he is a station wagon."

"You have put him in jail?" Juan asked.

"He would not go to jail!" Carlos shouted. He pounded on his desk. "I gave him parking tickets! I gave him tickets for honking his horn! I gave him tickets for disturbing the *siesta!* I told him for this he must go to jail. But he said he could not go to jail because a station wagon cannot fit into a jail, that a jail is for people."

"What have you done with him?"

"I have impounded him."

"You've what?"

"I have impounded him! He would not go to jail, so I chained him to one of the government vehicles. I had to! I had to do it! He would not go to jail! So I impounded him as I would a stolen vehicle. Oh, he is a bad station wagon, that Pepe!"

Mike smiled. "Then you do believe that Pepe's a station wagon?" he said. He tried to visualize the little old man standing off Carlos—Carlos with his heavy arms and broad shoulders.

"Eh? No! He is not a station wagon!" Carlos said.

"But don't you see that he really is?" Mike said. "He's as much a station wagon as Juan is a bartender. Juan is a bartender because everyone agrees that he's a bartender. And Pepe is a station wagon because everyone agrees that he's a station wagon—except you."

Carlos shook his head.

"Oh, I know he isn't official, that he doesn't have a license. But would you deny Juan a license if he needed it to tend bar?"

Carlos again shook his head, and Mike continued.

"You said, 'Oh, he is a bad station wagon, that Pepe!' So you must believe him."

"I said it only because I was angry."

"You gave him parking tickets?"

"*Sí*, I gave him parking tickets."

"Do you give parking tickets to pedestrians?"

"No. But Pepe is different."

"Of course he's different. He's a station wagon! You gave him tickets for honking his horn, for disturbing the *siesta?*"

"*Sí*," Carlos said and shrugged.

"Do you do this to the others? No, because they don't have horns."

"But Pepe's horn is so loud—it is the loudest horn in all Mexico!"

"But he does have a horn—you have just admitted it. The others, do they have horns?"

"No," Carlos said. He sighed heavily.

"Of course they don't. And now you have impounded him. Can you impound a citizen? No! What do you do with citizens who break the law?"

"I put them in jail."

"But you didn't put Pepe in jail, even though you are bigger, stronger than he is. You impounded him! You impounded him because he's a station wagon, because in spite of everything, you believe he's a station wagon."

Carlos shrugged imperceptibly. His normal gestures were violent, sweeping, and the two men, who had been following his every move, sensed that this was his moment of truth and were silent.

Carlos studied his strong, brown hands. It was as if he were aware of his hands suddenly for the first time. His expression might have been the same if he were considering cleaning his nails or cutting his hands off at the wrists.

"'*Sta bien*," he said at last, avoiding their gaze, "give me the license."

Juan took the license from beneath his shirt and put it into the hand that Carlos held out to him.

Carlos straightened himself to his full height. Then, assuming his most official manner, he strode into the street.

Mike waited with Juan in the comparative cool of the office, but hearing the station wagon start up, the two men rushed to the door in time to see Pepe come charging around the corner of the building. He was bent forward stiffly from the waist. His hands were pressed tight against his forehead, two gnarled fingers projected forward, forming a bumper.

Mike caught a remembered glimpse of the children playing in the sun—and understood.

The station wagon stopped at the sight of them and honked happily. Then with feet churning the dust, Pepe went honking and beeping down the street, his license plate wired to the seat of his pants.

By then Carlos had rejoined

them. "Who'll pay for the tickets?" he asked.

"Wasn't he the first to use the meters?" Mike asked.

"*Sí.* It is so."

Carlos turned to Mike and again assumed his most official manner. "I am sorry, *señor*," he said, "but I must give you the ticket for illegal parking. But for you I will make it easy, very easy—only ten *pesos*."

"But you said—" Mike began, then broke into a grin and took out the dollar bill he had offered Pepe. "Hell, for eighty cents it's not worth it. Besides I knew it was going to cost me when I listened to the old man; I just didn't know how much."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: PHYLLIS BENTLEY

TITLE: *Miss Phipps Jousts With the Press*

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Miss Phipps

LOCALE: England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *In the grand tradition, Miss Phipps meets murder wherever she goes; but even she didn't dream that an alleged anachronism in one of her lectures could have such far-reaching results . . .*

"IT'S TIME NOW," SAID THE CHAIRwoman with a smile as she swept onto the platform.

Miss Phipps, holding her head up with an effort, followed. She was feeling tired; she had spoken to a luncheon club and traveled along the coast in a very tiresome railway journey that day, and had no desire whatever to address the Brittlesea Literary Society now on "Character and the Novelist." However, as an honest and conscientious author-lecturer, she always did her best for her audiences, who after all had donned their best hats and coats and left their firesides and struggled through the rain, to say nothing of finding a place to park and paying money to hear her. Tonight she had a special motive for giving a fine performance, for there in the front row sat her best friends, John and Mary Tarrant, beaming proudly.

It was a good audience, thought Miss Phipps, looking round at the packed hall with some gratification; even the galleries were full. But heavens, what a shape to give an auditorium! Extremely high — all that empty space aloft sucked up the sound, thought Miss Phipps sadly; it was going to require a strong

effort to project her voice; the chairwoman had evidently been inaudible past the first few rows. The galleries were supported by a forest of sound-eating pillars, and yearning faces gleamed here and there from the dark spaces beneath. In the remotest and darkest corner at the back, beside the left-hand half-glass swing door, a bare trestle table could be discerned. Movement around this, and the occasional flourish of a light-colored notebook as a page was turned, indicated the presence of reporters.

"What a place to put the press!" thought Miss Phipps in despair. "Oh, my, but I'll have to work hard to make myself heard!"

The chairwoman concluded her highly conplimentary remarks, and bowing her flowery hat toward Miss Phipps, called on her by name to address the audience. Miss Phipps, in her usual agony at this point but smiling affably, rose. She told a relevant anecdote about a fictitious character in heaven.

"Are they going to be like sacks of potatoes, or can I get to them straight away?" she wondered anxiously.

On the right a male guffaw broke out, then on the left a lighter-toned but masculine laugh; thus encouraged a great many females began to titter. And finally the whole audience laughed together.

"Thank heaven for a mixed audience," thought Miss Phipps with great relief.

Now that the ice was broken, she rolled the lecture along in her happiest style, making all her points, getting laughter at the right places, using the pause and the change of voice to mark the opening of a new section, carrying the audience with her all the time.

"I'm going to be tired tomorrow, but never mind, it's going well," she thought. "I'll ask Mary to let me have breakfast in bed."

It was not Miss Phipps's habit to look at any individual member of an audience during a lecture; she had learned by experience that such a look broke her own concentration, embarrassed its recipient, and was usually resented by the rest. She did, however, at points in the lecture where she felt safest, occasionally glance round to judge from the expressive faces turned up to her whether they could all hear and understand. One such roving glance showed all faces intent, reporters' pencils moving busily in their remote gloom. Miss Phipps continued cheerfully, still well satisfied with her efforts.

Presently she began to speak of the problem that novelists have in finding suitable names for characters in a story. Sir Walter Scott, said Miss Phipps, quoting him at some length on the difficulties of this problem, adapted the name of a Saxon manor for Ivanhoe, and for the Normans in that novel, consulted a manuscript roll of warriors who came over with William the

Conqueror. Charles Dickens found some of his odd names on shop windows in the East End, as he prowled the London streets at night. Henry James chose names from the births, deaths, and marriages columns in the *Times*, and then scrambled them. A modern author of her acquaintance consulted a gazetteer, said Miss Phipps; another preferred electoral lists, another a telephone directory. She herself, said Miss Phipps, smiling, often took her characters' names from graveyards in order to insure accuracy of local nomenclature. The audience roared, but presently fell deeply serious as Miss Phipps spoke of the function of all art. She uttered her lofty conclusions in ringing tones, and the applause was terrific. Questions poured out, compliments flew from all directions.

"Now come and have a really big dinner at the Crown Hotel across the way," said Inspector Tarrant, taking her by the arm when at last she had left the platform. "After that superb performance you must be exhausted, Aunt Marian."

"Here's your breakfast, Aunt Marian," said Mary Tarrant at an agreeably late hour the next morning, drawing the bedroom curtains. "And Johnny's brought the newspaper for you. Johnny, give Aunt Marian the paper, dear." The four-year-old Johnny, beaming, offered Miss Phipps a rather crumpled copy of the *Southshire Post*. "There's a nice long piece about the lecture on page five — almost half a column. I'll turn it outside for you. I haven't had time to read it yet. Of course there'll be more in the *Brittlesea Evening Herald* tonight," added Mary hastily. "The *Southshire Post* is the county paper, you know."

Miss Phipps, munching well-buttered toast, began to read the account of her lecture with some pleasure. So often these local papers sent their football experts to cover her literary addresses, but the *Southshire Post* reporter seemed actually to have heard of most of the authors she had mentioned—or at least, he could spell their names. His paragraphing was good, too, and he could summarize well . . .

Suddenly Miss Phipps gave a violent start. The start upset her cup of tea over the clean pillows, but so angry was the usually mild Miss Phipps that she did not notice this disaster. She leaped out of bed, swathed herself quickly in her dressing gown, and sat down at the little desk which the Tarrants thoughtfully provided for her in front of the window. She typed — she always traveled with her portable—rapidly.

"*The Editor*,
Southshire Post

"Now where are the editorial offices of the *Southshire Post?*" wondered Miss Phipps. She ran to the top of the stairs and called the question down to Mary.

"Starminster. Is anything wrong, Aunt Marian?" said Mary anxiously,

appearing from the kitchen in an apron.

"Plenty!" snapped Miss Phipps.

"*Sir*," she wrote:

"*I write to protest against the account given in your paper of my lecture at the Brittlesea Town Hall last night. Though otherwise accurate, if incomplete, your account states that I said Sir Walter Scott chose the names of the characters in his novels from the telephone directory. This is so manifestly absurd as to require no comment, but for the benefit of your reporting staff perhaps I had better remind you that Sir Walter died in 1832 and telephones were not invented until 1876. I did not make the egregious blunder attributed to me and I must request that you publish a retraction and apology immediately.*

I am, Sir,

Yours faithfully,"

Miss Phipps signed her name to this epistle with a flourish. She dressed swiftly, threw a few hasty words of explanation to Mary, rushed from the house, took the mid-morning bus to Starminster, and handed the letter, marked *URGENT*, over the counter in the editorial offices of the *Southshire Post*.

Mary sympathized deeply and forgave the stained pillowcase at once. Always practical in her kindness, the moment the early edition of the *Brittlesea Evening Herald* was on the streets she ran out and bought a copy and opened it at the leader page.

"There, Aunt Marian!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "Three cheers for little Brittlesea! It's a lovely long account, and they've got the piece about the character names perfect, just as you said it."

Miss Phipps did not know whether to feel soothed, or even more angry than before. So she said nothing, and would have been glad to let the subject drop. But when Inspector Tarrant came in for supper, Mary, meaning to invite his sympathy, told him the story and showed him the two newspapers. He received the sad tale without too much interest, apparently thinking the matter insignificant.

"But, John, suppose you had been represented in print as saying something incorrect about police procedure," Mary reproached him. "It might have a very adverse influence on your reputation."

"Aunt Marian's reputation is too well established to be shaken by an idiotic error in the *Southshire Post*," said Tarrant grumpily.

"Thank you for nothing," said Miss Phipps with asperity.

"Since the *Brittlesea Evening Herald* gives a correct account of the lecture tonight—" began Tarrant.

"Very few people of the literary world read the *Brittlesea Evening Herald*, I imagine," said Miss Phipps. "On the other hand, the *Southshire Post* is a county paper of some standing. However, I'm being tiresome."

"No, Aunt Marian," said Tarrant.

"*I'm* being unsympathetic. The fact is, I'm worried. Did you see in the *Herald* tonight the story of old Ephraim Tadcaster's death?"

"Yes, I did notice it. He was found dead this morning halfway down the stairs leading to the ground floor of his hardware shop in Towngate," said Miss Phipps, who always read such items in the search of usable fiction material. "Broken skull due to fall, wasn't it?"

"Just so. He lay on his face, head downward, as if he had fallen while descending the stairs from his office, which is on the floor above. But unfortunately there are some discrepancies."

"How so?" said Miss Phipps, her interest quickened.

"The lights were all out. There is a switch on the ground floor and a switch on the floor above, and also a master switch on the ground floor next to the entrance door. Tadcaster *might* have turned off the upper-floor lights while on that floor, but it would be a silly thing to do since he could turn them off downstairs by the master switch. On the other hand, he could *not* have turned off the downstairs lights from upstairs."

"Do you suspect murder, then?" inquired Miss Phipps.

"Well, it's a possibility. Someone else must have been in the shop to turn off the lights. Old Tadcaster's death brings benefits to those concerned."

"Was he married?"

"No, he was a rich, mean old bachelor, with a niece and grandniece. His will leaves his whole estate in trust for them."

"Any assistants in the shop?"

"Two. Mrs. Watkyn and her daughter, young Doreen. They left at six in the evening, as usual. Mr. Tadcaster left with them, turned out the lights by the master switch downstairs, and then locked the door—so they say. Mrs. Watkyn, a widow since the war, is Mr. Tadcaster's niece. She and Doreen lived with him."

"Oh, dear," said Miss Phipps gravely.

"Exactly."

"What kind of person is Mrs. Watkyn?" asked Mary.

"She's a nice, respectable, rather sad, not-well-off, middle-aged woman," replied Tarrant. "Young Doreen is very pretty, a saucy little thing. Almost bit my head off when I asked about her whereabouts last night. I'm told she's very quiet and meek in the shop, but the moment she gets out she develops black wool stockings, huge sweaters, an enormous untidy head of hair, and a mind of her own. Those things cost money, you know. From Mrs. Watkyn's hesitations on the subject, I gather old Tadcaster disapproved of Doreen and her friends, so I don't suppose Doreen liked her uncle much."

"In a word, it doesn't look too good for the Watkyns," said Mary.

"Especially as one of them need

only have waited till Tadcaster was on the stairs, then put her hand in and switch off the lights by the master switch, to make a fall possible," suggested Miss Phipps. "It might have been no more than a piece of spite, you know."

"We've thought of that," said Tarrant. "But whoever did it would need to know that Tadcaster was inside, of course."

"If the lights were on—" began Mary.

"You mean that Doreen just passed by chance, and seeing the lights on, decided to play a trick on her uncle?" .

"It's possible."

Inspector Tarrant snorted. "Unfortunately for your theories, ladies, Doreen has a solid alibi from seven o'clock to nine thirty—she studies art at the Brittlesea Technical College in the evening. Poor child—not a spark of talent, I gather. A girl friend called for her at seven, they went along to the College together, and Doreen was in full view of an instructor and a class of twenty for the rest of the evening."

"That leaves Mrs. Watkyn alone all evening."

"On the contrary, a neighbor dropped in to see her and remained there till Doreen returned."

"What are you worrying about, then?" said Miss Phipps, puzzled. "Since both your suspects have alibis—"

"Well, you see the stairs have a green rubber covering. To crush one's head by a fall on rubber is possible, but Tadcaster's wounds are at the *back* of the head and appear to have been inflicted by a sharp-edged instrument. There are plenty of sharp-edged instruments in the shop—knives, picks, shovels, what have you. But none of these bears bloodstains and neither Mrs. Watkyn nor Doreen seems able to tell us whether anything is missing. Not that I blame them for that," he added honestly. "The whole place is simply crammed with heterogeneous hardware. We're searching the back premises, dust bins, et cetera, but so far with no results."

"It's perfectly clear to me," said Miss Phipps sharply, "that Tadcaster was murdered by the reporter of the *Southshire Post*."

"My dear Aunt Marian," said Tarrant, flushing. "Your theory is really absurd."

"John!" Mary rebuked him.

"But what possible grounds are there for picking on that unfortunate young man, whoever he is?"

"He was absent from my lecture for at least ten minutes, as the idiotic omission in his account plainly shows."

"He might have fallen asleep," said Tarrant wickedly. "No, no—I withdraw that. Forgive me. But don't you see, Aunt Marian, the *Southshire Post* can't print the whole of your lecture—it has to select the most entertaining portions. The person who cut down the report, the original full report—"

"A sub-editor," murmured Miss Phipps. "How I hate them!"

"—was a literary ignoramus."

"Probably a football reporter," said Miss Phipps. "Yes, I'm used to it. All the same—" She broke off abruptly, then asked, "Is Mr. Tadcaster's emporium near the Town Hall?"

"Why, yes, it is," conceded Tarrant reluctantly. "It's in an old narrow cul-de-sac, the first turning on the right from the street along side of the Town Hall."

"The absent reporter had time for the murder, then."

"But no motive, Aunt Marian," Tarrant reminded her.

"We shall find one," said Miss Phipps confidently.

"And how did he know Tadcaster would be in the shop?"

"He had made an appointment with him. For eight o'clock."

"Why?"

"*You* tell *me*," returned Miss Phipps. "It's *your* job."

"Aunt Marian, your gift for invention is really wonderful," joked Tarrant. "I admire it—I do, indeed!"

"Omit the compliments and accept the advice," said Miss Phipps sharply. "Will you investigate the *Southshire Post* reporter?" ("Or shall I?" she added, but discreetly forbore to say it aloud.)

"If we can prove murder by finding the weapon—" began Tarrant.

"Look in a Town Hall cloakroom," snapped Miss Phipps.

"Or if there were even the vestige of a motive—but as it is—"

"You'll do nothing."

"I'll bear your suggestion in mind."

Miss Phipps was up and fully dressed when Mary brought her breakfast next morning. The day's issue of the *Southshire Post* was tucked beneath Mary's arm; her expression showed disappointment.

"Is my letter in the *Post*?" demanded Miss Phipps.

"No," said Mary regretfully.

"Is there an allusion to it anywhere?"

"I'm afraid not. There's a letter for you, however."

She proffered an envelope which bore *Southshire Post* stamped on its flap. Miss Phipps tore it open.

"*Dear Madam*," she read,

"*We read your letter of today's date, alleging a misreporting of your lecture, and immediately took up the matter with our reporter. He said that the notes of the Brittlesea Evening Herald reporter would coincide with his own, and on a telephone call to the Herald this proved to be the case.*

"*We are therefore reluctantly compelled to the conclusion that you unfortunately omitted from your lecture some material which should have intervened between Sir Walter and the telephone, and that our reporter recorded what in fact he heard you say.*

"*May I, as one accustomed to public speaking, offer my sympathy and*

my understanding? A slip of this kind can occur to the most experienced speaker when delivering familiar material.

"*With all good wishes,*

"*Yours very sincerely,*

"*William Kay, Editor.*"

Miss Phipps exploded.

"Read that!" she shouted, thrusting the letter at Mary.

"It's very courteous," said Mary. "And even has a slight touch of humor—"

"Mary, did you or did you not hear me, during my lecture, allude to the habits of Charles Dickens and Henry James in finding characters' names?"

"I did," said Mary with emphasis.

"What did I say about them?"

Mary repeated the gist of Miss Phipps's words accurately.

"Then how did the *Southshire Post* reporter miss them? How? Because he was absent from the hall, that's how! I shall visit the editor this morning. No, of course he won't be there in the morning since a morning paper goes to press at night. How maddening! All right, then, I shall visit him late this afternoon."

"Aunt Marian, don't be angry at me for saying this," said Mary, "but please don't involve John in your quarrel with the *Southshire Post*. It might be detrimental to his career."

"I shall not mention Detective-Inspector John Tarrant to Mr. William Kay at all," said Miss Phipps grimly. "And now, if you please, let us dismiss the subject and take Johnny for his morning walk."

The office of the editor of the *Southshire Post* was a large handsome room with old-fashioned but well polished mahogany furniture, a huge desk, and a great many crowded bookshelves. The editor matched his room: he had silver hair, a keen intelligent face, a good suit, a pleasant voice, and excellent manners.

He received Miss Phipps *en princesse*, and showed an acquaintance with her detective novels which was very agreeable. Miss Phipps's cheeks, which had remained crimson since the reception of his letter that morning, began to cool down. Telephones rang and subordinates came in and out with galley proofs and photographs during the interview, but the editor remained calm, and always resumed his conversation with Miss Phipps at the point where it had been broken off by these interruptions.

"He's an able man," thought Miss Phipps reluctantly.

"Mr. Kay," she began in a calm, moderate tone, "let me assure you that I did not omit material during the 'naming' section of my lecture. My friends were able to tell me this morning, without any prompting from me, exactly what I said during that part of the lecture. Of course, I am not so foolish as to expect a complete report in the *Southshire Post*, but I am entitled, I think, not

to be summarized so as to appear ignorant in my chosen field."

The editor's face changed a little. He had worn the look of a man dealing courteously with a temperamental lady author; now he appeared to recognize that Miss Phipps had a logical mind.

"If we owe you an apology we shall certainly print one," he said. "You say your friends really remember your delivery of this material which my reporter alleges you did not say?"

"They do. Moreover, the *Brittlesea Evening Herald* last night printed it in full."

"Without first checking the matter to you?"

"Without first checking with me."

"Of course," said the editor thoughtfully, "when my assistant telephoned the *Herald* to check on their reporter's notes, the *Herald* editor would realize that a controversy had arisen about that part of your lecture, and he would instruct his reporter to recheck, and if there was time he would have had his report amended."

"With whom would the reporter recheck?"

"Not, you say, with you?"

"Not with me."

"Your written notes, perhaps?"

"I have no written notes."

"Ah," said the editor thoughtfully. "With the secretary or chairwoman of the Brittlesea Literary Society, no doubt."

"No doubt. But the *Herald's* report was accurate, which implies that some members of the audience must have heard the allegedly omitted material."

"You are quite right, Miss Phipps," said the editor. He flicked a switch and spoke into the intercom on his desk. "Send Egret up at once," he said. "But, pardon me, Miss Phipps, is it really worthwhile to insert a correction? To call attention again to the error? No one who knows you could possibly believe you capable of such a gross blunder."

"Many people do *not* know me," said Miss Phipps insistently. "But in any case the matter has now spread far beyond a personal grievance on my part. The absence of your reporter may concern an alibi in a murder case."

"Surely you are jesting," murmured the editor, his expression reverting to its original veiled amusement.

"We shall see."

"Yes. Here is Egret. Come in, Egret. This is Miss Phipps, whose lecture you reported."

Suddenly Miss Phipps had an awful qualm. The boy was young, fair-haired, pink-cheeked, and horribly embarrassed.

"Now, Egret," said the editor with an alarming silky smoothness. "Miss Phipps says that either you misreported her lecture or it was atrociously subbed. Which was it? The truth, please."

The boy, crimson to his hairline

mumbled, "It was my fault, sir."

"Ah. It's a pity you didn't say that yesterday, Egret. Your lack of truth has caused a lot of trouble. Now let us have your explanation, please."

"I left the hall for a few minutes."

"Why?"

The boy, in misery, hung his head and was silent.

"Come, come, Egret," said the editor impatiently. "Miss Phipps and I are not children, you know, and this is the twentieth century. If you had to quit your post to perform a natural function, say so at once and have done with it."

"It wasn't that, sir," said the wretched boy.

"You went round the side of the Town Hall to Mr. Tadcaster's hardware shop in Towngate," said Miss Phipps sadly.

"No, no! Nothing of the kind! I went to meet my girl," said poor Egret, blushing even more deeply.

"Your *girl?*" said the editor in a tone of intense disgust. "You mean to say you betrayed a trust, threw up a press assignment, to meet a *girl?*"

"Yes, sir," said Egret staunchly.

"And is your girl's name Doreen Watkyn?" demanded Miss Phipps.

"Good heavens, no! We'd arranged to meet about eight, you know, because she was going to a party in Brittlesea. Well, she sort of floated past the glass swing-door and I saw her and—well, I couldn't help it, sir. We went across the road and had a cup of coffee in the Crown Hotel—it was all quite respectable, I assure you. I was away about half an hour, I'd say. But what I can't understand is—"

"Let us have the girl's name, please," said the editor.

"I prefer not to give it," said young Egret.

"We must have it, I'm afraid," said Miss Phipps.

"The name, Egret," commanded the editor.

"Very well," said Egret in a loud tone, holding up his head. "She was Alice Kay."

"What!" thundered the editor, leaping in his chair.

"And can she confirm this?" pressed Miss Phipps.

"Of course. But I hope you'll keep her out of this—whatever it is. Why not ask the waiter who served us? He'll remember. Everyone remembers Alice," said Egret. "Her hair, you know. Red, and very curly."

"That will do, Egret. You may go. I will speak to you again later," said the editor in a choked voice. "I hope this will be a lesson to you."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. But what I can't understand," said Egret, pausing on his way to the door, "is how Tony got it wrong. When I came back to the hall, the lecture was over and the chairwoman was thanking you, Miss Phipps. I'd asked Tony before I left if I could share his notes, and so while the next

lecture was being announced, I just copied his last few pages. So if I missed some of the lecture, it was because *he* missed some of it."

There was a pause.

"Alice," said the editor at length, "I should explain, Miss Phipps, is my youngest daughter."

"It was all perfectly respectable, sir," said Egret.

"Oh, go away, Egret, off with you," barked the editor. "You're a foolish young man, but I suppose there's no real harm in you. For the moment, go away."

"Yes, sir."

"One moment," said Miss Phipps. "I take it that Tony is the *Brittlesea Evening Herald* reporter?"

"Yes."

"Do you like him?"

"Well—not very much, as a matter of fact. We meet him about a good deal, you know. He's older than me, of course. And then—well, a bit of a heel, I fancy. Borrows money a good deal. Racing, I think. It's just the general opinion."

"Perhaps," said Miss Phipps, hardly daring to put the question, "perhaps *his* girl's name is Doreen Watkyn?"

"I've heard her mentioned among others," said young Egret cautiously, and left the room quickly.

"Now, Miss Phipps," said the editor, resuming his grand manner. "Perhaps you'll be kind enough to tell me what this is all about."

Miss Phipps told him.

"You think old Tadcaster made an appointment with Tony What's-his-name to tell him to keep away from the girl, that they quarreled and Tony struck him down?"

"It might be even worse than that," said Miss Phipps. "Doreen will be quite wealthy now under her uncle's will, you know. Tony might have known that. He was in debt. I'm afraid—"

The editor flipped the intercom. "Smith, get a car and go to Brittlesea at once. Miss Phipps, the well-known novelist, will accompany you and give you the full picture on the way. Smith is my chief reporter," he said aside to Miss Phipps. Then he continued to the unseen Smith, summarizing the case with professional succinctness. "Oh, you know this Tony's name? Good. The police station first, obviously, and then the *Herald* offices—"

"Let him drop me before we reach the police station," interrupted Miss Phipps. "I can't possibly be involved in this case. Have your man Smith ask for Detective-Inspector Tarrant."

"Do whatever Miss Phipps asks, Smith. She's giving us this chance of a scoop—to snatch a murderer out of thin air!"

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