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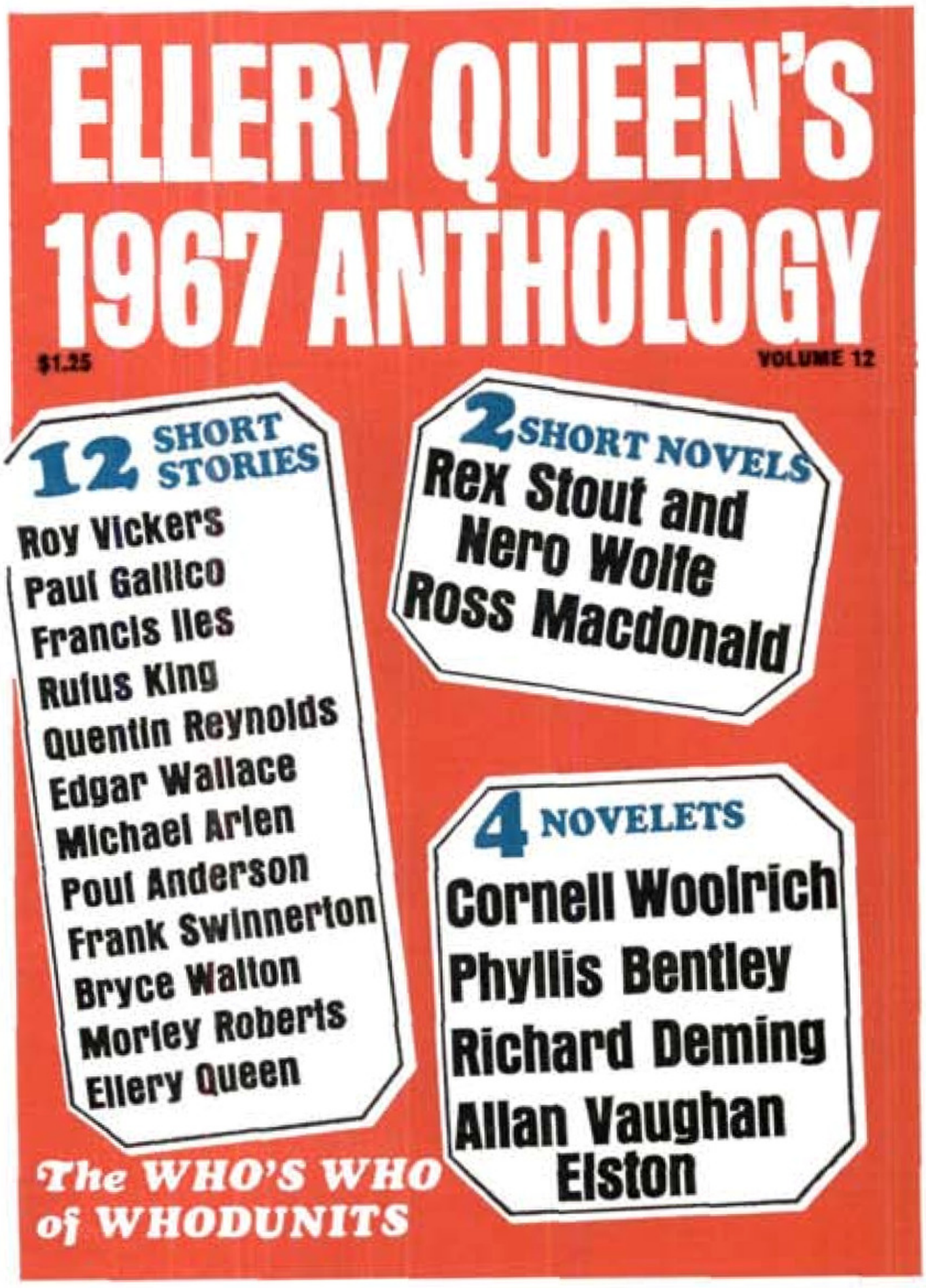

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THE OPPOSITE NUMBER

by JACOB HAY

EVAN PULSIFER NEVER REALLY thought of himself as being, in effect, an Espionage specialist; rather, he considered himself an Intelligence analyst doing what was really quite a humdrum job in a smallish cubicle, surrounded by scores of equally smallish cubicles occupied by his colleagues of the C.I.A. At five o'clock each evening, unless there was a flap on, he left his cubicle and drove quietly back to his home in one of the suburbs overlooking the Potomac, just north of Washington, and became simply another one of the residents with some kind of job with the government. There, he rarely if ever thought about Sundala.

Thus he was completely unprepared for the advent of Colonel Noganami Falsaki.

Pulsifer's preoccupation with the emerging Republic of Sundala was by way of being an accident of education. When the Republic of Sundala adopted the obscure Sunda dialect as the nation's official language, it developed that in all the Central Intelligence Agency only Pulsifer could both read and speak it. He had been born in the Sunda region, where his parents were missionaries of the Presbyterian persuasion.

So Pulsifer became the Sundala specialist, which was a relatively simple job since there wasn't much there to begin with. The Republic occupied a small wedge of land on the west coast of Africa which was notable chiefly for a particularly annoying variety of malaria and had once been useful as a coaling station for the ships of the Royal Navy. The inhabitants were largely Arabs and Indians, with an admixture of Portuguese; the economy defied easy analysis, since it appeared to be based almost entirely on the

fortunes of the State-owned Sundala Air-Africa Airline, into which the Republic had poured nearly all the foreign aid it received in bounteous abundance from the United States, Soviet Russia, Communist China, the Arab League, and Luxembourg.

It was believed that certain powerful interests in Luxembourg were convinced that there were vast mineral deposits in the western highlands, although this could not be established until means were found to reach the western highlands. This could not be accomplished until and unless other means were found to pacify the Batungi of Hok, a powerful tribal leader who claimed to be the rightful ruler of Sundala as an honorary great-grandnephew of Queen Victoria. Otherwise, there just wasn't much to say about Sundala.

On occasion, Pulsifer had thought of asking to be transferred to another desk to handle the affairs of some more interesting country. This, on the other hand, would have meant gathering a large mass of new facts and a lot of assiduous study. As it was, he knew all the answers there were to know about Sundala. But it was undoubtedly a dead end, even for an Espionage specialist or an Intelligence analyst.

"All quiet in your part of the world, Pulsifer?" his Chief would ask, and invariably Pulsifer would have to reply that it was, indeed, all quiet. The Sundalans had never had it so good. The Batungi of Hok, although adamant in his claim, was a graduate of Cambridge University and preferred to advance his cause through the medium of the World Court, where his plea was docketed for the late 1970s.

So Pulsifer was not at all prepared for Colonel Falsaki's telephone call to his home that quiet spring evening.

"Yes, this is Pulsifer," he had replied to the quiet inquiry, spoken in an accent that blended British with something Pulsifer couldn't quite put his finger on.

"I believe," said the Colonel, having identified himself, "it will be to our mutual advantage to meet and chat."

"I'd be delighted," Pulsifer declared sincerely. "I take it you've just been assigned to your Embassy here." It was his business to know everyone on the Sundalan Embassy's staff, and he'd never heard of a man named Falsaki.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Would you care to suggest a meeting place, sir?"

"Why not come on out here to my home in Potomac Heights?" Pulsifer said.

"I should prefer some more public establishment downtown," Falsaki answered, to Pulsifer's mild surprise. He didn't feel a bit like driving all the way into the center of Washington. But business was business. So they arranged to meet an hour later in the Men's Bar of the Mayflower Hotel.

Pulsifer had been seated in the bar for only a few minutes when the Colonel appeared, guided by the *maître d'* with whom Pulsifer had left his name. The Colonel was a tall youngish man with a light mahogany complexion and an expression that would undoubtedly have been amiable if it had not been slightly harassed. Although the evening was mild, he carried a heavy and much bestrapped trench coat over one arm, and in his hand he clutched a dark felt hat.

He sat down opposite Pulsifer, after the customary handshaking, and sighed with something like relief before ordering a double Scotch.

"Well now, what can I do for you, Colonel?" Pulsifer inquired pleasantly. Colonel Falsaki's eyes were sweeping the room, sharply examining faces.

"It is, rather, sir, a question of what we can do for each other," the Colonel replied gravely. "Let me lay my cards on the table, Mr. Pulsifer—or is it, perhaps, Major Pulsifer? Or Commander?"

"Just Mister. Garden-variety civil servant, I'm afraid."

"Oh?" The Colonel seemed a trifle disheartened, and then smiled knowingly. "Of course, sir. I should know your practice better. Military titles do not have the same value here as they do in my country. Nevertheless, Mr. Pulsifer, you are my Opposite Number and I, sir, am yours."

"My word," Pulsifer said, astonished. "I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, Colonel."

"It is quite simple, really. Your job is to keep an eye on Sundala. My job, therefore, is to keep an eye on you."

The Colonel looked at Pulsifer cheerfully for the first time, seeing before him a pleasant-looking young man with a crewcut and horn-rimmed glasses, wearing a neat gray suit and dark tie. And an expression of bafflement.

"Should you be telling me this?" Pulsifer asked dubiously. "I mean—well, it does seem somewhat irregular. And you seem to think we can help one another? How?"

"Cheers," the Colonel said, taking a deep gulp of the Scotch the waiter had just set before him. "For a month now, I have watched you, Mr. Pulsifer." Pulsifer started uneasily, and the Colonel held up a large calming hand. "Unexceptionable. Absolutely unexceptionable. Mr. Pulsifer, let me be brutally honest with you: you have bored me almost as much as Sundala must bore you."

He sighed, and continued, "To work at seven thirty each morning; back home at five each evening. A charming wife and two delightful children, just as I myself have left behind me in Sundala. Church every Sunday. Gardening in the evenings. Tennis on Saturday mornings. I myself prefer polo. But in sum, sir, you constitute no menace."

"Menace? You did say menace?"

"Nor, by the same token, do I constitute a menace to you, you see."

"I should hope not. In fact, I've always thought our relations with Sundala have been very close to ideal, although I'll admit that from time to time I've worried about the Batungi of Hok."

"A splendid chap, by the way. But that is precisely my point. Relations are indeed ideal. Which is not, Mr. Pulsifer, what you and I are getting paid for."

"We aren't?"

"My dear sir, how long has it been since you were summoned to the office of your superiors and commended for some feat of Intelligence analysis?"

"Well, as a matter of fact—" Pulsifer began hesitantly. "To be perfectly honest, never, although I did get a nice note from the Chief for tipping him off to the Luxembourg involvement."

"Pah!" Colonel Falsaki snapped a contemptuous finger. "It is even worse with me. Until two months ago I was a happy man, sir, commanding a regiment of the national army on the Hok frontier, playing polo against the Batungi's team in the demilitarized zone, enjoying my family—in a phrase, the good life. Then what? I am called to the capital, Teritza, by my uncle, the President. 'Here,' he says, 'read these,' and hands me the complete works of Ian Fleming. 'Sundala, too, shall have an Intelligence Service, and you shall be its Chief, my boy.' I could not refuse. 'Clearly, too, Washington will be your most important post. Go there as soon as you have finished reading, and let us know what your Opposite Number is up to.' "

"But how did you find out it was me?"

"I telephoned the Central Intelligence Agency and asked."

"Oh. That seems quite clear-cut and aboveboard."

"That, as I say, was over a month ago, shortly after my arrival. Since then, nothing. My uncle, the President, is becoming impatient. Almost daily I receive a coded telegram through our Embassy. Here, look —I have decoded his latest."

Colonel Falsaki handed Pulsifer a rumpled piece of paper.

"F," Pulsifer read, "INSIST YOU FORWARD SOONEST CIA PLOT OVERTHROW GOVERNMENT FAVOR OF BATUNGI OF HOK. LOVE, UNCLE THEODORE."

"But I assure you there is no plot," Pulsifer protested.

"Quite. I know that, and you know that. So, in fact, does my Uncle Theodore, the President of Sundala, and that is the trouble. If there is no plot, how can he go to the Russians and the Chinese for more foreign aid? How will Sundala Air-Africa be in a position to build a supersonic transport? Who will keep my splendid regiment equipped with machine guns?"

"I can see it would present problems. Our not having a plot, that is."

"Then, too, there is the question of my physical safety," Colonel Falsaki continued gloomily. "Not one attempt to run me down by automobile. Not one kidnaping and torture session."

"My dear Colonel, the C.I.A. simply doesn't go in for that sort of thing."

"I know." Glumly. Then, brightening, "But cannot you see, my dear sir, that this could be a two-way street?"

"Again, I don't quite follow you, Colonel."

"The Batungi of Hok," the Colonel replied triumphantly. "For you, he will acquire Chinese technicians and mysterious crates that could conceal purely defensive missiles. For me, he will receive air drops from planes flown by C.I.A. mercenaries from secret bases. For you, he will threaten to move into our neighboring country of Transu. For me, he will infiltrate operatives into our capital city of Teritza."

"Hmm," murmured Evan Pulsifer, his manner thoughtful. "Hmm," he murmured again.

He was thinking about Stanton, who had until just recently occupied the cubicle adjacent to his own in the vast rabbit warren of a building in Virginia. And then Stanton had deduced the existence of a conspiracy to replace the legally constituted government of the Republic of Upper Volta with a military junta. Actually, this had turned out to be the annual mobilization of the Upper Voltan national militia for summer exercises, but Stanton had, as a reward, been posted to the Embassy in Paris. Paris! Paris in the springtime! *Pari uk ubim wiktik dzang*, Pulsifer thought in the Sunda dialect he knew so well.

"Done," he said, holding out his hand. It was seized in a manly grip.

"And done," cried Colonel Falsaki. "And now you will please to kidnap me, sir. I will explain later. Simply walk quite closely behind me. It will look better thus." He smiled. "Your good wife will not object to a house guest for a few days, I trust."

"But what about your Embassy?" Pulsifer asked. "They're sure to go to the police."

"His Excellency, the Ambassador —another of my uncles—has also read the works of Mr. Ian Fleming. He knows well that in the submerged world of espionage, men vanish without reason. He will expect it of me, and it will look better when I return with word of the Batungi's evil plot."

Leaving the Men's Bar they walked to their cars. The Colonel's was a long low Italian sports car carrying diplomatic license plates. He surveyed it ruefully before getting in. "They would not sell me an ejection seat," he told Pulsifer. "I will follow you, sir."

And so they drove out to Potomac Heights to inaugurate The Sundalan Crisis.

Marge, Pulsifer's wife, was enchanted with Colonel Falsaki, whom Pulsifer introduced as a Ford Foundation fellow in Washington to study the Smithsonian Institution. Marge, being a good wife, asked no questions, having in mind that Pulsifer's last foreign guest had also been similarly introduced. It was, she had decided, probably a C.I.A. policy.

Pulsifer and the Colonel sat up until the small hours, developing their plots and counterplots.

The following morning the Colonel telephoned his other uncle, the Sundalan Ambassador. "Good morning, Uncle William," he began courteously, "I trust you are well. Splendid. Well, I thought I should let you know that I have been kidnaped but am being well treated. No, not to worry. It seems that the people who hold me captive want me out of the way for a few days. But I think I am on to something big."

The Colonel turned to Pulsifer. "That should set him to thinking," he added.

It was not until late that afternoon that Pulsifer was summoned to the office of Mr. Crabtree, the Chief of African Affairs (Emerging Nations Division).

"This morning report of yours," Mr. Crabtree began without preface, "I'm not sure I like the look of it, Pulsifer. What's a delegation of Chinese Boy Scouts doing in the Hok territory?"

"That's a good question, sir. If they really *are* Boy Scouts. My contact at the Sundalan embassy is checking into it."

"Really? I wasn't aware that it was our policy to make that sort of contact by our people in this office, Pulsifer. That's a job best done by our field operatives."

"I am aware of that, sir. However when the opportunity presented itself, I thought I might supplement the reports of our men in Sundala. The arrival of a group of visiting Boy Scouts in the Hok territory might escape their notice, but when my contact further advised me that these were *Chinese* Boy Scouts, I thought it wise to bring the matter to your attention."

"Hmm. Perhaps you're right, Pulsifer. In any case, I won't discourage you. Keep an eye on the situation, will you?"

Several days later, having fully worked out their individual programs, Colonel Falsaki and Pulsifer parted company, agreeing to keep in touch by telephone. The Colonel, employing one of Marge's paring knives, put a few artful slashes in his trench coat.

"Our men in Sundala are named Sullivan and Foster," Pulsifer advised. "Sullivan is posing as an importer of sewing machines; Foster's cover is that of the Ambassador's chauffeur. They're about due to be

rotated home on leave before reassignment, so there's no harm whatsoever in your exposing them." He shook hands with the Colonel. "Lots of luck."

"Together, sir, we shall go far in our respective countries' Intelligence Services," replied the Colonel, much moved. "I will let you know immediately my cousin, the Minister of Commerce, informs me that the large mysterious crates he is having made, in accord with the instructions I cabled him, are ready for shipment to the interior."

Four days later Pulsifer was enabled to report that an Albanian freighter had discharged a cargo marked FRAGILE— USE NO HOOKS in the harbor of Teritza. "The cargo consists of large crates, the contents of which are alleged to be farm machinery ordered by the Batungi of Hok."

"But the Albanians make no farm machinery," Mr. Crabtree protested to Pulsifer, summoned again to his Chief's office. "What's your thinking, Pulsifer?"

"Missiles, sir," Pulsifer replied simply.

That same afternoon the United States Ambassador to the Republic of Sundala cabled that C.I.A. operatives Sullivan and Foster were being expelled as *persona non grata.*

"Something's up, Pulsifer," Crabtree said at the emergency session called that evening. "The Director here thinks you ought to go out yourself and have a look around." The Director nodded gravely.

"Of course, you'll need a cover," the Director observed.

"We've thought of that, sir," said Crabtree. "Pulsifer will go as a Fulbright Scholar with a grant to study the currents of the Quangaha River, which rises in the western highlands of Hok. No Caucasian has ever penetrated there before."

"Sounds dangerous," commented the Director.

"It is," replied Mr. Crabtree.

A month later Pulsifer neared the Quangaha river port of Nguli, the last outpost of what passed for civilization in that remote region. He had spent the previous three weeks in bed suffering from the customary bout of what are locally known as the Sunda Shakes. He was wretched, and the boat he had chartered was temperamental, its steam engine smoking horridly. The native captain, an Arab named Hussein, was much addicted to hashish and kept putting his ancient craft on mud banks. "Allah's will," he would explain to Pulsifer.

At the town dock, the *Houri*, as the steam launch was named, rammed several pilings before she finally berthed. Pulsifer emerged from his tiny, steamy cabin to find himself facing a familiar figure.

"Colonel Falsaki!" he cried. The splendid figure in the uniform of a General of the Army of the Republic

of Sundala saluted smartly, and grinned with pleasure.

"My dear Mr. Pulsifer, welcome to the headquarters of the Third Frontier Corps, which I have the honor to command. We are, of course, on twenty-four-hour alert —" he nodded at several sleeping sentries on the dock— "but there is always time for a leisurely dinner, is there not?"

Over the third of a series of increasingly powerful gin-and-tonics General Falsaki explained to Pulsifer that his present post was in the nature of a reward for his services to Sundala in uncovering the vile C.I.A. plot to make the Batungi of Hok ruler of the nation.

"Not only a promotion, but the chance to return here to the frontier to defend my country," the General added as a house boy, bearing a fourth round of drinks, padded down the broad verandah of his elegantly furnished, air-conditioned bungalow. "I really had no taste for Intelligence work, you know."

"That's all very well for you, General," Pulsifer said, his tone unhappy, "but what about me? What about *my* crisis?"

"There is that," General Falsaki agreed thoughtfully.

"And what about this river I'm supposed to study? I've got to keep up appearances, you know."

"My dear Mr. Pulsifer, for a few Sundalan pounds Captain Hussein will falsify his log—assuming he bothers to keep one. You do not look at all well as it is. No, you will remain here as my guest for a time, and we will discuss the matter of the Batungi of Hok."

"Did somebody mention my name?" asked a new voice, and a towering, impeccably tailored figure appeared from the deepening afternoon shadows. "My dear Noganami, you must introduce me to your guest," the voice continued in a crisp Cantabridgian accent.

"My dear Claude, what a pleasant surprise! I hadn't expected you so early. Is Sylvia with you?"

"She's opening a new branch of the Hok Women's Volunteer Friendly Services up-country, but sends her regrets," replied the Batungi, inserting a monocle in his eye.

"Mr. Pulsifer, the Hereditary Batungi of Hok, my cousin Claude Fitzhugh-Mgallah," the General performed the introductions. "Mr. Pulsifer is with the Central Intelligence Agency."

"Delighted," said the Batungi.

"Yes," said Pulsifer, bemused.

"You play polo, Mr. Pulsifer?" the Batungi inquired courteously.

"Claude is a nine-goal player," General Falsaki said proudly.

"Oh," Pulsifer replied. "That's nice."

He was, he felt, either sloshed or down again with another siege of the Sunda Shakes. A fifth gin-and-tonic appeared on the small table beside his chair.

"Mr. Pulsifer has a problem,"

the General said. "He is investigating The Sundalan Crisis."

"Which one?" asked the Batungi.

"Your Chinese missiles, my dear chap. Your oriental advisors and technical missions. Frontier forays by armed bands of Hok guerrillas. That sort of thing."

"Thank you," said the Batungi, accepting a drink from the silent house boy. "Cheers, all," he added, easing himself into a chair. "Well, if you don't mind a suggestion from a comparative stranger, my dear Pulsifer, I should build it up a bit more. There's this matter of a loan for the new high dam on the Quangaha—do my people no end of good, you know—with American aid funds. As a gesture of good will it would go far to placate me in my blood feud with the present regime. Also, a pitched battle might help."

"Isn't that going a bit far?" Pulsifer asked anxiously.

"Not if we all use blanks," General Falsaki explained, "as we always do. Can't have our chaps hurt, you understand."

"What about this coming Friday?" the Batungi suggested. "Right after the polo match?"

"Excellent," agreed the General in Command of the Third Frontier Corps. "And now, gentlemen, shall we go in to dinner?"

Two days later the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency summoned Mr. Crabtree to his elegantly appointed office. "What's this from the Embassy in Sundala?" he asked brusquely. "Things hotting up there, eh?"

"We've just decoded Pulsifer's own report, sir. It looks like war. Limited, naturally, but war all the same."

"Has he any ideas?"

"Friday—tomorrow—is when he thinks things will blow up. Hok troops are reported mobilized on the frontier," Mr. Crabtree reported, his manner grave.

"Any suggestions?"

"Pulsifer seems to feel that the proposed high dam on the Quangaha River might help stabilize the country's economy, and since it will also irrigate a lot of the Hok territory, it might calm down the Batungi."

"Sounds reasonable. You know, Crabtree, it's just possible that we've underestimated Pulsifer in the past. What's his present status? Intelligence analyst, eh? That young man would do very well as a Chief of Mission, if you asked me."

"Quite possibly, sir. Will you see the Secretary of State on the Quangaha high dam allocation, sir? A hundred million should see the foundations laid, at least."

"Let's make it five hundred," replied the Director. "Never look cheap, Crabtree."

It was Pulsifer's stirring report of the Battle of Nguli which prompted approval, the following Monday, of a $650,000,000 allocation to the Republic of Sundala. Government

troops. Pulsifer cabled, had been driven back with heavy losses but had rallied under the inspired leadership of their commander, General N. Falsaki, to push the invading Hok legions back across the hotly disputed frontier. Casualties had been light on the Hok side, but the Batungi had nonetheless agreed to negotiate rather than continue hostilities.

"I am most optimistic that, acting as mediator, I can get both contestants together on a settlement," Pulsifer's cable concluded. He had written it Friday evening after consultation with his host and the Batungi. He had quite recovered from the Sunda Shakes.

"Amazing chap," said the Director, back in Washington, after the Western Highlands Truce and Watershed Agreement had been formally signed in Teritza a week before. His eye fell on a dispatch just in from Paris, and he frowned. "I wonder how he'd do with a really rough assignment, Crabtree."

"We can but try, sir," responded his loyal aide.

At the airport in Teritza some days later, Field Marshal Falsaki shook Pulsifer's hand. "We shall miss you, my dear Pulsifer," he said sincerely, his brown eyes were moist.

"Given a bit more time, we should have made you into quite a passable polo player," added the Batungi of Hok. "So much of it's in the forearm, you know."

And Pulsifer entered the cabin of the Sundala Air-Africa jetliner, much touched by the thoughtfulness of his two friends. In his lapel was the rosette of the Order for Civilian Merit of the Republic of Sundala, Second Class, with Oak Leaves.

Two weeks later, after the briefest of home leaves, Pulsifer and his wife, Marge, took over the commodious apartment recently vacated by the C.I.A.'s Chief of Mission for Paris. It overlooked the Boulevard Haussmann.

Life was good, Pulsifer thought as he sipped a brandy on his balcony. The Sundalan Crisis had taught him much, indeed, and on his newly increased salary. Marge would be able to afford at least one Paris gown. Quite possibly, two.

Thus he was quite prepared for the telephone call when it came.

"M'sieur Pulsifer?" the voice at the other end of the line inquired politely. "This is Colonel Pierre Saint-Luc Marie du Joinville speaking. You have heard of me?"

"Yes," said Pulsifer calmly. "You are my Opposite Number?"

"*Exactement*, M'sieur."

There was, Pulsifer felt as the quiet voice continued in his ear, no reason, really, why he should not end up as the Director. A man's ambitions should be limited only by his abilities.

"I think," he said slowly, "it would be well, Colonel, if we laid our cards on the table, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

a **HERCULE POIROT** *story by*

AGATHA CHRISTIE

It was, in some ways, a typical case for Hercule Poirot—telephoned near midnight, a woman's voice obviously frightened, a mysterious and desperate call for help, a matter of life and death . . . and, of course, Poirot, gentleman and detective, could not refuse . . .

HERCULE POIROT AND THE SIXTH CHAIR

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

HERCULE POIROT STRETCHED OUT his feet toward the electric radiator set in the wall. Its neat arrangement of red-hot bars pleased his orderly mind.

"A coal fire," he mused to himself, "was always shapeless and haphazard! Never did it achieve the symmetry."

The telephone bell rang. Poirot rose, glancing at his watch as he did so. The time was close on half-past eleven. He wondered who was ringing him up at this hour. It might, of course, be a wrong number.

"And it might," he murmured to himself with a whimsical smile, "be a millionaire newspaper proprietor, found dead in the library of his country house, with a spotted orchid clasped in his left hand and a page torn from a cookery book pinned to his breast."

Smiling at the pleasing conceit, he lifted the receiver.

Immediately a voice spoke—a soft husky woman's voice with a kind of desperate urgency about it.

"Is that M. Hercule Poirot? Is that M. Hercule Poirot?"

"Hercule Poirot speaks."

"M. Poirot—can you come at once—at once—I'm in danger—in great danger—I know it. . . ."

Poirot said sharply,

"Who are you? Where are you speaking from?"

The voice came more faintly but with an ever greater urgency.

"At once . . . it's life or death. . . . The Jardin des Cygnes . . . at once . . . table with yellow irises. . . ."

There was a pause—a queer kind of gasp—and the line went dead.

Hercule Poirot hung up. His face was puzzled. He murmured between his teeth, "There is something here very curious."

In the doorway of the Jardin des Cygnes, fat Luigi hurried forward.

"*Buona sera,* M. Poirot. You desire a table—yes?"

"No, no, my good Luigi. I seek here for some friends. I will look round—perhaps they are not here yet. Ah, let me see, that table there in the corner with the yellow irises—a little question by the way, if it is not indiscreet. On all the other tables there are tulips—pink tulips. Why on that one table do you have yellow iris?"

Luigi shrugged his expressive shoulders. "A command, Monsieur! A special order! Without doubt, the favorite flowers of one of the ladies. That table, it is the table of Mr. Barton Russell—an American—immensely rich."

"Aha, one must study the whims of the ladies, must one not, Luigi?"

"Monsieur has said it," said Luigi.

"I see at that table an acquaintance of mine. I must go and speak to him."

Poirot skirted his way delicately round the dancing floor on which couples were revolving. The table in question was set for six, but it had at the moment only one occupant, a young man who was thoughtfully, and it seemed pessimistically, drinking champagne.

He was not at all the person whom Poirot had expected to see. It seemed impossible to associate the idea of danger or melodrama with any party of which Tony Chapell was a member.

Poirot paused delicately by the table.

"Ah, it is, is it not, my friend Anthony Chapell?"

"By all that's wonderful—Poirot the police hound!" cried the young man. "Not Anthony, my dear fellow—Tony to friends!"

He drew out a chair.

"Come, sit with me. Let us discourse of crime! Let us go further and drink to crime." He poured champagne into an empty glass. "But what are you doing in this haunt of song and dance and merriment, my dear Poirot? We have no bodies here, positively not a single body to offer you."

Poirot sipped the champagne.

"You seem very gay, *mon cher?*"

"Gay? I am steeped in misery—wallowing in gloom. Tell me, you hear this tune they are playing. You recognize it?"

Poirot hazarded cautiously. "Something perhaps to do with your baby having left you?"

"Not a bad guess," said the young man, "but wrong for once. 'There's nothing like love for making you miserable!' That's what it's called."

"Aha?"

"My favorite tune," said Tony Chapell mournfully. "And my favorite restaurant and my favorite band—and my favorite girl's here

and she's dancing it with somebody else."

"Hence the melancholy?" said Poirot.

"Exactly. Pauline and I, you see, have had what the vulgar call 'words.' That is to say, she's had ninety-five words to five of mine out of every hundred. My five are: 'But, darling, I can explain.' Then she starts in on her ninety-five again and we get no further. I think," added Tony sadly, "that I shall poison myself."

"Pauline?" murmured Poirot.

"Pauline Weatherby. Barton Russell's young sister-in-law. Young, lovely, disgustingly rich. Tonight Barton Russell gives a party. You know him? Big Business, clean-shaven American—full of pep and personality. His wife was Pauline's sister."

"And who else is there at this party?"

"You'll meet 'em in a minute when the music stops. There's Lola Valdez—you know, the South American dancer in the new show at the Metropole, and there's Stephen Carter. D'you know Carter—he's in the diplomatic service. Very hush-hush. Known as Silent Stephen. Sort of man who says, 'I am not at liberty to state, etc.,' Hullo, here they come."

Poirot rose. He was introduced to Barton Russell, to Stephen Carter, to Señora Lola Valdez, a dark and luscious creature, and to Pauline Weatherby, very young, very fair, with eyes like cornflowers.

Barton Russell said, "What, is this the great M. Hercule Poirot? I am indeed pleased to meet you, sir. Won't you sit down and join us? That is, unless—"

Tony Chapell broke in.

"He's got an appointment with a body, I believe, or is it an absconding financier, or the Rajah of Borrioboolagah's great ruby?"

"Ah, my friend, do you think I am never off duty? Can I not, for once, seek only to amuse myself?"

"Perhaps you've got an appointment with Carter here. The latest from Geneva. International situation now acute. The stolen plans *must* be found or war will be declared tomorrow!"

Pauline Weatherby said cuttingly, "Must you be so *completely* idiotic, Tony?"

"Sorry, Pauline."

Tony Chapell relapsed into crestfallen silence.

"How severe you are, Mademoiselle."

"I hate people who play the fool all the time!"

"I must be careful, I see. I must converse only of serious matters."

"Oh, no, M. Poirot. I didn't mean you."

She turned a smiling face to him and asked, "Are you really a kind of Sherlock Holmes and do wonderful deductions?"

"Ah, the deductions—they are not so easy in real life. But shall I try?

Now then, I deduce that yellow irises are your favorite flowers?"

"Quite wrong, M. Poirot. Lilies of the valley or roses."

Poirot sighed. "A failure. I will try once more. This evening, not very long ago, you telephoned to someone."

Pauline laughed and clapped her hands. "Quite right."

"It was not long after you arrived here?"

"Right again. I telephoned the minute I got inside the doors."

"Ah, that is not so good. You telephoned *before* you came to this table?"

"Yes."

"Decidedly very bad."

"Oh, no, I think it was very clever of you. How did you know I had telephoned?"

"That, Mademoiselle, is the great detective's secret. And the person to whom you telephoned—does the name begin with a P—or perhaps with an H?"

Pauline laughed. "Quite wrong. I telephoned to my maid to post some frightfully important letters that I'd never sent off. Her name's Louise."

"I am confused, quite confused."

The music began again.

"What about it, Pauline?" asked Tony.

"I don't think I want to dance again so soon, Tony."

"Isn't that too bad?" said Tony bitterly to the world at large.

Poirot murmured to the South American girl on his other side, "Señora, I would not dare to ask you to dance with me. I am too much of the antique."

Lola Valdez said, "Ah, it ees nonsense that you talk there! You are steel young. Your hair, eet is still black!"

Poirot winced slightly.

"Pauline, as your brother-in-law and your guardian," Barton Russell spoke heavily, "I'm just going to force you onto the floor! This one's a waltz and a waltz is about the only dance I really can do."

"Why, of course, Barton, we'll take the floor right away."

They went off together. Tony tipped back his chair. Then he looked at Stephen Carter.

"Talkative little fellow, aren't you, Carter?" he remarked. "Help to make a party go with your merry chatter, eh, what?"

"Really, Chapell, I don't know what you mean?"

"Oh, you don't—don't you?" Tony mimicked him.

"My dear fellow."

"Drink, man, drink, if you won't talk."

"No, thanks."

"Then I will."

Stephen Carter shrugged. "Excuse me, must speak to a fellow I know over there. Fellow I was with at Eton."

Stephen Carter got up and walked to a table a few places away.

Tony said gloomily, "Somebody ought to drown old Etonians at birth."

Hercule Poirot was still being gallant to the dark beauty beside him. He murmured, "I wonder, may I ask, what are the favorite flowers of Señora?"

"Ah, now why ees eet you want to know?"

"Señora, if I send flowers to a lady, I am particular that they should be flowers she likes."

"That ees very charming of you, M. Poirot. I weel tell you—I adore the big dark red carnations—or the dark red roses."

"You do not, then, like yellow flowers—yellow irises?"

"Yellow flowers—no—they do not accord with my temperament."

"How wise . . . Tell me, did you ring up a friend tonight, since you arrived here?"

"I? Ring up a friend? No, what a curious question!"

"Ah, but I, I am a very curious man."

"I'm sure you are." She rolled her dark eyes at him. "A vairy *dan*gerous man."

"No, no, not dangerous; say, a man who may be useful—in danger! You understand?"

Lola giggled. She showed white even teeth.

"No, no," she laughed. "You are dangerous."

Hercule Poirot sighed. "I see that you do not understand. All this is very strange."

Tony came out of a fit of abstraction and said suddenly, "Lola, what about a spot of swoop and dip? Come along."

"I weel come—yes. Since M. Poirot ees not brave enough!"

Tony put an arm round her and remarked over his shoulder to Poirot as they glided off, "You can meditate on crime yet to come, old boy!"

Poirot said, "It is profound what you say there. Yes, it is profound."

He sat meditatively for a minute or two, then he raised a finger. Luigi came promptly, his wide Italian face wreathed in smiles.

"Mon vieux," said Poirot. "I need some information."

"Always at your service, Monsieur."

"I desire to know how many of these people at this table here have used the telephone tonight?"

"I can tell you, Monsieur. The young lady, the one in white, she telephoned at once when she got here. Then she went to leave her cloak and while she was doing that the other lady came out of the cloakroom and went into the telephone booth."

"So the Señora *did* telephone! Was that *before* she came into the restaurant?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Anyone else?"

"No, Monsieur."

"All this, Luigi, gives me furiously to think!"

"Indeed, Monsieur."

"Yes. I think, Luigi, that tonight of all nights, I must have my wits

about me! Something is going to happen, Luigi, and I am not at all sure what it is."

"Anything I can do, Monsieur—"

Poirot made a sign. Luigi slipped discreetly away. Stephen Carter was returning to the table.

"We are still deserted, Mr. Carter," said Poirot.

"Oh—er—quite," said the other.

"You know Mr. Barton Russell well?"

"Yes, known him a good while."

"His sister-in-law, Miss Weatherby, is very charming."

"Yes, pretty girl."

"You know her well, too?"

"Quite."

"Oh, quite, quite," said Poirot.

Carter stared at him.

The music stopped and the others returned.

Barton Russell said to a waiter, "Another bottle of champagne—quickly."

Then he raised his glass.

"See here, folks. I'm going to ask you to drink a toast. To tell you the truth, there's an idea back of this little party tonight. As you know, I'd ordered a table for six. There were only five of us. That gave us an empty place. Then, by a very strange coincidence, M. Hercule Poirot happened to pass by and I asked him to join our party.

"You don't know yet what an apt coincidence that was. You see, that empty seat tonight represents a lady—the lady in whose memory this party is being given. This party, ladies and gentlemen, is being held in memory of my dear wife—Iris—who died exactly four years ago on this very date!"

There was a startled movement round the table. Barton Russell, his face impassive, raised his glass.

"I'll ask you to drink to her memory. Iris!"

"Iris?" said Poirot sharply.

He looked at the flowers. Barton Russell caught his glance and gently nodded his head.

There were little murmurs round the table.

"Iris—Iris . . ."

Everyone looked startled and uncomfortable.

Barton Russell went on, speaking with his slow monotonous American intonation.

"It may seem odd to you that I should celebrate the anniversary of a death in this way—by a supper party in a fashionable restaurant. But I have a reason—yes, I have a reason. For M. Poirot's benefit, I'll explain."

He turned his head to Poirot.

"Four years ago tonight, M. Poirot, there was a supper party held in New York. At it were my wife and myself, Mr. Stephen Carter who was attached to the Embassy in Washington, Mr. Anthony Chapell who had been a guest in our house for some weeks, and Señora Valdez who was at that time enchanting New York City with her dancing. Pauline here"—he patted her shoulder—"was only sixteen but she came

to the supper party as a special treat. You remember, Pauline?"

"I remember—yes." Her voice shook a little.

"M. Poirot, on that night a tragedy happened. There was a roll of drums and the floor show started. The lights went down—all but a spotlight in the middle of the dancing floor. When the lights went up again, M. Poirot, my wife was seen to have fallen forward on the table. She was dead—stone dead. There was potassium cyanide found in the dregs of her wine glass, and the remains of the packet was discovered in her handbag."

"She had committed suicide?" said Poirot.

"That was the accepted verdict . . . It broke me up, M. Poirot. There was, perhaps, a possible reason for such an action—the police thought so. I accepted their decision."

He pounded on the table.

"But I was not satisfied . . . No, for four years I've been thinking and brooding—and I'm not satisfied! I don't believe Iris killed herself. I believe, M. Poirot, that she was murdered—by one of those people at the table."

"Look here, sir—"

Tony Chapell sprung to his feet.

"Be quiet, Tony," said Russell. "I haven't finished. One of them did it—I'm sure of that now. Someone who, under cover of the darkness, slipped the half emptied packet of cyanide into her handbag. I think I know which of them it was. I mean to know the truth—"

Lola's voice rose sharply. "You are mad—crazee. Who would have harmed her? No, you are mad—"

She broke off. There was a roll of drums.

Barton Russell said. "The floor show. Afterwards we will go on with this. Stay where you are, all of you. I've got to go and speak to the dance band. Little arrangement I've made with them."

He got up and left the table.

"Extraordinary business," commented Carter. "Man's mad."

"He ees crazee, yes," said Lola.

The lights were lowered.

"For two pins I'd clear out," said Tony.

"No!" Pauline spoke sharply. Then she murmured, "Oh, dear—"

"What is it, Mademoiselle?" murmured Poirot.

She answered almost in a whisper. "It's horrible! It's just as it was that night—"

"Sh, sh!" said several people.

Poirot lowered his voice.

"A little word in your ear." He whispered, "All will be well."

"My God, listen," cried Lola.

"What is it, Señora?"

"It's the same tune—the same song that they played that night in New York. Barton Russell must have fixed it. I don't like this."

"Courage—courage—"

There was a hush. A girl walked out into the middle of the floor, a coal-black girl with rolling eyeballs

and white glistening teeth. She began to sing in a deep hoarse voice—a voice that was curiously moving.

I've forgotten you
I never think of you
The way you walked
The way you talked
The things you used to say
I've forgotten you
I never think of you
I couldn't say
For sure today
Whether your eyes were blue or gray
I've forgotten you
I never think of you.

I'm through
Thinking of you

The sobbing tune, the deep golden voice had a powerful effect. It cast a spell. Even the waiters felt it. The whole room stared at her, hypnotized by the emotion she distilled.

A waiter passed softly round the table filling up glasses, murmuring "Champagne" in an undertone, but all attention was on the one glowing spot of light—the black woman whose ancestors came from Africa, singing in her deep voice:

I've forgotten you
I never think of you

Oh, what a lie
I shall think of you, think of you, think of you

Till I die . . .

The applause broke out frenziedly. The lights went up. Barton Russell came back and slipped into his seat.

"She's great, that girl—" cried Tony.

But his words were cut short by a low cry from Lola.

"Look—look. . . ."

And then they all saw. Pauline Weatherby had dropped forward onto the table.

Lola cried, "She's dead—just like Iris—like Iris in New York."

Poirot sprang from his seat, gesturing to the others to keep back. He bent over the huddled form, very gently felt for a pulse.

His face was white and stern. The others were held in a trance.

Slowly Poirot nodded his head. "Yes, she is dead—*la pauvre petite.* And I sitting by her! Ah! but this time the murderer shall not escape."

Barton Russell, his face gray, muttered. "Just like Iris . . . She saw something—Pauline saw something that night—only she wasn't sure—she told me she wasn't sure . . . We must get the police . . . Oh, God, little Pauline."

Poirot said, "Where is her glass?" He raised it to his nose. "Yes, I can smell the cyanide. A smell of bitter almonds . . . the same method, the same poison. "Let us look in her handbag."

Barton Russell cried out, "You don't believe this is suicide, too?"

"Wait," Poirot commanded. "No, there is nothing here. The lights

went up, you see, too quickly. The murderer had not time. Therefore, the poison is still on him."

"Or her," said Carter.

He was looking at Lola Valdez.

She spat out, "What do you mean —what do you say? That I killed her —eet is not true—not true—why should I do such a thing?"

"You had rather a fancy for Barton Russell yourself in New York. That's the gossip I heard. Argentine beauties are notoriously jealous."

"That ees a pack of lies. And I do not come from the Argentine. I come from Peru. Ah—I spit upon you. I—" She lapsed into Spanish.

"I demand silence," cried Poirot. "It is for me to speak."

Barton Russell said heavily, "Everyone must be searched."

Poirot said calmly, *"Non, non,* it is not necessary."

"What d'you mean, not necessary?"

"I, Hercule Poirot, know. I see with the eyes of the mind. And I will speak! M. Carter, *will you show us the packet in your breast pocket?"*

"There's nothing in my pocket."

"Tony, my good friend, if you will be so obliging."

Carter cried out, "Damn you—"

Tony flipped the packet neatly out before Carter could defend himself.

"There you are, M. Poirot, just as you said!"

"It's a dammed lie," cried Carter.

Poirot picked up the packet, read the label.

"Cyanide potassium. The case is complete."

Barton Russell's voice came thickly. "Carter! I always thought so. Iris was in love with you. She wanted to go away with you. You didn't want a scandal for the sake of your precious career, so you poisoned her. You'll hang for this, you dirty dog."

"Silence!" Poirot's voice rang out, firm and authoritative. "This is not finished yet. I, Hercule Poirot, have something to say. My friend here, Tony Chapell, he says to me when I arrive, that I have come in search of crime. That, it is partly true. There *was* crime in my mind—but it was to prevent a crime that I came. And I have prevented it.

"The murderer, he planned well —but Hercule Poirot he was one move ahead. He had to think fast, and to whisper quickly in Mademoiselle's ear when the lights went down. She is very quick and clever, Mademoiselle Pauline, she played her part well. Mademoiselle, will you be so kind as to show us that you are not dead after all?"

Pauline sat up. She gave an unsteady laugh.

"Pauline—darling."

"Tony!"

"My sweet."

"Angel."

Barton Russell gasped. "I—I don't understand."

"I will help you to understand, Mr. Barton Russell. Your plan has miscarried."

"My plan?"

"Yes, your plan. Who was the only man who had an alibi during the darkness. The man who left the table—you, Mr. Barton Russell. But you returned to it under cover of the darkness, circling round it, with a champagne bottle, filling up glasses, putting cyanide in Pauline's glass, and dropping the half empty packet in Carter's pocket as you bent over him to remove a glass.

"Oh, yes, it is easy for you to play the part of a waiter in darkness when the attention of everyone is elsewhere. That was the real reason for your party tonight. The safest place to commit a murder is in the middle of a crowd."

"What the—why the hell should I want to kill Pauline?"

"It might be, perhaps, a question of money. Your wife left you guardian to her sister. You mentioned that fact tonight. Pauline is twenty. At twenty-one or on her marriage you would have to render an account of your stewardship. I suggest that you could not do that. You have speculated with it.

"I do not know, Mr. Barton Russell, whether you killed your wife in the same way, or whether her suicide suggested the idea of this crime to you, but I do know that tonight you have been guilty of attempted murder. It rests with Miss Pauline whether you will be prosecuted.

"No," said Pauline. "He can get out of my sight and out of this country. I don't want a scandal."

"You had better go quickly, Mr. Barton Russell, and I advise you to be careful in future."

Barton Russell got up, his face working. "You damn interfering little Belgian jackanapes!"

He strode out angrily.

Pauline sighed. "M. Poirot, you've been wonderful."

"You, Mademoiselle, you have been the marvelous one. To pour away the champagne, to act the dead body—"

"Ugh," she shivered, "you give me the creeps."

He said gently, "It was you who telephoned me, was it not?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I was worried and —frightened without knowing quite why I was frightened. Barton told me he was having this party to commemorate Iris' death. I realized he had some scheme on—but he wouldn't tell me what it was. He looked so—so queer and so excited that I felt something terrible might happen—only, of course, I never dreamed that he meant to—to get rid of *me*."

"And so, Mademoiselle?"

"I'd heard people talking about you. I thought if I could only get you here, perhaps it would stop anything from happening. I thought that being a—a foreigner—if I rang up and pretended to be in danger and—and made it sound mysterious—"

"You thought the melodrama, it would attract me? That is what

puzzled me. The message itself—definitely it was what you call 'bogus'—it did not ring true. But the fear in the voice—that was real. Then I came—and you denied having sent me a message."

"I had to. Besides, I didn't want you to know it was me."

"Ah, but I was fairly sure of that! Not at first. But I soon realized that the only two people who could know about the yellow irises on the table were you and Mr. Russell."

Pauline nodded. "I heard him ordering them to be put on the table," she explained. "That, and his ordering a table for six when I knew only five were coming—"

"What did you suspect, Mademoiselle?"

She said slowly, "I was afraid—of something happening—to Mr. Carter."

Stephen Carter cleared his throat. Unhurriedly but quite decisively he rose from the table.

"Er—hm—I have to—er—thank you, Mr. Poirot. I owe you a great deal. You'll excuse me, I'm sure, if I leave. Tonight's happenings have been—rather upsetting."

Looking after his retreating figure, Pauline said violently, "I hate him. I've always thought it was—because of him that Iris Killed herself. Or perhaps—Barton killed her."

Poirot said gently, "Forget, Mademoiselle. Let the past go. Think only of the present."

Pauline murmured, "Yes—you're right."

Poirot turned to Lola Valdez. "Señora, as the evening advances I become more brave. If you would dance with me now—"

"Oh, yes, indeed. You are—you are ze cat's whiskers, M. Poirot. I inseest on dancing with you."

"You are too kind, Señora."

Tony and Pauline were left. They leaned toward each other across the table.

"Darling Pauline."

"Oh, Tony, I've been such a nasty spiteful spitfiring little cat to you all day. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Angel! This is Our Tune again. Let's dance."

They danced off, smiling at each other and humming softly:

There's nothing like Love for making you miserable
There's nothing like Love for making you blue
Depressed
Possessed
Sentimental
Temperamental
There's nothing like Love
For getting you down.

There's nothing like Love for driving you crazy
There's nothing like Love for making you mad
Abusive
Allusive
Suicidal
Homicidal
There's nothing like Love
There's nothing like Love.

Continuing William Brittain's wholly delightful series . . . Meet ten-year-old Jacques duMonde, an exchange student from Belgium with a probable I.Q. of 170 (or more). Young Jacques had a literary hero, and when strange things occurred in Larkin's Corners one fantastic Monday, Jacques naturally tried to emulate his great hero . . .

THE BOY WHO READ AGATHA CHRISTIE

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

IN THE WEEKS FOLLOWING THAT insane Monday in Larkin's Corners, there were many versions of What Really Happened. However, the village gossips were generally agreed that the first person to be approached by the young madmen when they entered the town was the proprietor of the drug store, Rad Simpson.

It was shortly after eight o'clock, and Rad had just unlocked the cash register. He heard the bell jingle on the front door, and two youths entered. Rad put on his best smile; they were strangers, and from the looks of their clothing, they were used to spending money freely. College boys, thought Rad to himself.

"Got any razor blades?" asked one. "I want the injector kind."

"Yep," replied Rad, tossing a container on the counter. "Ten blades for a dollar. Special this week."

Without a word the boy drew a razor from his pocket, fitted the container to it, and clicked in a new blade. Then he tossed the container and a dime on the counter. "I only need one," he said.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Rad yelled. "You got to buy the whole thing. I can't sell nine blades to somebody when it says ten on the box."

"But I only need one," the youth repeated.

"That don't make no difference, son," said Rad. He came out from behind the counter. "Take the blades or leave 'em. But you owe me ninety cents, irregardless. And you either pay up, or I'm callin' the police."

The boy's companion walked up to Rad and smiled blandly. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "but is there any way I can purchase nine injector razor blades? You see I have only ninety cents and—"

Immediately, Rad was all smiles. They were playing a joke on him.

He gave the second boy the blades, and like the first, he took a razor from his pocket and put in a fresh blade. He walked to the soda fountain at the front of the store, took a tube of brushless shaving cream from his pocket, and began to apply it to his cheeks. Then, facing the huge window, he started to shave.

Rad picked up the phone and called the police.

At about the same time another young man entered the Acme Hardware Store, two doors down the street. He purchased a mop and a bucket, requesting that Larry Nash, the owner of the store, fill the bucket with water. When the request was granted, he began, with great diligence but without Larry's permission, to mop the floor of the store.

Larry picked up the phone and spoke to the operator in a low tone.

Within twenty minutes the main street of Larkin's Corners was in a state of shock.

Item: In the firehouse two of the college-age boys were hard at work polishing the already gleaming brass fittings on the trucks.

Item: Fedder's Grocery was in a turmoil because one lad was busily carrying boxes of jelly doughnuts to the diet foods section while his companion was just as busily replacing them where they belonged.

Item: In the bank a boy was repeatedly going from teller to teller, getting a nickel changed into five pennies from one and exchanging the pennies for a nickel at the next; he kept this up for fifteen minutes before the bank president decided to call the police.

In his office in the rear of the village building Max Cory, the town cop of Larkin's Corners, was still unaware of the deluge of calls about to descend on him. He smiled across his desk at the boy who had come to visit him.

Jacques duMonde had arrived in Larkin's Corners from his home in Belgium six weeks before as part of a student exchange program. Although his command of English was excellent, and his tests had shown that he was perfectly capable of handling the work of a high school senior, the school authorities had been somewhat shaken when they first set eyes on the boy; they promptly made a note that hereafter they would insist on knowing the age of any exchange student coming to their school.

Jacques duMonde was just ten years old.

When spoken to by the school authorities, Max and his wife Jean had quickly agreed to let the boy live with them. And certainly he was no trouble. In fact, the neat and orderly condition in which Jacques always kept his room sometimes embarrassed Jean Cory, who was inclined to let her housework slide at times. His stamp collection was painstakingly mounted, catalogued, and annotated in a manner to put an expert philatelist to shame. He

was never late for meals or for an appointment. Order and precision seemed to govern the boy's life.

The village librarian was fascinated by Jacques. On his first visit he took out Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection*, and returned it in less than a week. When the librarian asked him how he enjoyed the book, she was treated to a short lecture on Darwin's system of classification, including improvements he might have made. Jacques was impeccably polite, but it was obvious to the librarian that he had gained more from the book than she could ever have hoped to.

And then Jacques discovered Agatha Christie's stories about Hercule Poirot. In his fictional countryman Jacques found a kindred spirit. He read and reread the stories, discussing the techniques of detection with Max. That was the reason for his early-morning visit to Max's office.

"I have yesterday completed *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*," said Jacques. "And surely, *mon ami*, you will agree that to a person with the tidy mind of Hercule Poirot, it must be clearly evident—"

"Wait a minute, Jacques," said Max, holding up his hand. "My main job here is to give out speeding tickets. We've never had any wild crimes in Larkin's Corners. Besides, I haven't read the book."

Max looked at the small figure sitting across from him. The boy's short blue pants had a sharp crease and were, as always, spotless. His shirt was so white it almost glittered, and below the knee stockings his patent leather shoes with the pointed toes were dazzling in their brilliance.

And what was that odd movement that Jacques made with his thumb and forefinger beside his nose? It looked to Max almost as if he were curling the end of a nonexistent mustache.

Then the telephone began to ring.

During the next few minutes Max Cory almost went out of his mind. From drug store, hardware store, fire department, grocery, and bank came the same message. The main street of Larkin's Corners had suddenly gone berserk.

Max jotted down each complaint in his notebook. He started to rise, looked once more at the noteoook, then sat down again. He reached for the telephone.

"Rad," he said when the connection had been made, "I want you to do something for me . . . Yeah, I don't know what's going on either . . . Look, I'll investigate, but let me do it my way. Now here's what I want you to do. Close the store—that'll keep 'em out for a while. Then go find Larry Nash—he's at the Fire Department, so that's covered as well as his hardware store. Then get Al Fedder at the grocery and Sam Donohue from the bank. Bring 'em all down here

to my office . . . and stop worrying about losing business. You don't sell that much on Mondays anyway."

Max hung up the phone and turned to Jacques. "Bunch of college boys are pulling some stunts down on main street," he said. "It's crazy. There's no rhyme nor reason for—"

"Pardon, monsieur." replied Jacques. "There is always a reason. Are we to believe that these individuals, after being exposed to the glories of a higher education, have taken leave of their senses? I would like very much to hear what the merchants have to say. Of course, if you—"

"Sure, kid, stick around. The whole world seems to be nuts today. I guess a little informality around here wouldn't hurt any."

Ten minutes later the four businessmen crowded into Max's office, muttering complaints about a policeman who wanted to do his job without getting off his big fat overstuffed—

"Hold it!" shouted Max. "Now I'm just as concerned about all this as any of you. But tell me something. Just what horrible crimes did these guys commit?"

The others looked at one another in silence. Max continued in a lower voice.

"Look, Rad, a young man took a shave in your window. We've got no law on the books against that."

He turned to Larry Nash.

"Larry, that store of yours has needed a good cleaning out since you bought it. That boy was performing a public service. And as far as the grocery is concerned, you said yourself, Al, that they put everything back just the way they found it."

Max spread his hands. "Look, I don't say you haven't good reason to be annoyed. It's just that they haven't done anything we can arrest them for."

"Yeah," Al Fedder growled. "Well, why can't they do their fraternity initiations somewhere else?"

"No, I checked on that," Max replied. "They're from Cutler College according to the stickers on their cars. And Cutler has its initiations in the spring, not in the fall."

"But why are they doing it?" asked Larry Nash.

"I dunno. But all I can do is keep an eye on 'em. Now take it easy—at least, nobody's been hurt."

The phone rang again. Max answered, and as he listened, his eyes became grim. He hung up the phone and turned to the others.

"Come on," he said. "That was Les Kincaid at the Post Office. A couple of those guys just roughed up old Mrs. Nearing."

At the Post Office, Max found eight youths backed up against a wall and guarded by Postmaster Kincaid who was armed with an ancient shotgun. The eyes of all the boys were wide with fear.

Victoria Nearing had settled her trembling body into a chair. "They really didn't do much, Max," she said. "They just frightened me a little, that's all. I wouldn't want to see them get into trouble."

"Well, I would," snarled Kincaid. "They all came in here at once, Max—all eight of 'em. Stood looking at the bulletin board, they did. I figured they was up to no good, so I got my gun ready.

"Anyway, one of 'em steps up to the window and orders one hundred and two five-cent stamps. One hundred and *two*. So I gives him the sheet and tears off two more singles. He'd no sooner got out of the way than the next one wants the same thing. Why one hundred and two? Just to make more work for me, the way I see it."

"They've made work for most of us, Les," said Al Fedder. He quickly filled the postmaster in on the events of the morning.

Kincaid nodded. "Just trouble-makers. Anyway, after the second one had ordered, Mrs. Nearing walked in and got in line right behind him. She asked for some stamps, but just as she was leaving, one of these galoots grabbed her by the arm and whipped the stamps out of her hand. That's when I called you and grabbed my gun."

"But they didn't hurt me," said Mrs. Nearing. "In fact, they gave me all the stamps they bought. I don't think they meant any harm."

"How about it, Max?" asked Larry Nash. "Have you got enough to arrest them now?"

"I guess I can at least question them. As far as arrest goes, that'll depend on Mrs. Nearing. But I wish I knew just why—"

"Monsieur Kincaid!" Jacques's small voice could be heard over the general din. "I wonder if I might ask you something."

Kincaid looked at Jacques and smiled. "Say, you're the boy living with Max, ain't you? Sure, boy, ask me anything you like."

"Have you seen any of these gentlemen before this morning?" Jacques waved his hand at the frightened young men along the wall.

"No," Kincaid replied. "I don't think—say, wait a minute! That one in the green cap. Yessir, by golly, he was in here Saturday just before closing time."

"Did he come behind your little window at any time?"

"Nope—that's against regulations."

"Then allow me to ask whether or not he assisted you in picking up the stamps which you dropped?"

"Yeah, he did. When I was unpacking the sheets, a couple of 'em fell through the window, and he—hey, wait a minute! How did you know I dropped any stamps?"

"Because, Monsieur Kincaid, that would go far in explaining why these gentlemen are acting in this ridiculous fashion. *Sont ils fou?* Are they crazy? I very much doubt it."

Jacques turned to Max. "While you are attending to these men, *mon ami*, I wish a few more words with Mr. Kincaid. Then perhaps I can assist you in explaining this little mystery."

Max threw up his hands in amazement. But he left, taking his eight prisoners with him, and Jacques turned back to Kincaid.

Half an hour later Jacques walked into Max's office. Seated on the floor on both sides of the small room were the eight college boys. Jacques turned to the one whom Kincaid had identified as the boy who had been in the Post Office the previous Saturday.

"I know why you did these crazy things," said Jacques, "and I am a friend of Officer Cory. Now if I can convince you that your work here is at an end, and if Mr. Cory gives his permission, will you agree, with haste, to leave Larkin's Corners in peace and go back to your studies?"

The youth in the green cap shrugged. "I don't even know what you're talking about," he mumbled.

"Perhaps I can convince you that I know all about your scheme. But what have you to say, Monsieur Cory? Will you allow them to leave?"

"Leave? I'd be tickled to death if they were gone now. But first I've got to know what they were doing. And what did you mean about convincing them that their work was at an end?"

"*Un moment*," replied Jacques. He took a thick pencil from Max's desk and entered the small lavatory off the office. Returning a few seconds later, he faced the boys who looked at him in astonishment, and then at one another.

Jacques had drawn in pencil on his upper lip a huge, sweeping mustache.

Without a word the eight collegians rose and left the office. Staring wide-eyed at the door, Max could hear the roar of their cars as they headed for the village limits.

"But it was simplicity itself, *mon ami*," said Jacques as he and Max sat alone in the office. "As Hercule Poirot himself has taught me, there is a pattern in what is seemingly the most foolish of human actions. To determine that pattern requires only the proper use of the little gray cells.

"What have we in this case? These strangers entered the town and committed several pointless acts. Obviously, however, if they are not all insane, one of these acts is not so pointless. The rest are designed to conceal the one deed that they wish to accomplish in secrecy. They are—how do you say it?—'red halibuts'."

"I think you mean 'red herrings'," said Max with a smile.

Jacques ignored the comment. "But where does one find the significant deed?" he continued. "Consider, Mr. Cory, that the boys

began by spreading themselves all over the village. And yet all of them came finally to one building—the Post Office. Is it too much to assume, then, that the Post Office is the real place of interest to them?

"But what is of so great interest in a Post Office? Obviously the stamps. After all, Mrs. Nearing was set upon so that those gentlemen could look at the stamps she purchased. This event also told me that they were looking for a particular copy of the current George Washington five-cent stamp which, incidentally, the youths were purchasing in such an odd manner."

"But how did you know that one of those guys had been in the Post Office before?"

"I assumed that the postmaster did not know of the existence of the particular stamp which interested our eight friends. I asked myself how this could be, and there seemed but one answer. In some way a sheet of stamps had made its way in front of the window and back again. Since I could think of only one manner in which this might have happened, I put the question which so amazed Mr. Kincaid."

"Sounds good so far," said Max. "But why didn't those boys just come in and buy sheets of stamps until they found the particular one they wanted? Why panic the whole town?"

"Ah, Monsieur Cory, to understand this, one must have some knowledge of rare stamps. Perhaps the most famous example in United States stamps is the 1918 airmail which has an error showing the airplane flying upside down. Each such stamp is worth several thousands of dollars.

"But in the fall of 1963, in New Jersey, a similar mistake was found. In that case there was an error in printing the colors, the person who purchased the stamps realized they were a rarity, but made the mistake of boasting about his discovery. At this point the government printed many copies of the error, making the man's discovery almost valueless.

"This is what the eight gentlemen were guarding against. They wanted the stamp, but they had to get it in such a way that attention would not be drawn to it. And who would suspect a purchase of stamps after the other fantastic events of the day?"

"And that would explain why they grabbed Mrs. Nearing. They wanted to make sure Kincaid didn't sell her the sheet they wanted."

"To be sure. All the events of the day were for the single purpose of buying an improperly printed stamp without giving anyone reason to believe it existed. One of the eight—probably without any knowledge of the stamp's worth—saw it on Saturday. He mentioned it at college to a friend who realized its value. So they came back today to purchase it."

"Jacques, I've got to know," said Max. "What in blazes was the matter with that stamp to make it so valuable?"

"At times the plate from which stamps are printed becomes marred or damaged. When this occurs, normally the plate is replaced and the imperfect stamps are discarded and destroyed. But once in a million times, perhaps, an error escapes the examiners. Such an error I found in the stamp rack at the Post Office which Mr. Kincaid so kindly allowed me to inspect. Observe, Monsieur!"

Jacques held up a sheet of 5¢ stamps, each bearing the head of George Washington. At first Max could find nothing out of the ordinary.

"The third stamp from the bottom in the second row, *mon ami*," said Jacques.

There it was. On that single stamp in the entire sheet of 100 a flaw in the plate had caused the ink to print in such a way that the Father of His Country seemed to be sporting a magnificent mustache.

"So that's why they left after—"

"Precisely. They realized that I had detected their secret. Unfortunately, I must return this sheet to Mr. Kincaid. He will send it back to Washington where it will be destroyed. Sad, *n'est ce pas?*"

"Yeah, Jacques. That would certainly be a great find for your own collection."

"That is so, but that is not what makes me sad." Jacques held up a book—Agatha Christie's *The Labors of Hercules*—which had on its jacket a picture of Hercule Poirot, his superb mustaches stretching from one side of the cover to the other. He placed the book next to the sheet of stamps. Max chuckled at the similarity between Hercule Poirot's and George Washington's mustaches.

Jacques passed his hand across his own hairless upper lip. "It is indeed a pity," he sighed, "that even one example of such magnificent facial adornment must pass into oblivion."

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR **ARTHUR PORGES**

TITLE: ***Private Beachhead***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Admiral Garvin was 75 and retired—a frail, white-haired shadow of his former self; but he was still a fighting man, who didn't know when he was licked . . .*

THE TWO MEN MOVED IN SO quickly on Admiral Garvin (retired) and his grandniece that there was no time to resist even if it had been practicable. The little sandy cove, with a formation of jagged rocks to landward, was invisible from either side. It was private property, too, but every beach bum knows that title never extends below the mean high-tide mark, and that people strolling along the edge of the surf are not legally trespassing.

This pair, however, were smooth; they swerved suddenly at right angles, ignored the signs, and loomed over the two sunbathers before the Admiral's frown had completely formed.

"These two'll be good enough," said the older one, who was tall and wiry. "This isn't a bad spot, either—private—and we can't waste any more time looking. The cops may decide to comb the waterfront."

"Look here—" Admiral Garvin began sharply, but the younger man interrupted him.

"Right, Danny," he said, just as if the Admiral hadn't spoken a word. He was darkly handsome, with eyes that smoldered as he eyed Laura in her skimpy swim suit. Obviously, they both discounted Garvin—a frail, white-haired man of 75 was not likely to offer any but token resistance.

"What do you think you're doing?" the Admiral snapped, his voice quite resonant. It had once boomed out crucial orders at the

Battle of the Coral Sea, and still held a vibrant note of command. "This is private property, and you're trespassing."

"Knock it off, Grandpa," the taller one said. "We're the Willard brothers. That answers all the questions—right?"

It did, indeed; the papers had been full of their doings. This was the pair—Dan and Barry Willard—that had taken a bank for $92,000, killing the guard and two customers—one an hysterical woman—in the action. Poison, both of them, with long records of robbery and violence.

Dan was removing his shirt, and Barry followed suit.

"You stay with her," the older one said. "You look just right as her boy friend. I'll sit with Grandpa." He waved a stubby revolver. "With this against his ribs in case he wants to play hero."

He sat next to Admiral Garvin, and covered himself from the waist down with a blanket that had been folded there. His brother, also bare above the middle now, rammed both feet into the sand and said to Laura, "Cover me up—quick!"

She gave the Admiral a single pitiful glance, her lips trembling. He nodded curtly, and she began to pile the white grains over Barry's legs.

"If anybody comes by," Dan said, "I'll be dozing, with a handkerchief over my face, like another old guy might. You better smooch a little to make it look good," he told Larry. "And don't say I never did anything for you—she's quite a dish."

Laura was pale; the Admiral was seething with rage. In exchange for ten minutes of his youth—say, from the Annapolis years, when he was a champion light-heavyweight—he would have let the Devil sip his blood. Ensign Garvin could have broken this weedy punk like a dry stick.

He thought longingly of the three Marines just a few hundred feet down the beach; they were obviously just back from Viet Nam—a trio of husky, battle-toughened veterans. If only he could summon them . . .

Even now he could hear their transistor radio blaring out some horrible music; they had three very pretty girls with them, and had been dancing on the hard sand. Garvin had intended to tell them, in no gentle way, that he didn't come down here to have his eardrums battered. He had his own portable along to pick up a talk on seapower originating at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey.

He picked up his radio, and Dan grinned approval.

"Good thinking, Gramps," he said. "A little music will make everything look even more on the level."

The Admiral twisted the dial, straining his old ears for the sounds

coming from the Marines' transistor. Finally he picked up the same program, winced ostentatiously, and turned to something else. Dan Willard didn't pay much attention, nor did he press with the gun. What could an old geezer in shorts do to a vigorous guy in the prime of life?

Some kids came by along the shore, staying well clear of the *KEEP OUT* signs, and Barry took full advantage of the situation. He grabbed Laura, holding her close. She squeaked and began to whimper.

"Shut up, you," Dan told her. "Give my brother any trouble and we'll kill Grandpa—I mean it. Play along, and nobody gets hurt. A few kisses won't do you any harm."

"Hell, no!" Barry said. "Girls beg me for 'em." And he bent over her again.

Admiral Garvin, his face oddly blank, seemed not to notice; but a vein in his forehead throbbed, and something about his blue eyes, in which two tiny bonfires burned, made Dan say uneasily, "Don't get any ideas, old man. She'll be all right; she's been kissed before. Say," he added wonderingly, "don't tell me that kid's your wife? Why, you old goat, I bet that's it—no wonder he's so mad at us!"

"Let him blow his stack," Barry said. He still held Laura close. "I like this kid. Maybe we should take her with us. She'd make a nice hostage—among other things."

"We'll worry about that after the way's clear," his brother said. "When it's dark, we'll cut out of here and steal a car."

"They'll be looking for two men," Barry said. "With her along, it might make a difference; and even if they get wise, they won't dare shoot. It's worked before."

"We'll see," Dan said, feeling Garvin stiffen beside him. The fool kid didn't have to alarm them so early; he never learned to play it cool. See and grab—that's all he knew.

"Don't mind him," Dan said. "He's just beating his gums for laughs. The girl'll be okay, Grandpa."

"I'm counting on it," the Admiral said, with a steely ring in his voice; and at that moment, from the rocks above and behind, three very tough and able Marines dropped into the scene.

Two of them pinned Dan so hard his breath went out with a whoosh, and the gun slipped from his paralyzed fingers. The third, and biggest, gave Barry a judo chop behind the ear that dropped him as if he'd been poleaxed. It was all over in seconds.

"Good work, men," the Admiral said quietly. "I knew my message would get action in a hurry."

"I don't know how the devil you made that racket in my set," the Sergeant said. "But the Morse code was clear. Say," he added, his voice full of awe. "Aren't you Admiral Garvin, the one they called—?"

"Bulldog Garvin," the old man said, his eyes twinkling. "That's right, son."

The other two Marines also stared. Bulldog Garvin, the guy who stood off three Jap light cruisers with only two destroyers and with all the guts in the world.

Laura was sobbing in the old man's arms; he patted her shining head.

"How'd you reach our set?" the Sergeant repeated. He was looking at Garvin's portable in wonder; it was just a simple radio receiver like his own.

"It's very simple," the old man said. "My grandson's in communications, and he once gave me the tip. If you tune in at 460 kilocycles below another program, that raises a helluva static in it. I fiddled until I matched your station at 1060 kilocycles; then I set mine at 600. I didn't bring the volume up to where these hoods could hear anything, but just jiggled the knob enough to make noises—in Morse—in your set. I figured Marines would know code—and fighting."

He looked at the crestfallen Willard brothers. "Obviously, the United States Marines know both, and damned well."

An impressive story . . . not exactly EQMM's "dish of tea," but we couldn't resist it—or forget it . . . and what a marvelous last sentence!

SEEDS OF TIME

by YOUNGMAN CARTER

YOUNG FOSTER RAN DOWN THE quadrangle, through the cloisters, and then slap into a brick wall. Wallop. Just like that.

He bashed his head, spilled a lot of blood, knocked himself out, and was carted off to the sanatorium where he stayed, pretty dizzy, I suppose, for the best part of a week.

This is the vividest memory of all my schooldays because I was one of the chaps who caused the trouble. It was 12:15 P.M., end of morning lessons, and in those days the fashionable rag was to belt the man ahead of you—preferably someone who was wandering out of a class alone—smartly across the backside and cry, "I'm after you!"

The man thus struck ran like a stag until he found some other person similarly placed, whom he could strike in turn. And so on. It seemed to us wildly funny and the chase led, by unwritten law, to any latrine, an agreed sanctuary.

It was I who hit Foster across his rump and he set off at speed clearly knowing what it was all about, and enjoying the rag. But he ran straight into the wall, and that was the start of it.

I felt pretty guilty because of the accident, though there was no sort of bullying involved. He was quite good at games and might easily have got clear away. I didn't know him at all well although he was in my own form and my own house. Even so, conscience nagged at me and I went down to the sanatorium. It was the beginning of a year-long friendship.

He was a very odd fellow, small and shy, with big dark eyes and the kind of nose that earned him the nickname of Beaky.

The first time I really noticed anything strange about him was during an English lesson under old Mothballs, not a natural schoolmaster but a dull dog who got by with uninspired efficiency. The subject was John Fairclough, the poet, a minor light of the late Eighteenth Century, but one of our more illustrious old boys. Indeed, there is a Fairclough Memorial Fountain in the quad which had just been cleaned and refurbished, for this was his bicentenary year.

Mothballs was talking about the Fairclough biography, reissued and re-edited for the celebration. It is

the standard work, by a man named Ramsden, also a son of the school, and a contemporary of the poet's. The old man was rambling along, almost intoning his remarks, when he perceived that Foster was asleep. Always a fine shot with a piece of chalk, he caught the boy right on the bridge of his nose.

There was some applause for the feat, which he followed up by remarking, "Perhaps, Foster, you would care to give us some of your personal impressions of Fairclough, a few nuts from your squirrel's hoard of information? Some private morsel already in store, since you are clearly not in need of anything which can be gained by paying attention."

Foster was rubbing his nose, which was apparently pretty painful. Everyone was laughing at him; he was hurt and very angry. He stood up.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I can. Fairclough had ginger hair and a stammer. His eyes used to water a lot, particularly when he was being ragged. And . . . and he was a dirty little sneak when he had half the chance. He sneaked on Ramsden once for breaking bounds and got him a birching."

Old Mothballs was taken out of his stride by this, but he came back acidly. Sarcasm was his specialty.

"Indeed, Foster? How remarkable then that Ramsden never mentions this incident, though he gives us a wealth of other information about their schooldays—in this very classroom, my boy, possibly just where you are now idling—and when he speaks of Fairclough's hair he says it was golden as a cornfield."

Foster was so angry that he did not see the trap being baited. He went on, still rubbing his nose, "Fairclough sat in the front, sir, because he was jolly short-sighted. Not in my seat, sir, but where Forsdyke is sitting now. Ramsden sat at the back with the rest of the bullies. He wasn't a friend of Fairclough's at all. He only said that later, years afterwards, when he wanted to make himself out to be important. He was just a common toady. Even the masters didn't like him."

By now Foster had made rather an effect: he spoke as if it had been only the term before, as if he really did know what he was talking about.

Even Mothballs paused before he remarked, "But this is fascinating. I never credited you with possessing either erudition or imagination. Perhaps you can enlighten us all about the incident of the flying pork pie? Was there injustice in those days, Foster?"

He was referring to the one good piece of gossip in the schooldays chapter, a passage which describes how the poet was accused of throwing a pork pie through the Headmaster's dining-room window, thereby disrupting the meal which was

in progress (for it struck an open soup tureen) and bringing down a fearful vengeance on the young poet, who had always protested his innocence.

"Oh, he did it all right," said Foster. "But it was a mistake. He was sweet on the Head's daughter, Dorothea. He was trying to chuck it up into her bedroom, just above. He was always a rotten shot, being so boss-eyed."

We were all listening now. Mothballs was in some danger of losing control of things. Finally he said, "And how are you so certain of all this, Master Foster? Were you a spectral visitor at the scene? Speak up, boy."

Foster lost his nerve. His face went from red to white and he shook himself to a twitch, as if he were a wet dog.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said at last. "I made it all up. It was a . . . a sort of daydream I had. I beg your pardon."

He sat down, or rather he crumpled up as if he'd been winded.

"In that case you will confine your dreaming to the proper place in future. You will also write out Ramsden's excellent chapter, *Our Happiest Days*, in a fair copperplate hand and bring it to me by Wednesday morning. Without fail. It should cure you of the modern tendency to sneer and to denigrate the heroes of old."

That was the end of the incident. It might have been worse, I decided, if poor Foster had not looked so ill at the end. Most of us thought he was going to faint. I gave him a hand with his impot, for we were now regular friends and while we sat at it in the dayroom, I asked him what on earth had come over him.

"I don't know," he said. "He riled me, hitting me on the nose like that. I ought to have shut up about all that tripe of Ramsden's. He was a greasy swine, anyhow."

"How on earth do you know?" I said. "Been swotting it up in some other book?"

"No," he said. "I'm not a swot. It's just that I . . . oh, forget it. I'll tell you some other time. I promise." Then he turned to his lines and muttered, "Carroty-headed little stinker."

I tried again, but he just clammed up, and we finished the job in silence.

The second odd thing happened on a Tuesday in June. I remember it very well because it was the eve of Derby Day, and the math master had been encouraging us to take an interest in simple arithmetic by calculating odds and running an imaginary book in class. He was one of those "with-it" types, very rare in those days.

Just before afternoon school Foster dashed up to me in the changing room where I was oiling a bat. He was very excited.

"I say," he whispered. "Do you

have any money you can lay your hands on? I've just remembered . . . that is, it's just occurred to me . . . we can do ourselves proud. Coronach's the name for tomorrow. We can't go wrong."

Now, even at that tender age, I had heard that once before and pocket money was precious. But Foster was so excited and so persuasive that he whisked my objections away. In all, we scraped £5 together, and in the late afternoon we found old Pudney, the groundsman and cricket pro, at the nets. He was our strictly illegal bookie, though it was an open secret, for the masters also used him freely.

We won £25, a great fortune.

As we were counting our hoard for the sixth time behind the pavilion—it was toward teatime on the Saturday evening and the first eleven were dragging out their game for a draw—I raised the matter which had been bothering me for three days.

"Look here, Foster," I said. "When you first thought of this effort of ours you said, 'I've just remembered,' about Coronach. Then you backed out of it and said, 'It's just occurred to me,' as if someone had given you a tip out of the air or something. Now you jolly well own up and tell me how you knew Coronach would win."

He looked away from me and began to mumble.

"It was just a hunch. I didn't really know. Honestly, I simply guessed it." He brightened. "But it came off, didn't it?"

"Bosh," I said. "You knew about it somehow and you won't admit it. I think it's something to do with that bang on the head you got when you ran into the wall. I think you see visions and you just won't own up to it. Look, if you do, why don't we go into partnership on bets and things and become millionaires? You might even be able to see what things to bone up on for the exams."

He shook his head. "No, old boy," he said. "It isn't a bit like that. That bang on the head was only a silly mistake. I . . . I thought I could . . . well, never mind what I thought. I forgot something, if you must know."

He shut up for a bit as if he'd been about to confide in me and had thought better of it, but then went on, rather red in the face. "Look, about this twenty-five quid. I'd rather you had it. None of it really belongs to me and you could get a motor bike if your old man would stand for it. You keep it. I can't use it, anyway. Pity to waste it. Please hang on to it—well, at least to the end of term. You'll see what I mean then."

I told him bosh and rubbish, but he was so solemn and so insistent that I agreed to hold our loot until the holidays when we'd have our share-out whether he liked it or not.

In a way, a rather miserable way, it was just as well. About three weeks before the end of term Foster

killed himself. He blew himself up one afternoon in one of the science labs, where he had no business anyhow, for it was a half holiday and science wasn't his subject.

There was one hell of an explosion —all the electric circuits in the school went haywire, and there was a hole in the wall of the physics lab you could have driven a cart through, to say nothing of a considerable fire and a mess which stank the place up for days.

But no Foster. Not a rag or a bone, except for what they thought might have been his cap, but could just as well have been anyone's from the condition it was in. We only knew it was Foster because a cleaner actually saw him there mucking about with some wires.

Well, of course there was the most awful row you can imagine. He had an old uncle with whom he lived, who naturally came roaring down from Northumberland where he was supposed to own a great castle (sometimes it was a haunted grange, according to rumor) together with dozens of officials and policemen and journalists.

Nothing came of it, although uncle and his friends poked about in the remains for weeks, even after the school broke up. No one ever discovered what Foster had been doing in the science lab, and no trace of him was ever found. Death by misadventure, they said, and added a lot of tripe about adequate precautions being taken with dangerous equipment.

I was more cut up about it than anyone—certainly more than his uncle who seemed, I thought, curious and excited rather than sad, as any decent guardian ought to have been. He ransacked Foster's locker and took all his kit away, even his schoolbooks, which weren't his anyhow.

This matter-of-fact, clinical attitude made me so angry and so sad that I moped all through the summer holidays and never told anyone about the one bit of Foster that remained, apart from his share of the £25.

This was his folio, a sort of stout cardboard box with flaps which you tied with black tapes, and in which you kept exercise paper and notebooks and letters. We all had one, for they were issued to us, but Foster had managed to wangle two.

The second one was what he called his Secret File and he never showed it to anyone, not even to me.

The day after the explosion I found it right at the back of my own locker and I knew he must have put it there himself just before the accident. I guarded my secret at first with a miserable resentment against fate, which had removed my friend so suddenly; then, as a sentimental relic of my schooldays.

Finally, of course, I forgot all about it.

Foster, having disappeared or disintegrated or been blown to atoms, lived on only as a nine days' wonder to be discussed at Old Boys' gatherings, along with Watson's stupendous six over the chapel right into the quad, Entwhistle's try against Charterhouse, and Fat Potter getting ten of the best in the dining hall for amateur ventriloquism.

It was at one of these gatherings, years after, that the subject inevitably arose again. Old Boys' Day was wet that year and we gathered gloomily in the Big School after lunch, for there was no cricket to watch. In its place was an exhibition of old prints and maps of the school going back over 400 years.

The man standing next to me said, "That's odd. Do you remember poor old Beaky Foster running into the wall of the cloisters and nearly braining himself?"

I agreed that I did and asked what was odd about it. "Look at this map," said the man. "Drawn in 1790, before the library was built. If Foster had been dashing down the quad then, he'd have been able to turn sharp left and would have had a clear run as far as the Head's yard. No cloisters wall in 1790. I always thought Beaky was odd, even before that bang on the head. Never quite with it, you know. Remember that day he lectured Mothballs about Fairclough's red hair?"

The whole thing came back to me so vividly that I felt quite sick with a sudden surge of forgotten emotion.

When I got home I rummaged around for Foster's Secret File, which I found after a long search at the back of a drawer full of theater programs. It must have been 30 years since I had last turned over the contents.

There is a photograph, cut out of a rugger group, of John Pilchard, who, I am very much afraid, may be our next Prime Minister but one, and a complete essay—rather a good one—in a round schoolboy hand, a set piece for prep, signed by the late Charles Winters the dramatist, which must be quite valuable now. Then there are three separate signatures, pinned together, of Sir James Purdee the atomic wizard, who is the biggest name in the business today; and an amateurish snapshot of Wagstaff the composer, aged about fourteen, holding a fiddle.

There is an old-fashioned fountain pen labeled *Lauderdale's Pen, which he gave me when it went wrong*, and this is almost too valuable a trophy to keep these days, when every scrap connected with that immortal hero is a collector's item.

There is a sketch of an airplane, remarkably modern, signed and dated 1926, by Bradley, who is the greatest of living designers but showed no sign of talent at school; and finally a whole collection of signatures and bits of writing, together with a button and a very scruffy school tie, marked as belonging to Adam Makepeace, aged

thirteen, Lower IVB, whom I don't remember and have never heard of since. There is nothing, I regret to say, of my own.

There were about 700 of us there in 1926, and out of those boys Foster had collected souvenirs of our six most famous men, and with one exception, nothing else.

You must admit that wherever he came from or wherever he went to, there was something very odd about Foster. Odd, you know, because he wasn't weird at all—just an ordinary, rather nice, shy chap, who always seemed on the verge of confiding something, but never did.

I often had the feeling he might turn up again, though I don't see how. In the meantime I watch the papers for news of Adam Makepeace, and I advise you all to do the same.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Ashe, Gordon	A TASTE OF TREASURE	Holt, Rinehart	$3.95	10/27
Chaber, M. E.	THE DAY IT RAINED DIAMONDS	Holt, Rhinehart & Winston	3.95	11/17
Cleeve, Brian	VICE ISN'T PRIVATE	Random House	3.95	10/25
Creasey, John	KILL THE TOFF	Walker & Company	3.95	11/2
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Keating, H. R. F.	DEATH OF A FAT GOD	E. P. Dutton	3.95	11/14
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AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Bloch, Robert	THE SCARF	Gold Medal (Orig.)	$.50	10/27
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Ford, Leslie	MURDER COMES TO EDEN	Popular Library	.60	11/1
Fremlin, Celia	THE JEALOUS ONE	Avon Books	.50	11/18
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Titles and Data Supplied by the Publishers.

an exciting novelet by

CORNELL WOOLRICH

It all started with a crazy kind of bet. Could a man with less than one dollar to his name go to a strange city where he doesn't know a soul and without getting a job, without begging on the streets, without getting arrested and thrown in the clink, not only get by for one whole week but also increase his capital? Hewitt took the bet.

And almost before he realized what had happened, Hewitt found himself chained, link by link, to a murder; and everything he did seemed to add another link to the circumstantial evidence against him . . .

A humdinger of a novelet by the one and only Cornell Woolrich, with slambang action every paragraph of the way . . .

ALL IT TAKES IS BRAINS

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

HEWITT GOT OFF THE TRAIN AT the Bonaventure Station with a clean shirt on his back and 75 cents in his pocket. Plenty of people have arrived plenty of places with even less than that, but Hewitt's case was different. He was out to win a bet. A three-cornered argument between himself, two plastered friends, and a New York panhandler was the original cause of it.

"That's all right for you to tell me where to get off," said the panhandler angrily. "I'd like to see you strapped in a strange town where you didn't know anyone; maybe *you* wouldn't put the touch on!"

"I'd clean up," said Hewitt, "and not coffee-and-cake money either. I got brains." He flipped the moocher a quarter.

"You'd cool off," said the panhandler. He shrugged and shuffled off, but the two plastered ones were on the spot with more money than was good for them.

"Here's five hundred says you wouldn't last a week without wiring one of us to straighten you out."

The bet came to two thousand altogether, winner take all.

"No hick towns now, where they don't know what it's all about. And no trying to get work on account of you've got such a cultured

personality. It's got to be a place where you don't know a soul."

Hewitt flipped through the pages of a little memo book. "Montreal, then. It's the only place I haven't got at least one good address for."

So they bought him a one-way ticket, took all his money away except six bits, saw him off on the train, and by the time his head cleared he was already across the line. He thought it over, sober, and liked the idea. It was the first time in five years he'd had anything to do except clip coupons, swill highballs, and hit a little white ball from atop a pony.

"What's the best hotel in town?" he asked a taxi driver.

"The Mount Royal."

Hewitt cracked the door shut. "Thither," he said. Any sap without money can go to a cheap rooming house; it takes a smart guy without money to go to a swell hotel and get away with it.

"Dollar," said the taxi driver.

"Pay the man for me," said Hewitt to the doorman, "and put it on the bill." And try to collect, he added to himself. He sauntered in. "Best in the house," he told the clerk. "Baggage? Oh, that'll be along later—"

One condescending look and the clerk's faltering attempt to secure payment in advance faded away in confusion. Hewitt's tailor had done a good job.

"Send up a menu—and, yes, two tickets to a show." And when he had been shown to his room, he nodded with restrained approval, as though it just about made the grade, nothing more. "Suppose you draw me a bath," he told the bellhop.

"Beg pardon, sir. I'm not very clever with pencil and paper, but it's just inside if you'd care to see it for yourself."

"Bright lad," commented Hewitt. "Remind me that I owe you fifty cents."

Showtime found him on St. Catherine Street, Montreal's Broadway, a pair of second-row orchestras in a little pink envelope in his breast pocket. Now, he said to himself, for a partner. That panhandler in New York could have done the same thing, he kept thinking, instead of bumming dimes; it showed what a lot of difference a few brains made. He was forgetting, though, that the panhandler didn't have on a two-hundred-dollar custom-made suit, nor did he have Hewitt's high polish to see him through; also, that this was only the first night—there were six more to go.

A girl waiting for a bus caught his eye. He stepped over, touched his hat. "How would you like to take in the show at the Palace?"

"I call a cop," she said promptly, turning her head away.

"I don't think he'd have the price on him," he suggested amiably. "Why not let me take you instead? I have the tickets right here." He showed them to her. "There's no

catch, you can leave me right afterwards, but I hate to sit through a show alone. Stranger in town," he explained.

She turned slowly and looked him speculatively in the eye. Next she took in the way he was dressed; lastly her glance fell on the two tickets sticking out of the envelope. On it was penciled, *Hewitt, 909, Mount Royal.*

He could almost read her thoughts: an expensive hotel, expensive clothes, a stranger in town. An American stranger at that, the most helpless of the species the world over. Her slim heels pivoted on the pavement, got in line with his.

"I go wiz," she said soberly. Under the glaring Palace marquee she said, "It is the fonniest thing ever happen to me. Why you do it, I do not know."

"Because, as I told you, I'm all alone in town."

"You do not know anyone at all?"

There was dynamite somewhere deep down under this situation—he knew that already; he decided to keep hammering away until he struck a spark. "Not a soul," he said, handing the tickets to the doorman.

"Poor m'sieu," she answered, going down the aisle ahead of him. Once they sat down, her eyes were on the show, but her mind was busy elsewhere; he could tell that by looking at her. He knew there was a phone call coming sooner or later, but didn't know just when.

It came sooner then he expected. She got up and whispered, "I telephone, eh? To say I am delay, ozzerwise zey wonder why I no come home."

He let her get to the head of the aisle, then got up and followed her. The door of the middle booth was just closing when he showed up; he got into the one next to it and shoved his ear against the partition. No one yet seems to have thought of a sound-proof phone booth, but even so her Canadian-French was hard to unwind, and his Paris days didn't do him much good.

Margot, Perroquet, and Louie all popped out, especially Louie, lots and lots of Louie. She was Margot, Hewitt hazarded, and Louie was working the racket with her. The Perroquet must be where she was going to bring him to be rolled.

That was the best he could do with just three words to work from. The way the word *riche*, which is fortunately the same in any language, kept bouncing around in the next booth, he knew he was on the right track. It wasn't just a call home to brother Louie.

Hewitt reached down in his pocket and touched the three quarters he'd brought with him from New York; that decided him on seeing the thing through. Margot and her Louie were in for a big disappointment. He had nothing to lose—in fact, he even stood a good chance of coming out ahead; he was going to give them a run for their money. Besides, it was al-

ready too late in the evening to seek adventure; why not take what he was offered?

When she came tripping blithely down the aidle again, he was sitting in his seat. "What did Maman say?" he asked her out of the corner of his mouth.

"She say, 'Never mind, *ça fait rien.*' "

"I'll bet she did!" he murmured.

Trudging up the aisle later she inquired solicitously, "You tired?"

"Never before four," he assured her.

"Zen mebbe you care to stop in Le Perroquet five-ten minutes?"

"You took the very words out of my mouth," he assented.

She gave him a startled look. "Huh? You have heard of it before?"

"Never until now. Any place you say, though."

She relaxed again. "We go, then. It is a nice *intime* little place."

They followed St. Catherine Street past the bright-light zone and down toward the French district at its lower end. The Perroquet didn't go in for neon advertising; it was just a doorway in a very dingy-looking house, with a painted sign over it.

"It is all the way up," she said. "You don't mind?"

Hewitt, trailing after her up the endless stairs to the top floor, wondered briefly in just what shape he would be coming down again; but he did not let it worry him too much. Never cross your bridges, he reminded himself, until you come to them. There was another one about burning your bridges behind you, but this wasn't the time to think of it.

Arrived at the top floor rear, she knocked on the door. "Only membaires," she whispered, "like private club. But zey let us in, you will see."

"And my initiation," he concurred, "will follow almost immediately."

The door was not locked, just modestly closed to prying eyes. A waiter opened it and nodded them in. The place was just a big attic, furnished with wooden tables and long parallel benches, a loudspeaker, and a wicket in the wall through which drinks were handed out for distribution.

But it was not quite as bad a trap as Hewitt had expected; he could tell by the curious stares Margot drew as she preceded him to a table that she was not in cahoots with the entire place, that he would have only herself and the Louie fellow to buck if it came to a showdown.

It was an underworld hangout, no doubt about it, but they wouldn't all jump him together, which was something. The feel of a gun on his hip would have been something more, but the only gun he owned was in a desk drawer on Manhattan Island. The squat, aluminum-topped saltcellar on the table for flavoring beer was about the same circum-

ference as a gun muzzle, he calculated, fingering it. By the time Margot had finished giving the waiter the order, it had disappeared from the table into his side pocket. She didn't even miss it; she propped her elbows comfortably on the table and waited for the drinks to come, her catlike eyes agleam.

Louie, it seemed, was not in the place yet; if he had been, he would have been over by now. The idea, Hewitt surmised, was to get him as boiled as possible ahead of time; then when Louie carelessly sauntered in, he would be a pushover for a rolling and maybe a quiet dropping into the St. Lawrence River.

What they failed to take into account was that he happened to be used to a quart of the best Scotch daily, starting in before breakfast; also, that he mightn't be well-heeled enough to get past the first round in a pay-as-you-go joint like the Perroquet. Which is exactly what happened. The problem solved itself automatically when the waiter stood there and coughed after putting down the first two drinks.

"Trow him a feesh," said Margot impatiently. "He doesn't know a gentleman when he sees one."

Hewitt looked up. "How much?"

"Sixty cents," said the waiter.

Hewitt hauled out his three quarters and made him a present of them, then downed his highball without drawing breath. "Stay with yours," he advised her, "or else we'll be walking out again."

Her cat-eyes popped. "We just order anozzer, no?"

Laughing at her bewilderment, he shook his head and pulled out the lining of his pocket to show her. "Only on the house. That was my last six bits."

"Oh, *mon dieu*, wiz zose clothes, you—!" She crumpled like a balloon contacting a pin. "*Sacré!*" she gasped. "Why you let me sink you a *riche* American?"

"I didn't tell you I had money," he grinned.

She started hitting herself on the forehead. "He keel me for zis! He keel me!"

"He? Who?" said Hewitt innocently.

"Never mind!" She grabbed him by the shoulder. "You get out of here, quick! You go now, before—"

Hewitt shook his head doggedly. "I like it here. I'm staying for the evening." He was enjoying himself immensely at her expense.

Seeing it was useless, she jumped up and started for the door. "You wait, I come right back. I go down, wait at ze door. I have to explain somesing to someone." Then as he tried to get up and follow her, she pushed him down again. "No, no, please! He have a bad temper; he is in enough trouble already—I come right back, I tell you! Here—" She tossed him her purse for security.

She had given herself away so thoroughly by now he didn't have the heart to rub it in. She went scurrying out and the door closed

after her. The whole thing had been in English, and every sallow face in the room was turned his way, thinking he had just had a row with her.

He gave her a minute or two of grace, but he was dying to get a look at this Louie guy's ugly phiz when he heard the payoff, and maybe save her from being cuffed around a little; so he got up and went after her, shoving her purse in his pocket. The whole room grew expectantly silent.

Getting to the door he collided with an edge of one of the tables, and the aluminum salt shaker in his pocket gave out a loud clunk as it struck a pitcher of beer. Every eye was instantly on that bulge in his coat pocket and knowing looks were exchanged.

He closed the door after him and began to tiptoe down the four flights of stairs toward the street, hoping to creep up on the pair without their seeing him.

There was a subdued drone coming from somewhere down near the entrance that might be two voices in excited French conversation; it was hard to tell this far up. Below the third floor it grew louder, not only because he was getting nearer but because the voices were rising.

He recognized Margot's whine, pleading desperately with someone. It was Louie, all right; she must have stopped him on his way up, and he wasn't taking it handsomely, judging by the scuffling and face-slapping that began to be audible. He was taking it out on his partner because he thought she had double-crossed him.

"Why, the rat!" exclaimed Hewitt aloud.

He quit tiptoeing and began to lope down a few steps at a time. Behind him, he was dimly aware, the door of the Perroquet had opened, and its denizens were edging cautiously forward, trying to peer down the long, dim stairwell.

Margot screamed something in French, than there were two thunderous explosions that shook the whole rickety house, and a moment later he had flung around the last turn in the stairs and saw her lying spreadeagled halfway down the last flight. A thin layer of smoke hovered over her like a ghostly blanket.

The street entrance showed wide open—and empty. No one could have got out that quickly. Hewitt couldn't have stopped if he had wanted to. He simply cleared her body with a crablike sidewise jump, and went past it under his own momentum. But he didn't see the gun lying two steps below her.

His foot shot out on it like a squat black skate; he missed all the rest of the steps, did a complete forward somersault without managing to break his neck somehow, and went tumbling groggily out into the open, skinning his palms and jarring his jaw on the sidewalk.

Behind him he was conscious of a ratlike scurrying toward the back of the house and the groan of a

warped basement door somewhere under the stairs. Before him a helmeted bobby was racing up from the opposite corner, banging his club hollowly against each metal lamppost as he passed it. The sound went wailing up and down St. Catherine Street.

Hewitt didn't wait to fit words to the tune; the thing to do was to get Louie before he had time to burrow his way out of that basement. He picked himself up, turned, and darted inside again. The patrolman shouted something and the stone facing of the doorway gave a funny click, as though a bullet had just bounced off it, but Hewitt wasn't there any more.

He was making tracks for the back of the hallway, with just a glance up the stairs. The way Margot was still lying there head down in the middle of all the Perroquet apaches, he knew she must be beyond all help. She'd been a gyp, but she'd been a cute little devil at that; his thumbs were flexing in and out, dying to get around that Louie's throat.

The door he'd heard close was the one behind the stairs, a low shoulder-high thing; it gave the same grunt a second time when he opened it himself. The china knob came off whole in his hand; a puff of cold, musty air hit him in the face. There was a jabbering from the stairs above, and the cop's shoes came slapping back toward where he was.

" 'Alt!" he roared, at the sight of Hewitt's shadow on the wall before him. There was a cannon boom that seemed to lift the house off its foundations, and the lobe of Hewitt's ear stung and turned wet.

"Who ya firing at?" he yelped angrily, and threw the loose doorknob with all his might. It missed the cop but caught the dim light bulb screwed into the wall; there was a pop, a tinkle, and everything went pitch-black.

Hewitt heard the cop's head go slamming into the dead-end wall that bounded the hall, and the "Oof!" as all the air left his body. He didn't wait to hand him the smelling salts; if he'd been shot at in the light, he hated to think what would happen to him in the dark.

He ducked through the low cellar opening, pulled the door after him, and massaged it frantically all up and down its rotted edges, collecting splinters. But there was a bolt near the bottom and he shot it home, stooping to do so. Before he could straighten up again there was strange music sighing just over his head, like the low whine of a flexible saw, and as he reared something slapped him lightly back and forth between the eyes.

He froze, then caught at it, felt the handle of a swaying knife imbedded in the panel. So Louie was a pretty good shot, was he? Could aim by ear as well as by sight? Pretty good, but not quite good enough this time. He'd had a gun

and he'd had a knife, and now he had nothing left—unless he was a walking arsenal—and was going to get the stuffing kicked out of him!

Hewitt wrenched the knife out of the door, and from the other side of it there was a muffled: "Oh, you would, would you!" and another T.N.T. blast that sent little flying pieces of wood into his face.

"Oh, ideal spot to be in!" Hewitt intoned silently. Bullets in the face and flying knives in the back! He flung himself flat on the doorway landing, grasped the knife hilt between his teeth, and began to crawl on his stomach down the brick cellar stairs like a snake.

The door behind him was anything but quiet, what with pounding of fists, kicking of feet, and heaving of shoulders; but it would hold a minute or two longer, since they did not know where the bolt was to shoot it away.

But the cellar below him was tensely silent, with Louie standing waiting in it somewhere. For all he knew Hewitt was bleeding to death just inside the door, but he was afraid to go over and find out, afraid of bullets coming through the door. Hewitt writhed down on his palms and kneecaps.

"Sounds like we got 'im," a voice said outside the door. Louie thought so too. Louie was going to find out differently in just about a half minute.

The stairs stopped and the contorted Hewitt found himself on level cellar floor at last. Still couldn't see a thing; the knife had come in a straight line behind him, though, and there hadn't been a sound since, so Louie must still be standing where he had thrown it.

Forty years of accumulated dust was packing Hewitt's nostrils, and he began to feel a sneeze coming on. He put one paw out before him to creep a little farther onward and instead of landing on cold flooring it landed on warm shoe leather. Louie was standing right over him, he had almost crawled between his legs!

Louie must have felt the reptilian touch, as of something slithering across his shoetops. There was a scream of terror from somewhere over Hewitt's head, the foot jerked spasmodically, and Hewitt got a kick in the jaw that made him see stars. The knife clattered out of his mouth, along with little grits of tooth enamel. He grabbed instinctively for the retreating leg, hooked it, then his hold weakened as the sneeze finished what the kick had done, and he lost the leg again.

At the same instant the heroic door finally split up into black and white ribbons, white from the flashlights playing on the other side of it, and the cops came through. They came through impulsively, to say the least, not having expected the door to give way just when it did.

The foremost one tried to stop short on the landing, but was

crowded off by the two at his heels, and went ricocheting down to the bottom. His mates came down on top of him, and the three of them were in a welter of arms, legs, and winking torches that threw big white polka dots all over the walls.

There was a faint crash of tin, that had nothing to do with them, from an outlying section of the cellar, and Hewitt picked himself up and ran toward it, bent double. He found an opening in the subdividing wall by sheer luck, ducked through it, and instantly was moiling up a crumbling incline of rolling, treacherous coal, that kept going higher as he went along.

The ceiling closed down on him, and a greasy tin chute, impossible to scale, reared before him. But just over it the open grate through which coal was dumped into the house was within arm's reach, and the shoved-aside lid showed him how Louie had made his getaway just now.

Hewitt caught hold of the rim from below, chinned himself until his head was above ground level, then agonizingly drew his jackknived form up after him, knees pressed up to his chest. He came up like a sooty mermaid into the open air.

They were shooting again down in the cellar; they seemed to do nothing but shoot, without ever hitting anything. He brought his feet up over the edge, straightened up on them, sucked in air, and slyly edged the heavy lid of the coal hole back in place with one foot. Then he started going someplace else with great determination, looking around him as he went.

He had come out, not on St. Catherine, but one street over; there seemed to be but a single cellar under the two houses, placed back to back. Which was a fine arrangement, he felt, one that ought to be encouraged. There was no sign of Louie, and for the first time in fifteen minutes he was glad of that. He didn't feel equal to taking him on just then.

The hum of the crowd gathered in front of the Perroquet carried clearly over the quiet rooftops from St. Catherine, so he turned down the other way at the first side street he came to. The tip of his ear burned like a blister from the cop's bullet, and his jaw, which had been frozen ever since the kick, slowly came to life again with a pleasant throb and ache. He put his handkerchief to his face and it came away black with coal dust.

He had to get off the streets pronto; his whole appearance was a dead giveaway, and it was he they were after, not Louie; but he didn't know which way to turn, didn't even know how to get back to the Mount Royal. It was the bet that kept him going, now that he had come this far.

"You'd cool off," the panhandler had said.

"I'd stay out of jail," he'd bragged.

"If you get locked up," his friends had warned, "that means being housed and fed at the city's expense, and we win the dough."

Even so, if it had meant just giving himself up, explaining his connection with the affair, then walking out again, he would have chanced it; but he had about as much chance of clearing himself as he had of taking a trip to the moon. He was chained to the murder link by link, and every step he had taken since eight thirty had added another link. Hurrying along, hugging the walls of houses, he reviewed the whole mess in his mind.

He'd picked her up at a bus stop, with people standing all around; he'd even seen them grinning about it; they'd remember when the time came. The doorman at the theater, the usher, they'd remember too; that part of it would all come out.

Next, the Perroquet—the whole bunch there had thought they'd seen it this way: first, the quarrel at the table in English, then the girl jumping up and running away from him, then his going after her. Worst of all, the way the bulge in his pocket, that was really a salt shaker, had bumped the corner of a table and sung out. What chance had he of proving it wasn't the gun found lying two steps below her a minute later?

Lastly, a minute after he dove down the stairwell, she screamed something up it in French, then two shots rang out. They got down just in time to see her lying there and him doubling back from the street doorway to dive into the cellar.

The police had their own little links to go by from that point on. One of them had a good look at him as he sprawled out the doorway for a minute, then plunged back inside. Chased to the back of the hallway, he threw something at the light and smashed it (or so the cops would swear) to make good his escape. Holed up in the cellar, he tried to knife them through the door (again they'd swear this, and under oath). Who but a murderer would go that far resisting arrest?

And the whole crew, cops and apaches alike, had come so close to seeing the thing done under their very eyes that, human nature being what it is, someone would eventually pop up and swear he *did* see it—and that it was Hewitt he saw do it.

Meantime Louie, who was just one step ahead through the whole chase, hadn't been seen by a soul, either outside or inside the house. It was like a ghost committing a murder, and passing the buck to the living.

Hewitt, hustling along the byways of midnight Montreal, every shadow an enemy, realized that he himself hadn't seen Louie at any time, not once from beginning to end. He'd come upon the girl's

body; he'd heard a slithering down the hallway; he'd heard a cellar door squeak closed; he'd heard a knife whistle across the top of his head; he'd put his hand down on somebody's shoe, and an unidentified voice had screamed in the darkness. Just that, and nothing more—not a look at his face, not even a shadow on a wall as the cop had seen in his own case. And no one, not a living soul, to back him up in the few disembodied sounds that were all he had for evidence. For all he knew there wasn't any Louie.

But there *had* to be; he clung to that idea as his only hope. Without it he was sunk. She'd called someone named Louie from a telephone booth; she'd run downstairs from the Perroquet to head him off, Hewitt himself had grabbed his leg in the cellar, only to lose it again. There *was* a Louie, and Hewitt had to find him (in a town where he didn't know one street from the other) to save his own neck! Nice, sweet, soft job!

If he once got hold of Louie, then the maze would begin to unravel. There were things like prints on the knife and gun, where they had been bought, and who had bought them, that would come to his help, loosen the chain of circumstantial evidence against him; but until he had Louie there was no use counting on those things—there was too much that outweighed them. Once the police got their mitts on Hewitt, it was goodbye to him—he'd never have a chance of clearing himself. He had to stay on the loose until he had produced the real killer or he was done for.

He didn't even have a nickel left, couldn't even get off the streets and lie low anywhere, unless he went back to the Mount Royal, and to do that was like inviting arrest. He thought of the panhandler in New York briefly and muttered, "Maybe you were right, buddy, maybe you were right."

A police car came cutting around the corner just ahead and went shooting down the same narrow street he was following, a movable headlight on it sweeping the doorways from side to side. He shrank back into the shadows; it had just missed him by inches—if he'd been a block farther on it would have caught him from behind!

The car cut out again at the next corner and disappeared. They were looking for him all right, zigzagging all over town!

That decided him. It was the lesser of two evils—the Mount Royal or being snatched up on the streets. He had a chance of getting away with it at that, if he didn't stay there too long. They mightn't have traced him to the Mount Royal yet; he didn't see how they could have. Eventually they would, probably before morning. If he was going there at all, the sooner he went, the safer it would be; the longer he delayed, the riskier.

First he had to find out where he

was. Since this street had already been gone over once, it was better than trying a new one. He stayed on it. It was dead; there wasn't anyone on it he could ask. A janitor emptying ashes had gone inside again before he could catch up to him. At the next crossing a cop, evidently going off duty, nearly bumped into him. He was so scared for a minute that he instinctively did the natural thing.

"'Scuse me, lost my bearings. Where's the Mount Royal?" The whole force couldn't have heard about it at the same time; this was blocks away from the Perroquet.

The cop touched his helmet politely, as per regulations. He told him, adding it was too far to try to walk. Before Hewitt knew what had happened he had thrown up his arm and signaled something or someone in the distance.

Hewitt steadied himself by putting out his hand to the wall; he kept his face in the shadow, not knowing if there was still soot on it. "Here I go!" he thought. A minute later a taxi came tearing up and slurred to a stop beside them.

"Take this gentleman to the Mount Royal," instructed the cop, and closed the door after him. "Good night," he added.

Hewitt was too limp to answer. He slipped down the back seat cushion to his shoulder blades, let himself be carried away like a patient on a stretcher, his tongue hanging out.

He'd recovered by the time they got near the hotel. "Take the back entrance," he ordered the driver. He knew just what he was going to do. It was crazy to go up to 909 and just sit there waiting for them to come and get him. He'd go in through the tavern at the rear, breeze past the reception desk, borrow twenty-five or so on his bill, walk out the front way, and lose himself.

The cab drew up and the driver gave him a shrewd look.

"Just hold it," Hewitt said negligently. "Be right with you."

He might as well lose the cab too while he was about it, he figured, otherwise it would provide another of those damned connecting links to wherever it was he went from here. He flung into the smoke-filled taproom, ordered half ale and half beer, and stepped back to peer through the amber-glassed swinging doors that commanded the lobby.

The hotel detective stood out like a sore thumb, from the mere fact that he was studiously minding his own business with newspaper and cigar. The hell with him, thought Hewitt impatiently; he wouldn't have known a fugitive from justice if one came up and shook hands with him. But there were two other men chatting across the desk with the clerk. Were they guests or were they plainclothesmen?

"'Arf and 'arf," said the bartender behind him.

The radio was bleating: "—and

even in our own Montreal we're not free from blah-blah-blah. A young woman named Margot Baptiste was atrociously murdered less than an hour ago by an American gangster who picked her up on St. Catherine Street. The man is still at large, but his arrest is expected momentarily.

"And don't forget, ladies and gentlemen, the *Eagle*, through whose courtesy these news flashes are being sent to you, is still offering its one-thousand-dollar Civic Virtue Law Enforcement Reward for the private citizen who brings us information leading to the arrest of any and all such blah-blah-blah. This offer does not extend to the police, of course; simply to private individuals.

"We believe the whole community should cooperate. Remember, the *Eagle's* motto is 'Keep Kanada Klean from Krime.' So get busy, you upright, law-abiding citizens and amateur sleuths, and maybe you'll win a thousand dollars—"

"Yes, maybe," sneered a barfly somewhere behind Hewitt. "It's just a publicity stunt. I bet if you did go to them with any information, they'd find a way of getting out of paying."

"How can you tell?" objected a second one, "unless you go there and try it? And nobody's been able to try it yet, because the police always get the Johnny first—"

" 'Arf and 'arf," pleaded the bartender. Hewitt kept his back turned. Weren't those two guys ever going to clear away from that desk out there?

"And now," droned the air waves, "to help you win that thousand, here's a description of this latest enemy of society, as furnished by the police. Listen carefully. Height, six feet one. Light-brown hair. Blue eyes. Weight about medium. Talks with an American accent, of course, and at the time of the murder was well-dressed; in fact, unusually so. Dark-blue suit, white shirt, blue four-in-hand—"

Hewitt's breath was steaming the glass in front of him, it was coming so hot.

"So if you see or hear of anyone answering to that description—but remember, don't just telephone in, you must call at the *Eagle* office personally and bring proof to substantiate your report."

" 'Arf and 'arf," whined the bartender wearily.

Hewitt barged out through the flap doors. He didn't actually run, but it was the quickest time anyone had ever made through that dignified lobby. He put a whole row of columns between himself and the desk, getting to the front entrance; but still there was a big open space between each column, and he had to pass close enough to the hotel dick to have been able to touch him.

"Hi, Mac," he saluted him loudly, and was gone. They were almost always called Mac anyway, and it

carried over to the two at the desk, which was all that mattered.

He breezed out through the front entrance, as penniless as when he'd gone in, but still in circulation at least; and immediately two loving arms were twined around him in a bear hug. The taxi driver was stocky, and not in a trifling mood.

"No yer don't, no yer don't. I kinder thought so! In one way, out the other, eh? Well, I've 'ad that tried on me before, me fine gent! Now do I get paid, or do I 'oller for the police?"

"You get paid," agreed Hewitt unhesitatingly. "Only I'm not through yet. First you take me where I'm going—" And, with his eye on the hotel entrance, he wondered desperately where he *was* going. "Now—er—I have it written down right here," he stalled. "Get in first and let's get going, until I can find it."

He closed the door after him and the driver started off. "Yer better find it before we get past the first copper, or you're going to the station-house," he glowered.

Hewitt, sweating blood, went through the fake of tapping his pockets all over, the driver's jaundiced eye on him in the mirror—and suddenly he found it! Pulled it out—out of nowhere! Through all the crawling on the cellar floor, through all the flight through darkness, it had miraculously stayed with him, deep in the capacious inner pocket of his coat—the envelope-sized flat purse that dead Margot had given him to hold for her when she went downstairs to meet her doom.

He opened it, shaking like gelatine. A little change, some face powder, a post card from a girl friend.

"Got it or 'aven't yer?" asked the driver impatiently.

"Got it!" said Hewitt, reading from the post card. "Such-and-such St. Antoine Street."

"Bad neighborhood, that," said the driver morosely. "Don't try any of your—"

The cab could hardly get into it, it was such a narrow lane. And the problem of getting away from the driver had only been postponed a while longer, not solved. There wasn't enough in the purse to pay what Hewitt now owed him.

Nor was hanging around this St. Antoine address any safer than the hotel had been, for his purposes. Since the police had established her identity almost at once, they must have been here long ago to check up on her. They might still be here questioning her people, if she had any. Even if they'd gone by now, her people would turn him in without compunction, if they could get their hands on him, thinking he'd killed her.

But maybe she'd lived alone; a bad little egg, rolling people at bars, she wasn't likely to stick close to the bosom of her family.

He took the card out again and

scanned it. Written French wasn't as tough to make out as the spoken kind. "I saw your sister yesterday," he spelled out. "They want you to come home. I didn't tell them where you were—"

So she did live alone, and her people wouldn't be able to tell the police where. It might be days before they found out for themselves; people like this weren't the kind to come forward of their own accord with any helpful information. They were on the other side of the fence.

Anyway, it would be better to hide up there for tonight than to keep running around in the open like a hare; it was taking a chance, and a big one, but at least he'd be behind walls and not at the mercy of the first cop who set eyes on him.

First, though, he had to get rid of this gas-buggy Old Man of the Sea whom, apparently, he could not shake off.

He couldn't pay him and he couldn't run out on him; the fellow would tell where he'd brought him to. Staring up at the dead, unlighted windows of the dingy flat, he got an idea—why not keep the cabbie with him as a house guest? In fact, it was the only way out, except for throttling him on the spot.

The driver, meanwhile, was drumming his fingers menacingly on the side of the cab.

"How about it?" he growled. "This 'ere's the number you want, or are you thinking of setting up light 'ousekeeping in me machine?"

Hewitt got out and jerked his thumb. "The money's upstairs. Come up with me and you'll get everything that's coming to you. I'm too tired to chase down again tonight."

The man was beside him in a minute, fists forming. "Into an 'ole like that? Oh, no, I've 'ad that 'appen to me before, too! Now then!"

Hewitt stuck his hand into his coat pocket and suddenly thrust the head of the salt shaker against the driver's hip. "Now then is right. In you go, or your cab's a widow!"

They marched into the doorway shoulder to shoulder.

"Put your paws down," ordered Hewitt. "This is no holdup—it's an invitation to rest a while. Light a match."

There wasn't even a gas jet burning in the dump. He didn't know what floor it was on, which door it was. The match flare revealed a row of rust-flaked iron letter boxes. Some of them had names on them, three were without any. One of the three was on the first floor.

"Light another and keep moving," said Hewitt, jogging his captive with the salt shaker. "Stand there with your face up against it." He stepped back out of reach, and felt in Margot's purse for the key. No key was in it. "Turn the knob," he said gruffly, to hide the panic in his voice.

The driver turned it, and the door was locked.

"Stick your fingers up and feel along the top."

Something fell to the bare floor and he let out a sigh.

"All right, let yourself in."

The driver did so, then quavered, "I ain't got no money, guv'nor—"

"Neither have I," snapped Hewitt, "so we're going to keep each other company."

"Then you ain't gonter—?"

"No, I ain't gonter murder you. Go on, don't stand here in the hall all night!"

The key rattled in the lock like a pair of dice, the man was shaking so. He pushed the door open and edged in. Hewitt took the key out, stepped in after him, closed and locked the door, and they were in pitch-darkness.

"Don't move now, I'm covering you. Light another match."

A sort of half light came on, and Hewitt made out a gas jet on the wall, but it was sealed with lead. There was a candle stuck into a bottle on the table. One hand still in his pocket, Hewitt picked it up with the other, held it pointed toward the match. As he did so, liquid wax dripped out of the hollow around the wick. A drop of it touched his hand, still warm.

Hewitt tensed, set the lighted candle down with a crash that nearly split the bottle, and his eyes shot around the four sides of the room like those of an animal caught in a trap. The driver was too thoroughly cowed by now to take advantage of it. Or too slow.

A bed, a broken chair, a closed window too dirty to see through, met Hewitt's whirling glance—nothing else.

But there were two doors facing them, close together, both closed. He lowered his voice.

"Get over to one side of that first one," he told the gray-faced driver, "close up against the wall. Reach out and yank it all the way open, as far as it'll go."

Hewitt stayed where he was. It was no use trying to get out now anyway; if there were cops behind either one of those doors, it was too late—they had him. But the soft candle grease could also mean they'd been here just now and gone away again.

The driver stretched out his arm full length, as though he were going to touch a live wire, and brought the door slamming around toward him. A water closet stood revealed.

"Move over and open the next one," muttered Hewitt. "Don't get in front of it, either." He kept twitching in funny places, not with fright, but because he was keyed up.

The driver edged along the wall, reached for the second knob, and gave it a jerk. The door flopped back and this time showed a row of the dead Margot's clothes.

The letdown was terrific. The driver could have jumped him half

a dozen times if he'd only had the sense to realize it.

Hewitt took a good look, then said, "Close it again—close it tight. Now go over in the corner and sit down on the floor. If you move I'll shoot you full of holes."

The driver was in no mood to be skeptical; he did as he was told with great haste, then collapsed into a shivering cross-legged squat.

Hewitt went over to the bed, pulled all the musty covers off it, took his hand off the salt shaker long enough to tear one of the sheets into strips. The driver grimaced at the bondage he saw being prepared for him.

Hewitt tore a split in the mattress along one of the seams, pulled out handfuls of gray cotton batting, and dumped them on the floor. The driver began to perspire copiously, as the thought that he was in the power of a maniac crossed his mind for the first time.

Hewitt stepped into the water closet, felt along the rusty, mildewed drainpipes, and began to tug at them with one foot up against the wall as a lever.

A whole section of one came off in his hand with a bang, and he came out all wet, but holding it like a bludgeon. The driver's terror was rapidly nearing the point of hysteria. Hewitt wrapped a piece of sheeting around the pipe, making a blackjack of it. Then he said, "Light a match and pass it to me."

When the driver saw him deliberately drop it into the little mound of cotton batting and shove the whole heap up against the closed door with his foot, the limit of his endurance had been reached.

"Ow!" he gibbered. "What're you gonter do, burn me alive in 'ere?"

"Quiet!" rasped Hewitt, and moved up alongside the door, his back pressed to the wall.

The mattress stuffing began to smolder. Thick smoke crept up to the crack of the closet door and found the keyhole. The air began to grow hazy. Hewitt and the driver could hardly see each other any more. The candle on the table guttered and threatened to go out.

Somebody coughed chokingly, but not in the room itself. A minute more and the door shot open, partially concealing Hewitt. Margot's dresses began to stir. A revolver came through them first, at waist-level, and a man stepped out after it.

He was short, but muscular as an ape, and as ugly as one. He was half blinded and perspiration was pouring out from under his beetling black brows. He came a step farther, saw the driver huddled in the corner. The gun started to turn that way.

Hewitt brought the piece of lead pipe down on the back of his head with a springy little fillip. The thug went down flat on his face, and stayed there, stunned. It only took him a minute to come to, but when he did he found himself sitting on

the broken chair, his arms securely fastened behind him with strips of bedding. Hewitt had his gun, and he was laboriously writing out something with a pencil stub on a piece of paper on the table.

"But if you saw 'im in there the first time I opened the door," the driver was saying, "why did you close it again and go to all the trouble to bring 'im out?"

"I didn't see him," Hewitt answered, "but I've got good eyes. I saw the muzzle of his gun peering between those dresses, covering my belly. One move and I'd have been in two pieces. He must have had another gun hidden away here, and we interrupted him when he came back to get it."

"Well, then," protested the driver, who liked things explained to him, "why didn't you just let fly at 'im through the door, instead of choking a person 'arf to—?"

"This may work sprinkled on the tail of a bird," Hewitt grinned, taking the salt shaker out of his pocket and placing it on the table, "but I don't think it would have stopped big, bad Louie."

" 'Oly mackerel!" gasped the driver. "And 'ere I've been shaking in me boots 'arf the night!"

"That's what I want to get at," said Hewitt. "How much do you think would repay you for the trials and tribulations you've been through?"

The driver wiped his nose coyly, first on one side, then the other. "Oh, I dunno. It's a real pleasure 'elping a gent like you. Say, ten dollars."

"Just sign this," Hewitt told him. "It's an agreement to split with me fifty-fifty on any money I can put you in the way of collecting. Your share will be five hundred. Steady," he added, supporting the reeling driver by an elbow, "I want the signature legible. Now help me lug this bozo out to your cab. We're going down to see the Managing Editor of the *Eagle*."

Just 24 hours after he had left for Montreal, Hewitt's two friends back in New York got a Special Delivery letter from him:

"Enclosing money order for $1500. I increased my six-bit capital two thousandfold since yesterday. You can add it to the two thousand coming to me from you two birds. It seems I was wanted by the police for a while last night, so a taxi driver friend of mine collected a thousand for turning me over to one of the dailies here. Then I got a thousand myself for turning in a guy named Louie, who had been wanted for a long time. The Managing Editor, at last reports, is having a nervous breakdown in a sanitra um. I won't be back for a while, as I am to be chief state's witness when the trial comes up, but meanwhile am staying at the best hotel in town at the city's expense. Was I right? All it takes is brains."

THE PROBLEM SOLVER AND THE DEFECTOR

by CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

THE WAIL OF THE SIREN DIED away as the police car pulled onto the shoulder of the superhighway and slammed to a stop. Hodge, the C.I.A. man, slid out of the car and held open the door.

Just ahead, the traffic police, outlined by the late afternoon sun, waved on the interminable stream of motorists. By the roadside was a ripped guard rail where twin streaks through the dirt and grass swerved off toward the granite face of a steep bank. Near the bank an ambulance was parked, and men were working purposefully at the wreck of a smashed automobile.

Hodge glanced around as his companion, a tall well-built man with intent gray eyes, followed him out of the police car. Hodge's glance was worried, since on this man, Richard Verner, rested his hopes of retrieving a disastrous day. Verner was a heuristician—his business was to take the facts of the most baffling problem, put them together, and find the only possible solution. And Hodge, like the men working around the wrecked car, was thoroughly baffled.

"Several hours ago," Hodge had explained to Verner, "an official of an East European embassy, a man I'd met at a New Year's party, called me from a roadside phone booth. He said he wanted political asylum, and to prove his earnestness he was bringing along a key diagram of 'Shower,' a foreign missile we're anxious to learn about. He said he had hidden this vital piece of paper in his car.

"While he was talking to us on the phone, he got nervous about a black sedan he saw cruising past, said something about a 'death squad,' hung up, and left the booth. He'd already described his own car, and we'd suggested the best road, so we thought we could get to him. Incidentally, we'd also notified the State Police, the State Department, and the F.B.I. But before any of us could reach him, he was run off the road and killed."

Verner shook his head. "And the vital diagram?"

"That's the problem. On the phone he'd said, 'I am a good amateur mechanic. I have this paper well hidden.' We're sure no one else had time to search that car for it. But we can't find the piece of paper. The worst of it is, we've learned that high officials of the man's embassy are burning up the roads to get here. We can't prove

he'd already changed sides. They'll impound his property—they have the legal right to do it. So *we've simply got to find that piece of paper.*"

The two men watched the mechanics work feverishly on the wrecked car. Sections of trim were unscrewed, hollow knobs and the underside of chrome strips were examined, and the fabric was carefully cut away. Large canvas sheets had been staked down, and parts of the car were spread over the sheets in orderly rows.

But the hiding place still eluded them.

Verner glanced at the canvas sheets and thoughtfully considered the spread-out contents of the trunk compartment—jack, tire iron, suitcase, brief case, several paperback novels, a worn car-repair manual, a red two-gallon gas can, and a large gray-enameled metal chest open to show shiny tools of all kinds.

"What about those things?" Verner asked.

Hodge shrugged. "They've all been searched. The suitcase lining has been pulled out, the handle slit, the clothes examined. The books have all been carefully leafed through and the covers cut open. The tool kit has been checked for a false bottom or double layers. The tool handles have been drilled through, to be sure there's no hollow where a tightly rolled piece of paper could have been hidden. We didn't find anything—not a sign or trace of the blasted thing."

"How about the man's body?"

"The doctors say the paper isn't there, either."

Verner nodded, and watched the mechanics, who had the rear end of the car hoisted up and were now draining the gas tank. Soon they had the tank out and cut open. One mechanic crawled under the car to look at the differential. Around the car there was unceasing activity—but the diagram remained hidden.

Hodge shook his head, and glanced uneasily at his watch. The minutes were slipping past quickly—too quickly.

Soon the rear end of the car was up on blocks, while at the front the engine was being lifted out.

Hodge said exasperatedly, "We've already looked in every conceivable hiding place. Now we're looking in places that are inconceivable."

Verner nodded sympathetically.

Hodge said, "Aren't you going to carry out an investigation?"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

Hodge frowned, but said nothing.

The minutes ticked steadily by.

At last the car was spread out like a child's mechanical toy, and the men who'd been working at it stood around helplessly.

Verner suddenly seemed to relax. "Hodge, what's harder than finding a needle in a haystack?"

Hodge looked blank. "What's that?"

"It's even harder," said Verner,

"to find a *particular piece of hay* hidden in a haystack."

Hodge said shortly, "Riddles won't help us." He looked ready to say more, but just then a mechanic walked over, frowning.

"That paper isn't there—not a sign of it," the mechanic reported.

"It's *got* to be there," Hodge exclaimed.

"It isn't. You can reduce that car to powder and you won't find any piece of paper."

Hodge stood still for a long moment, then drew a deep breath and glanced at Verner. "Your job is to solve problems. All right, let's see you solve this one."

Without hesitation Verner walked past the car to the canvas sheets where the contents of the trunk compartment were spread out. He picked up the worn, grease-smeared repair manual. He leafed past pages of text, past photographs and diagrams of engines, transmissions, power-steering units, the connections of vacuum lines in power brakes, and then he paused to study a worn-looking diagram.

He handed the book to the mechanic. "What part of a car is this?"

The mechanic frowned at the grease-smeared page, turned the book around, looked at it closely, then shook his head. "No part I ever saw before."

Verner handed the book to Hodge, who examined it in astonishment, then pressed back the pages. "Evidently he cut out the original page, trimmed the diagram to fit the size of the manual, glued it in so close to the binding that it's hard to see the glued edge, then made it look like one more worn, grease-smeared page."

Hodge carefully worked the diagram out and slipped it into an inside pocket. He motioned the mechanics to look busy, and glanced at Verner.

"How did you know?"

"Once we were sure it wasn't in the car itself, I asked myself: Where would a diagram be *least noticeable?* And the answer is: Obviously among *other* diagrams."

Hodge nodded slowly. "And the only place where there were other diagrams was in the car-repair manual. We must have looked right at it, but we were so sure it was just another car diagram that we didn't recognize it."

The two men turned as, from the road, they heard a screech of brakes, and a burly well-dressed man, his face pale with mingled fear and anger, loudly claimed diplomatic immunity and thrust past the police.

Hodge smiled and said quietly, "His problem is a little harder than finding a particular piece of hay hidden in a haystack."

Verner watched the East European diplomat and his staff shove their way toward the wrecked car.

"Yes," said Verner. "It's even more difficult to hunt through a haystack for something that isn't there."

magazine BOX SCORE for 1965

In editing his fourth volume of the BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR (published in July 1966 by E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.) Anthony Boucher selected 17 stories, of which 15 appeared in magazines (and of these 15 best, 6 were chosen from *EQMM*). Mr. Boucher's Honor Roll listed 100 stories from magazines and 9 stories from books. Here is the box score for the 100 best detective-crime-mystery stories published in all American magazines during 1965:

name of magazine	*Honor Roll stories*	*percentage*
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine	55	55%
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine	15	15%
The Saint Mystery Magazine	10	10%
Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine	4	4%
Argosy	2	2%
Playboy	2	2%
Saturday Evening Post	2	2%
Atlantic	1	1%
Cavalier	1	1%
Cosmopolitan	1	1%
Diners' Club Magazine	1	1%
Gamma	1	1%
Horror	1	1%
Mademoiselle	1	1%
MD	1	1%
Ladies' Home Journal	1	1%
Rogue	1	1%

The percentages above indicate that *EQMM* published nearly 4 times as many distinguished new mystery stories as our nearest competitor, and nearly twice as many as our 3 nearest competitors put together—and *EQMM's* 55 Honor Roll stories in 1965 did not include the superior reprints, both short stories and short novels, which *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* offers throughout the year.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **GEORGE EMMETT**

TITLE: ***Pushkin Pays***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: South of Long Island, New York

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An offbeat crime story with an offbeat kind of sophisticated charm . . . About a society orchestra leader, his out-of-this-world trumpeter, and a Hungarian beauty who knew what she wanted . . .*

TUGGING AGAINST ITS SEA ANCHOR, the *Ileana I* drifted slowly east on the outgoing afternoon tide. It was the sort of day that serious fishermen prefer—with no spray, with the wind steady at three knots, and the Atlantic breathing gently under a quilt of gray sky.

A seagull circled overhead, shopping the cold September surface. To the north most of the other boats were gathering toward Long Island. And far, far to the south—still out of sight, as a matter of fact—there was another seagull, this one flying in a curious zigzag pattern as if puzzled by the dark, sharklike form slithering through the water below.

Stephen Hamlin, the young society orchestra leader, posed effetely against the sky, unlimbered his shoulders under the bright green turtleneck sweater, and made another cast, handling the rod as though it was a recalcitrant baton. To his surprise the lead arced perfectly, settling 40 yards astern with an inaudible plop. But his face failed to register satisfaction as he adjusted the drag.

There was, of course, no bait on the hook. It was a sham, a charade performed for the benefit of the squat cabin cruiser that had been trolling endlessly back and forth across the *Ileana's* stern since he had dropped anchor.

The champagne had worn off, and now the ordeal of standing in Benny's boat, wearing Benny's binoculars over Benny's sweater, playing games with Benny's fishing

gear—all this was seriously depressing him. He sat down and submitted to a lingering kiss from Benny's wife, but that only made things worse. The corner of his eye kept wandering to the shadowed side of the *Ileana's* cabin—to the duffle bag lying there on the deck, with Benny's body inside it.

Ileana—the beautiful, irresistible Ileana—leaned back from his lips, and stretched luxuriously, revealing a perfection of figure even through the loose Austrian skiing jacket.

"Really, Stevuchka," she said, her accent suggesting the wan melodies of Budapest. "You looked positively beautiful standing there. So tall and serious, with the clouds in your hair. You must take up those little cigars—like that marvelous Viking smokes in the television commercials."

"Benny smoked cigars," he reminded her gloomily.

"But thick, un-chic ones, darling, with a smell like Camembert. I had to open the windows to breathe." She glanced at the corpse in the duffle bag and dismissed the protruding argyles with an impatient flutter of her hand. "Please. I don't even wish to think of him."

She leaned back against the auxiliary outboard, hugging her knees in the svelte, tapered slacks. "If only you knew him when he was home. Looping all over—" (Stephen supposed that she meant "loping") "—with those terrible cigars in his mouth. One never knew what foolishness to expect from him next. It was like living with a unicorn, darling."

Stephen shrugged. It was only at the end that Benny had fully realized he was wearing a horn.

He stood up and began the pretense of reeling in his line. He had tried dodging along the coast, but the other cabin cruiser had stayed close behind, as if its occupants too were worried at being out so far from shore.

How had he ever got himself into such a predicament? Stephen wondered. Thinking of his morning drive along the Southern State Parkway, he remembered ruefully what the road to hell was paved with. His impulsive turn-off at the Moriches exit had brought it all on, of course. A cup of morning coffee with Benny and Ileana Revere, a few minutes chat to see how the lovebirds were getting on after six months of marriage—it had seemed at the time like a pleasant, thoughtful way to break up his long trip to Southampton.

Neither of the Reveres had had much luck in previous marriages, and Benny had been particularly unfortunate. His first wife, as closely as Stephen could recall, had been Natilla Khalifa, an exotic dancer of vaguely Turkish origins. She had been made to disappear by a suave Belgian magician.

Benny's second wife had been Barberly Devereaux, a former Rockette, and later a student of Zen.

After two years of marriage she had gone off to India in pursuit of the sound of one hand clapping, leaving Benny behind to contemplate the silence of his own devoted lip trembling. It was only twelve years later, just after he'd met Ileana, that Benny had applied for a divorce from Barberly.

Stephen could still remember the day Benny had come bursting in late to rehearsal, streaming smoke from his cigar and brimming over with the news of his engagement. Ten years had vanished overnight from the bags under his eyes.

"She's g-g-gorgeous, Steve," Benny had said. "B-blonde, with a f-face like a model. She's g-got royal b-blood in her, the r-real thing. You c-can feel it when she w-w-walks into a room."

Benny always stammered when he became emotional. An immediate cure was four fingers of bourbon, taken neat. He was often emotional, but drinking had never interfered with his playing. Drunk or half sober, Benny Revere owned, as they say, "one of the best lips in the business."

Despite the chronic cigar, he could store a typhoon in his lungs, letting it out in trumpet lullabies that often resembled Heifetz on the violin. He was worth every cent of the $18,000 plus bonuses that Stephen paid him, and the $10,000 more he earned from recordings. Music seemed to sock Benny into dignity. The stammer, the whiskey glaze, the mooselike awkwardness of his face—all fell away when he lifted the trumpet. His eyes would close, his body grew lean, and as the first note flew off to Jericho, you could almost literally see him rising completely out of his five-feet-six. He had been a great favorite at society balls. He would be hard to replace.

Ileana's voice intruded. "Stevuchka, I'm getting hungry."

"The next time we come out here to bury one of your husbands, we must remember to bring sandwiches."

"Darling, that's not a very nice thing to say." She turned away, pouting.

He tried to remind himself that allowances had to be made for Ileana. If she was a survivor by profession, it was because she had been apprenticed to Europe's darkest hours.

"You cannot imagine," she had once told him, "how hard our lives were. First we lost Vlados, for twenty years Papa's valet. He did the most wonderful imitations of Hitler, darling. You have no idea how Papa cried when Vlados was taken away to the concentration camp. Where could you get another valet in those days?

"Next we lost Markos, the gardener. He had to go into the army. Such a beautiful fellow; you have no idea how Mama cried. Really, World War Two gave me such headaches. The comings, the go-

ings, the confusion. It seemed that no sooner had the German officers living in our house taught Mama and the girls *Lili Marlene,* than the Russians arrived, and we had to start all over again with *Bublitchki.*"

After slipping across the border during the Uprising, Ileana had made her way to America with little more than a jewel case and an ambition to act. By that time, however, the Hungarian-American theater delegation was amply rounded out with Gabors. "Some of the best producers tried me out, darling. They all said I had talent, but I never got a part."

The marriage to Benny was the third for Ileana as well. "We won't count the one in Hungary. That was purely for necessity, darling. He was a cabinet minister under Nagy. So old, and I was only a child. It was the only way we could keep our house in Pest and get Markos out of the prison for Mama's garden."

Ileana's first American husband had been Sticks Scheuer, once a well-known jazz drummer. "Such rhythm, darling, you wouldn't believe it!" Each Christmas she still sent a large fruitcake to Ossining, New York, where Sticks was serving 10-to-20 for anti-social behavior. "I'm sure that woman led him on, darling. Sticks would never have gone near her otherwise, especially if he had known that her husband was a Lieutenant of detectives."

Her second marriage had been to a rising operatic baritone who had abruptly lost his voice, sanity, and ability to support her, all on the day before their second anniversary. "I have," as she admitted at her wedding to Benny, "a terrible weakness for music, darling."

Benny had invited the entire Stephen Hamlin Society Orchestra to attend, and Stephen himself had been best man. It was a vivacious affair, flowing with music and drink. Benny had lost his stammer and was controlling himself perfectly. Ileana had made the utmost of her unbelievable blonde beauty and was beguiling even the waiters with her accent.

Admittedly, there had been one awkward moment when Ileana had taken Stephen aside to pump him for confirmation of Benny's income. The bubbling manner was suddenly suspended, like champagne abruptly gone flat. He had reassured her, and the bubbles were turned on again.

"Really, Stephen—do you mind if I call you Stevuchka?—I am so looking forward to hearing your wonderful orchestra play at some nice society affair. Such interesting people must attend."

That, of course, was out of the question. Stephen's reputation and his success depended almost as much on faultless discretion as on his sturdy background—good family, the Juilliard School, four years of study in Paris and London. His musicians' wives simply did not at-

tend the functions at which the orchestra played. Stephen himself had remained a bachelor principally to avoid such complications in his highly specialized career.

In spite of the differences in ages —Benny was 46, Ileana a Hungarian 26 ("You can look up the record for yourself in Budapest, darling")—their marriage had seemed to be, in Stephen's phrase, a garden of contentment. Benny's drinking tapered off to a benign plateau, his stammer improved considerably, his playing had never been better. He was, for the first time in the seven years since Stephen had hired him as the nucleus for his brass section, a happy man.

True, there had been one cloudy incident: in Philadelphia, after finishing a night's work, most of the musicians had adjourned to the hotel bar. While the others ordered, Benny had closeted himself in the phone booth. When he came out, there was a small, self-pitying smile on his face—like the face of an organ grinder's monkey in the rain.

"I j-just c-called my wife," he said to no one in particular, "but a m-m-man answered, s-so I hung up."

That was the night Benny created a disturbance in Rittenhouse Square by inviting passersby to shoot an apple off his head with a bow and arrow. The bow was from a bass fiddle, the arrow a loaf of French bread . . .

Stephen finished reeling in his line. "We'd better move out another mile," he said. "That cabin cruiser seems to intend to troll here all day."

Ileana hesitated. "Must we, Stevuchka? I hate going out so far."

"Would you rather bring Benny home and try again tomorrow?"

Reluctantly, she moved across the deck to the controls while Stephen hauled in the sea anchor. The engine popped and rumbled, and as the *Ileana I* got under way, Stephen took over the wheel. With relief he noted that the other boat was no longer attempting to follow. That and the rising wind against his face improved his perspective somewhat.

Ileana leaned against him. "Have I made you very unhappy, Stevuchka?"

"Frankly, yes. I'd much rather be at my place in Southampton, scoring music."

Ileana sighed theatrically.

The brief case of music he'd intended to score that day had been beside him in the front seat of the Jaguar as he'd driven through Center Moriches and pulled up beside the Reveres' house. The driveway was blocked by Ileana's convertible and Benny's boat and trailer. Benny was out, but Ileana had been in . . .

"Stevuchka, this is such a nice surprise! How are you darling? . . . No, Ben-ny is at the orphan asylum today—in Brooklyn, the one he

grew up in . . . Considering adopting? Oh hahaha no, darling. I adore children—I watch all the Shirley Temple films on the television——but the way Ben-ny throws our money away, I'm lucky to afford a maid three times a week, let alone a live-in nanny . . . He goes every week, didn't he tell you? He teaches the children music. Yes, it is a very nice thing. It gives me the whole day to myself, darling. Won't you come in?

"You look very dashing in that admiral's cap, you know. Here, let me take it . . . I'm not speaking to Ben-ny, I'm very cross with him. He's impossible, really. Do you know that bonus you gave him last week? The four thousand dollars? Do you know what he did with it? He bought instruments for the orphan asylum, so they could have a band! Who ever heard of orphans parading? And next week is the Bergdorf-Goodman mink sale. Darling, I could have killed him . . . Yes, of course he gave me vun. But they vear so much better vhen you vear vun vun day and vun the next."

Stephen had felt slightly overwhelmed by the accent. He hadn't seen Ileana for several months.

"No, not in there, Stevuchka. In the living room. Sit here on the sofa. I'm so glad you came—you have no idea how I need advice. But first let me get you something to drink . . . No, darling, coffee gives heartburn. Let me get some champagne. I always keep a few bottles on ice for special friends."

While she went for the champagne, Stephen had looked around. The furnishings reflected Ileana——expensive, effusively feminine, and somehow cozy despite the overstated size of the room.

"There. It's not the best year, but I am very loyal to Mumm's. Will you open it, Stevuchka? I am so weak with things that take strength."

While he was opening the bottle, she had excused herself, returning a few minutes later with her hair slightly rearranged and her perfume mildly reinforced.

"Darling, I am getting a divorce. I spoke to a lawyer yesterday. Benny doesn't know yet."

Stephen expressed surprise, and pointed out that Benny was very much in love with her.

"But you don't know what it's like to live with him, Stevuchka! The people he brings home! Starving painters, authors I never heard of, unemployed musicians, poets with long beards and short poems, poets with short beards and no poems. If I don't leave him now, I will end up in the loony house with my second husband, darling, the singer!

"Last month it was an old Russian, a peasant with long white mustaches. Did I say white? They were yellow, darling, yellow from the pipe that hung down from his mouth. His nose was the same

shape as the pipe, except it didn't turn up at the bottom. And it ran, Stevuchka. And his terrible old eyes ran. His name was Pushkin, and he sold frankfurters and sauerkraut from a pushcart."

Stephen spluttered into his glass and wondered if the champagne and accent were already beginning to blend.

"Some boys had smashed his business with their heat rod and then driven off. Ben-ny helped him to put the pieces into the station wagon and brought him home from Greenwich Village—to our home, darling. He didn't have one of his own. He slept in his pushcart, underneath the charcoal. Can you imagine his clothes on my sofa? Ben-ny wanted to give him a new suit, but he wouldn't accept.

"Darling, I was so nasty to that old man. And you know me, I am never nasty. When I first saw him, I tried to be polite. I said to him in Russian, 'Mr. Pushkin, my husband is an imbecile. He brings people home without asking me. I really wish you would get out of my house.'

"But he only smiled at me and said, in that deep old Cossack voice like a ghost's, 'Pushkin pays, Pushkin pays.'

"He lived with us for *days*, darling, while Ben-ny built him a new pushcart in the garage. The noise! The sawing, the hammering, every hour another wine bottle going clunk in the garbage can, and all day long on the phonograph—louder than anything else—*Tchaikovsky!* Darling, it gave me an even bigger headache than the war.

"But at night—Ben-ny wasn't working those three days—at night the noises were worse. They were in the house this time. The old peasant snoring soup and wine through his mustaches, Khatchaturian's saber dances playing on the big stereo. Darling, do you know how loud that Ampex in the corner there can play?"

She had paused to top up their champagne glasses.

"And then Ben-ny lit cigars for each of them. Two Camemberts burning this time, and on top of it all, Ben-ny lifted me onto the coffee table and wanted me to dance those wild gypsy dances with him. Darling, if that isn't grounds for a nice Nevada divorce, I ask you, what is?"

Before Stephen could reply, she was rushing on again. "On the second day I began to lose my politeness. After all, darling, enough is enough. I said, 'Pushkin, I have asked my husband to throw you out, but he won't do it. He says both of your souls are in the pushcart. I think Ben-ny is very drunk, so I appeal to you as a woman: go away, or I will call the police.'

"But he only nodded his head like this, and said again like the ghost of an idiot, 'Pushkin pays, Pushkin pays.'

"Darling, by the third day I was

beginning to itch. I was no longer talking to Ben-ny. I said, 'Pushkin, you are beginning to take advantage of my hospitality. I think you have lice. I want you out of here tomorrow, or I will sue my husband for divorce.'

"That evening the new pushcart was finished. Darling, it wasn't the Four Seasons, but it was much better than before. Ben-ny even bought rubber tires for the wheels. I thought, 'One more night, and then I can have the fumigator.'

"But I didn't have to wait. In the middle of the night I hear the garage door close. Ben-ny is snoring. I get up, I go to the window. I see Pushkin in the moonlight—so strange he looked—pushing the pushcart up the road. Darling, how such an old man expected to push such a clumsy thing from Moriches to Greenwich Village, I will never know.

"I went to his room to see what he had stolen, but it was all there. And a note, written in old Russian, in a shaky hand with lots of flourishes: 'Pushkin Pays.' Not even thank you, would you believe it?

"We never saw him again, darling. Ben-ny looked all over for a week, but I had good luck. He never found him."

Stephen had had to snap himself back to reality. The champagne, the cunning perfume, the preposterous viewpoint supported by that aphrodisiac accent—Ileana was beginning to entrance him. He said, "Of course, let's not take Ben's kindness away from him."

"Darling, a man's kindness is the most precious thing to me! But he should spend it at Tiffany's, not throw it away on children and peasants. It simply spoils them . . . I don't know what you find so amusing, darling. Have some more champagne."

He had had much, much more champagne. His next clear recollection was of Ileana shaking him awake and whispering an anxious cliché into his ear, "Quick, hide in the closet—I think Ben-ny is home!"

It was mid-afternoon. They had both fallen asleep. In the darkness of the closet Stephen sagged against an empty mink coat—headachy, his mouth parched from the Mumm's, yet stifling a drunken simper as he listened to the sounds outside—Benny's slow footsteps entering the room, then a long moment's silence, then Benny's footsteps shuffling out again. Strangely, there were no voices. Next he heard Ileana's feet hit the floor and race across the room and away.

After a while Ileana returned and slid open the closet door. She seemed worried. "Stevuchka, will you have a look at Ben-ny? I tried to put his cigar in his mouth, but he doesn't puff."

Benny was lying face up, wearing Stephen's tweed jacket. Bits of glass from a broken champagne bottle surrounded him like green plastic flowers. Stephen no longer felt like

simpering. He knelt down to feel Benny's pulse, while Ileana explained.

"Darling, it was a terrible insult! He came into the bedroom wearing your jacket and cap from the foyer closet. If he had shouted, made a scene, if he had shot you, I could have understood. But just to look at me—so sad—with your jacket hanging down to his knees like Fernandel in a French farce, and then just to walk out! What woman could stand it? It was self-defense, darling."

"Self-defense?" repeated Stephen incredulously.

"I was defending my pride, Stevuchka."

"Well, thank God he's still alive! Get some cold water from the kitchen."

She had returned with an iced bottle of champagne.

"I didn't want him to drink it!" Stephen said exasperatedly. "It was for his forehead!"

"Let me put it on, darling," Ileana said. Daintily holding her negligee closed with one hand, she bent over and brought the bottle down hard on Benny's head. "See his pulse again, Stevuchka," she suggested.

Stephen had been shocked beyond words. This time, of course, Benny was deader than the minuet.

After she had hurriedly opened the champagne for him—"Would you believe it? The adrenalin must have made my hands stronger." —they had sat down to discuss the matter. Ileana had tried to reassure him, "I will simply tell the police you had absolutely nothing to do with it, darling."

She would also insist all the way to the electric chair that she was 26, automatically discrediting the rest of her testimony. Stephen gulped down his champagne and buried his head in his hands. No matter what developed now, his carefully nurtured career was finished. An affair with the wife of one of his own musicians, involvement in her husband's murder—his clients would not chortle it off as an entertaining peccadillo. He would be dropped from the Social Register, blacklisted by the Musicians' Union; his membership in the Southampton Beach Club would be withdrawn, and his best friends would cut him dead at the Colony.

"Why did you hit him again?" he groaned.

"Darling, I saw all my nice alimony flying out the window, and really I lost my head."

Agonizedly, he pointed out to her that there were no golden eggs to be expected from a dead goose.

"Even a goose with a hundred thousand dollars' insurance?" She hastily refilled his glass. "I have a terrible idea, darling, not like me at all, but . . ."

Stephen pulled the throttle back and switched off the motor. The squat cruiser they had left behind was now making its way slowly

north toward Long Island. They were alone at last. He tore off the much-too-small sweater, knotted it around the fishing pole, and threw them overboard. Then he scanned the horizon through Benny's binoculars. Except for a seagull rising toward them from the south, there were no witnesses in sight.

Stephen had needed only a minimum of convincing. There was, in fact, no acceptable alternative. After sewing Benny into the large duffle bag—"Please don't be so impatient, Stevuchka. I have absolutely no talent for dressmaking"—they had got him into the boat without being seen. Ileana drove as they trailered the boat to a public ramp that Benny never used, and with a minimum of notice, they had launched.

Aboard, Stephen had had to undo Ileana's needlework—they had forgotten to give Benny an anchor. It had been a tight squeeze before, even with Benny's shoes off; but now, with the heavy tool box resting on Benny's stomach, the best Stephen was able to manage was to lash the hem of the duffle bag around Benny's ankles.

Their story was just naive enough to be believed. That Stephen's Jaguar had been parked flagrantly outside the Reveres' home was evidence that there had been nothing untoward in his visit. But they would rehearse the story again on the way back.

Benny, they would say, had come home potted. He had insisted on taking them out for some afternoon fishing. While Ileana was instructing Stephen at the controls, Benny had fallen overboard. Perhaps he had hooked a shark; the Atlantic off Long Island was full of them this season. A shout for help? The engine was dreadfully noisy. And if by chance the occupants of the other boat came forward, they would remember having seen a man in a bright green turtleneck sweater—Benny's—making amateurish casts from the stern.

Stephen turned glumly to Ileana. "Ready?"

Ileana gazed contritely at the holes in her husband's argyles. "Maybe I wasn't the right wife for him, Stevuchka."

The duffle bag sagged as each lifted an end. They dragged it to the side, and Stephen said, "All right, wait until I say 'hup.' One, two, three, *hup*."

As the bag kissed the water, it suddenly began to kick, like an aroused slug attempting to swim.

"Darling, he's still alive!" said Ileana. Grabbing her purse, she leaned over the rail and pummeled the canvas coffin in a businesslike way until it sank out of sight, trailing a luxurious fountain of bubbles.

'You're not much of a murderess," Stephen snapped, punching the starter button.

"And you're not much of a doctor, darling," she shot back. She slumped against the auxiliary out-

board, fanning herself weakly with her purse.

The starter wasn't responding, Stephen punched it repeatedly, with growing irritation. "How do I get this blasted scow started?" He began to trace the ignition leads. "I think I've found it," he announced with relief. "We must have broken the wire lifting Benny over the side. Where did he keep his tools?"

Ileana began to laugh.

"Where did Benny keep his tools?" he asked again.

"Don't you remember, darling? He took them with him."

"Oh." He found a paring knife in the cabin and began to shave insulation from the broken ends of wire. "Damn it, I'm musical, not mechanical!" The splice was nearly completed when Ileana shrieked behim him.

Stephen spun around, his eyes following the line of her arm.

A hand was clutching the rail. As Stephen watched, fascinated, a second hand appeared. Then a dark wet mass of hair rose slowly between the two. A pair of eyes followed, round with terror and exhaustion. Then Benny's nose. An open penknife was clamped pirate style between his teeth, preventing them from chattering. He looked appealingly at Stephen.

"Kill him, Stevuchka!" yelled Ileana.

Stephen no longer needed prompting. The mysterious disappearance of a trumpeter was one thing. To be accused of and charged with attempted murder was another. He crossed the deck boldly and stomped hard on one of the hands. It jumped from the railing as if scalded. The knife dropped out of Benny's mouth.

"S-Steve, f-for the luvva P-P-Pete!"

Feeling quite numb, Stephen lifted his foot over the remaining hand on the rail.

The crash almost pitched him over the side. He heard an alarmed squawk in the sky and had a fleeting glimpse of a seagull performing an abrupt climb. The ghost on the railing said "Oof!" and was borne away in the manner of a vaudeville comic being yanked to the wings by a cane.

Then Stephen found himself in the water.

"Stevuchka! Come back—I can't swim!"

The soprano voice seemed to come from every direction at once. He was making swimming motions with his hands, but the water kept slipping through his fingers. In the distance he saw Benny skimming backward across the surface, the twin plumes of a bow wave fanning out from his rump. Then Benny began to rise, like an avenging archangel going in the wrong direction.

"Ileana!" Stephen shouted. "Neither can—"

The "I" was a long-drawn-out sound, burbled into the sea at depths

of six to eighteen inches, and going down . . .

The short, middle-aged submarine commander raised the counter-sprung steel hatch, climbed four more steps, and emerged onto the bridge. Through binoculars he peered worriedly astern. Except for bits of debris, the circling school of sharks, and a small gasoline slick, the sea to the southwest was empty.

The commander lowered the binoculars grimly, and ran his eyes up the periscope shaft to survey the damage. Clinging to the top, as if impaled, was something that resembled a slightly corpulent primate. He called up to it, "Are you all right? We were just raising our periscope. There was no time to see you." It was a voice that concealed agitation.

The object slid slowly down to the conning tower bridge. It lifted one foot and scratched the rope marks on its ankle, then it touched the bumps on its head and winced. "I d-don't suppose you've got a d-drink on b-board."

"Yes, yes, but first, was anybody with you on that boat?" the officer demanded, pointing astern.

Benny shaded his eyes and examined the floating debris. "Just me." His face crumpled momentarily. "And a c-c-couple of rats."

The submarine commander breathed with relief. He called an order to someone below. "I will write you a receipt for the damage, of course, but unfortunately I cannot bring you to port. The three mile limit, you understand. If we cross it, that American submarine that has been following us from Cape Canaveral might—" He drew a finger briskly across his throat. "You will have to make shore in one of our inflatable rafts."

Benny examined the stiff red epaulettes on the commander's uniform with interest. "J-Just what sh-ship is this?" he asked.

"You are aboard the Undersea Vessel Pushkin," the officer replied. He was already writing out a receipt on a small pad. "Merely present this in person with your documents to the Admiralty in Murmansk. In Novotny Street. Between the hours of ten and four."

Benny nodded. "F-f-forget the receipt," he said. "The boat w-wasn't worth much. L-let's just call it square."

The officer didn't answer. He finished scribbling out the receipt and forced it into Benny's hand. "The Pushkin pays," he said with stern pride.

An interesting story about an old desert rat with a precious one-pound coffee can and three young savages looking for the good life—about a payday in Paradise, a "pot of gold" at the end of the rainbow . . .

THE CHICKEN FEED MINE

by HELEN NIELSEN

THEY CROSSED THE LAS VEGAS city limits at five o'clock when the sun was beginning to lighten the horizon and pull up the surrounding peaks from the flatness of the night sky. They had worked the slot machines, played the tables, had fun with the girls, and now they were broke again and back on the road.

It was a good road—U.S. Highway 95—and it would take them, if the water pump on the old Pontiac held up, all the way to Route 60 where they could cut over to Coachilla and drop down into the Imperial Valley. The growers were in trouble since the government took away their *braceros*, and three strong young men with no place in particular to go and nothing in particular to do could pick up a few dollars in the lettuce and carrot fields. It was three days after New Year's and the juices of life ran strong and wild in their bodies. They had no problems they couldn't solve, and they were going to be young forever.

Their names were Bud and Joe and Stan, and they were 23 and 24 and 19, respectively. The first two had been in the Army and the third had a medical discharge from the Navy. Now they were in search of the good life, wherever it might be found, and exactly two hours later it came to them in the person of Hamilton Jefferson Curtis.

They found Hamilton Jefferson Curtis installed in the back seat of the Pontiac when they came out from the roadside café where they stopped for coffee and eggs—installed because he sat like a potentate with a dusty souvenir-type Indian blanket wrapped around his bony shoulders and a weathered Stetson that must have been 20 years old riding on his ears like a sunbonnet with a circular brim.

He wasn't the least bit apologetic.

"Goin' fer as Three Virgins Pass?" he queried.

He could have been anywhere from 50 to 80. Desert wanderers attained a kind of semi-mummification after long exposure and weren't inclined to show their teeth like a horse at auction.

"Old man," Bud said, digging his fists deep in his Army jacket

pockets, "this is no taxi. Get out."

"Name is Curtis—Hamilton Jefferson Curtis," the old man answered, "and it ain't more'n thirty miles to the Three Virgins—as the crow flies. I see you're wearin' an Army jacket, son. You ain't goin' to let an old soldier walk in the heat of day, are you?"

Bud hesitated.

"Aw, let him ride," Stan said. "I'll sit in back with him. Move over, old-timer.—What's this?"

It was a coffee can—one pound size—and Curtis grabbed it possessively as Stan slid into the seat beside him. The old man grinned wickedly.

"Chicken feed," he said. "Allus take along a little chicken feed when I travel. You boys got a radio in this machine? Mebbe we kin have some music. I like dancin' music with fiddles in it—lively music. Got a radio?"

"Oh, brother!" Bud groaned and eased in behind the steering wheel.

"Only thirty miles," Joe reminded.

Only thirty miles . . .

Bud averaged 60 miles an hour on the desert. The first time he asked the old man where the Three Virgin Pass was located they had been driving almost an hour. Curtis squinted hard across the sun-drenched waste and rocked sideways on the edge of the seat.

"A mite further," he said. "Just a mite further."

It was an hour later when Bud asked the second time.

The old man tapped a nervous tattoo on the top of the coffee can.

"Should be soon," he said. "You'll see the Three Virgins off to the left as we come to it. 'Way off to the left."

After another hour they stopped for beer at Sam's Wayside Bar and Grill. It was hot and dusty inside and smelled of bacon grease and ham fat. Sam was a balding man with a red face and a roll of fat at the back of his neck that hung over the edge of his shirt collar like yeast bread rising up from a baking pan.

He watched with bland eyes while the three young men stalked about on the plank floor pacing off accumulated energy. They were nervous and noisy. They were like colts let out of confinement. They slapped and punched one another, peered at the old hunting photos on the wall and finally returned to the bar where the old man squatted on one of the stools, his Indian blanket still draped around his shoulders and the coffee can clutched tightly in his lap.

"What are we going to do with the old-timer?" Stan demanded. "I'm tired of riding with him. He smells!"

"He's playing us for a good thing," Joe said. "Thirty miles!"

"As the crow flies!" Bud reminded.

"Flies! As the crow walks pigeon-toed!—Bartender, give us three beers."

Hamilton Jefferson Curtis' head bobbed up as if operated by a switch, and a touch of hopeful expectancy lighted his watery eyes.

"Let's buy him a beer, too," Sam urged.

"And be stuck with him all afternoon? Did you ever pet a stray dog and then try to get rid of it?" Bud straddled the stool next to the old man and then, because he didn't like being used even by an old desert rat, he added, "How about a deal, old-timer? We buy a round—including you—and you buy a round for us?"

"Bottle beer," the old man said. 'Hate canned beer."

Behind the bar the proprietor waited for everybody to make up their minds.

"Have you got any money, old-timer?" Stan taunted.

The old man twisted sideways on the stool and tugged at the lid of the coffee can. When it came off, the three young men hovering over him could see what it contained—the proprietor on the far side of the counter was out of range. Curtis reached into the can and pulled out a wrinkled bill. He spread it out on the counter. It was ten dollars.

"Four bottles of beer," he ordered in a loud voice, "Canned beer ain't good for the innards. You boys take good care of your innards, hear? When you're as old as I am you'll know why I told you. Well, everybody drink up!"

And Bud and Joe and Stan stood open-mouthed staring at the coffee can resting in the old man's lap. It was filled almost to the top with crumpled bills just like the one Curtis had laid out for the beers.

It was unusual for Christmas to come so soon after New Year's. An idea could circulate without being spoken. Bud and Joe and Stan drank the beers the old-timer bought for them and then ordered a second round for him. He hadn't eaten, so he demanded a bowl of chili. They bought that for him along with a third beer to go with the food.

"How about one for the road?" Bud suggested.

All this time the proprietor watched with assumed indifference, but now a worried frown bothered his forehead as if something akin to thought was beginning to break through.

"The old guy's gettin' high," he said.

"So? He ain't driving," Bud said.

"He might get sick."

"We're his friends—we'll take care of him."

"Sure," Curtis said. "These boys are my friends—and I ain't drivin'." He emitted a shrill, womanish laugh and slapped the counter top for service. "One for the road!" he ordered. "Bottle beer. I hate canned beer."

"I know," the proprietor said. "It's bad for the innards. Okay, old man. It's your funeral."

The young men waited until Curtis finished his fourth beer and then

they all walked back to the Pontiac. Nobody suggested leaving him behind or mentioned how he smelled. A State Highway patrol car parked in front of the café as they pulled away. A uniformed Deputy alighted, glanced at them in passing, then walked inside.

At the sight of Deputy Ralph Dempsey, the proprietor filled a mug of black coffee and slid it across the counter.

"Did you see that outfit?" he asked.

"What outfit?" queried Dempsey.

"Them boys and the old guy in the Indian blanket."

"The ones in the Pontiac. No, I really didn't notice."

"You should have. Something queer goin' on there, Ralph. I don't talk much but I listen good. First they say: 'How we goin' to get rid of the old man?' Then they tank him up on beer and *he* pays. That's what bugs me. I'd swear the old coot didn't have a dime on him an' he pays with this—"

Sam placed the ten dollar bill on the counter. Deputy Dempsey studied it idly at first and then his interest quickened.

"No, it's not counterfeit," the Deputy said. "Did you get one of those check lists of serial numbers the department sent out on the Hollister Chemicals payroll robbery?"

"Got it mounted here on the cash register. Say, you don't think that outfit—?"

Dempsey didn't answer. He left the counter stool and came around to the back of the cash register. He ran one finger down a list of numbers until he found a category that included the numbers on the ten dollar bill.

"It's here!" he said. "This is a part of the payroll money—the first to turn up. What did that outfit look like, Sam?"

"Nothing special," Sam said. "Three young fellas—one of 'em wore an Army jacket. But it was the old coot in the Indian blanket that gave me the ten dollar bill and, Ralph, I swear if that old coot held up an armored truck and made off with the payroll, my name is Wyatt Earp!!"

Bud drove at a slower speed after the beer stop. There was more to think about. No sooner was the old man settled in the back seat than his chin dropped forward on his chest and he fell asleep. Bud watched him in the rear-view mirror.

"Get the coffee can, Stan," he said quietly. "Easy—don't rouse him. See how much he's got in there."

There was little traffic on the highway at mid-day. Two trucks and one station wagon were all they passed in the time it took Stan to count the money in the can. It was all in tens and twenties, and it came to almost $3000.

"Chicken feed!" Stan said rever-

cntly. "What does he call real money?"

"Put it back in the can," Bud ordered.

"All of it?"

"Every last bill! And put the can back in his lap. Now we'll wake him up. Old-timer! Mr. Curtis!"

The old man snorted himself awake and one hand flew to his hat brim in a sorry salute.

"*Sergeant* Curtis," he corrected. "U. S. Mounted Cavalry—"

"Okay," Bud said. "Get off your horse now and look around. Any sign of that Three Virgins Pass you've been talking about?—And no more lies!"

"I never lie," the old man said. 'Cross my heart!"

"You said thirty miles!" Joe challenged. "That was a coupla hundred miles back."

"Well, I get mixed up sometimes. I jes' came over last week."

"Over where?" Bud demanded.

"Over to Needles. That's as fer as the truck took me. I got tired of settin' out on my claim all alone, so I walked over to the highway and thumbed me a ride on a truck. Then I thumbed me a ride back—only that ride turned off the highway, so I climbed in with you boys."

"There's no Three Virgins Pass on the road map," Joe said.

"Of course there ain't! Three Virgins ain't a town—it's three mountains!"

The old man slid foward on the seat and peered out at the horizon. It was a long time since they had left the mountains, but now the earth was beginning to roll again and one stark butte humped up against the distant sky.

"That's the Ol' Pipe Organ yonder!" he cried. "And fu'ther back behind it—that's the Gineral and his men. All them little mountains—they's the men. Now you watch. It ain't much fu'ther now. The Three Virgins—like three sisters in veils. It's the granite makes 'em look black jes' like the Funerals up to Death Valley."

Now that they knew what to look for everybody scanned the horizon. There was no mistaking the Three Virgins when they came into view. Tall, slender—yes, even graceful—they towered in solemn dignity above the desert. Bud eased up on the accelerator and began to watch for a turn off.

"I kin walk it from the highway," Curtis said. "I allus walk from the highway when I get tired of settin' and hitch me a little trip."

"We've got plenty of time," Bud said. "We'll take you all the way."

He caught Stan's eyes in the rear-view mirror. Stan was tense and sweating, and Bud could feel Joe stir restlessly in the seat beside him. They were all thinking about that $3000 in the coffee can, and each one of them knew they would never come back to the highway without it.

A highway maintainance truck was parked on the shoulder at the

Three Virgins Pass turnoff, and a crew of men were repairing a culvert that had washed out in a flash flood. Curtis waved to them as they made the turn and one of the workers waved back.

"Friends of yours?" Bud asked casually.

"Ain't got no friends," Curtis said. "I'm a hermit. But I wave to people workin' for the gover'mint. It makes 'em feel appreciated."

And then Bud got to the heart of the matter.

"Old-timer," he said, "where did you get that chicken feed?"

Curtis' high-pitched laugh came again and then died away in a rasping wheeze.

"Got me a chicken feed claim," he said.

"You mean like a mine?" Stan queried.

"Like a mine?" The old man thought about that with his head cocked sideways, and the thought seemed acceptable. "You might call it that," he said. "You might call it a bonanza. Yes, sir! Got me a real bonanza!"

The turnoff road wasn't paved. After the first mile it narrowed to a pair of hard-packed wheel tracks without so much as a draining ditch; then scattered patches of scrub brush began to dot both sides of the tracks as they climbed up to meet the base of the Three Virgins.

Every turn of the wheels made Joe more nervous. He leaned closer to Bud and whispered, "I think the old boy's loco."

"Does that worry you?"

"What are you planning to do?"

"Play it by ear. Look, over by the ravine. That's a cabin. Hey, old-timer—"

"That's my place!" the old man cried. "You done it! You took me all the way home jes' like you said! Well, boys, I'm much obliged."

Bud braked the Pontiac to a stop in a cloud of dust, and Hamilton Jefferson Curtis had the rear door open before Bud could shut off the motor.

"Hey," Bud called, "ain't you going to invite us in?"

"It ain't much of a place," Curtis hedged.

"We're not particular—and we need water for the radiator. You must have a well, old-timer."

"Got me a spring."

"That's the best kind of water! Come on, men. Sergeant Curtis is going to show us his spring."

"No!"

The word exploded from the old man's lips. It was a surprise. He was worried. Not many thoughts ever found their way through his addled mind, and the few words in his vocabulary were adequate for minimum communication. But he still had his senses and some basic instinct was telegraphing trouble.

"I got a water barrel in the shed," he explained. "I'll go back and fetch you a bucket."

"I'll go with you," Bud said.

"You'll need me to hold that can of chicken feed."

And then the old man knew what they were going to do. It had been as certain as sunset from the moment he'd opened the can at Sam's Wayside Inn.

The soiled Indian blanket slid slowly from shoulders that hunched narrow under a faded blue cotton shirt. He stood no more than five four and couldn't have weighed over one hundred pounds, and now he was circled by three husky young men whose energies were strong and could be uncontrollable.

Nervously the old man wetted his lips.

"I bin thinkin'," he said. "Mebbe I should pay you for the ride. You'll be needin' gasoline."

"And oil," Joe said.

"And tires," Stan added.

Curtis' fingers clawed at the lid of the can.

"Here, I'll help you," Bud said. He yanked the can from Curtis' hands and tossed it to Stan. "Now," he demanded, "where's the rest of it?"

"There ain't no more!" the old man whined.

"You're lyin!' You told us in the car—"

"I was jes' storyin'—"

"You told us you had a bonanza. Come on, old-timer. That money had to come from some place. Joe, Stan, search the cabin."

It was a room 12 by 20. It contained a cot with a cotton-stuffed mattress and a pair of old Army blankets, a rude table, a kerosene stove, and a cupboard. They found nothing in the cupboard but a few cans of beans, some coffee, lard, and flour. They ripped open the mattress with a bread knife and dragged out an old locker trunk from under the bed. In it they found a pair of levis, some canvas shoes, and an old Army-issue overcoat ripped out at the elbow.

But no money.

"I told you there ain't no more money!" Curtis whined.

"Where did you get the money you have?" Bud demanded.

"It's mine! I got it for what I took outa my mine."

"He could be telling the truth," Joe said. "I've heard about these old desert rats. They make a pile and stash it away some place. They don't trust banks."

"But the bills in this can look sort of new," Stan protested.

"And why not? They've never been used. Now that's not what money's for, old-timer. Don't you know that? Money's to spend and make people happy. I sure could make a lotta people happy with that money."

"All right!" the old man yelled. "You got the money, now go! Go on, get outa here!"

That was a mistake. He was a little too anxious to give away almost $3000, and that had to mean there was more somewhere.

"I'm going out to the shed," Bud said.

"What for?" the old man demanded.

Another mistake. The tremble in his voice gave him away.

"To get that bucket of water for the radiator."

"I'll get the water. I'll get it right now!"

But when Curtis scurried off to the shed, Bud was only a step behind him. It was a lean-to backed up against a clump of brush that almost hid the ravine behind it. The wooden latched door swung open on heavy hinges, and sunlight streamed through the split siding to reveal an oil drum in the center of the hard earth floor.

Curtis darted into a dark corner and came up swinging a tin pail at Bud's head. That was his third mistake. The pail glanced off Bud's shoulder and Bud retaliated with a fist in the stomach that laid out the old man like a cadaver.

Something glinted at the bottom of the barrel. Bud found a length of rope and as Stan and Joe pushed their way into the shed, pulled a gallon-size glass milk jar to the surface. Inside the jar, rolled into coils as narrow as cigarettes, was the rest of Hamilton Jefferson Curtis's chicken feed mine. It didn't take long for the three of them to count it —$14,000 in tens and twenties.

It was the end of the rainbow. It was payday in Paradise.

"No wonder the old boy was willing to let us take the coffee can and leave!" Joe said. "No wonder he called it chicken feed!"

"Let's get moving," Bud said.

"What about him?"

Curtis hadn't so much as whimpered while they counted the money. He had crawled back into a dark corner of the shed, and all they could see of him were the soles of his boots and his eyes hating them across the room.

"Leave him alone," Bud ordered.

"He'll yell to the police."

"Who'll listen? Old guys like that go around telling wild tales all the time. Can you imagine what a cop would say if Curtis told them he was robbed of seventeen thousand dollars? Besides, we won't be here. Do you know where we're going with this dough? Mexico City! We can live like kings on this kind of cash in Mexico City! Let's travel."

They stumbled out into the sunlight laughing and howling like young savages. Stan clutched the coffee can and Bud carried the milk jar and nobody bestowed as much as a backward glance on the old man crouched in the corner.

That was why they didn't see Curtis pull a rifle down from the wall and come blasting his way out of the shadows. The first shot ripped the edge from the collar of Bud's jacket and sent him diving for cover behind the Pontiac. Joe and Stan were a split second behind him, and all three of them hugged the ground

while Curtis emptied the rifle into the dirt around them.

One bullet crashed into the right front fender, but the old desert rat was too wild with fury to even think of shooting out the tires. The first time he pulled the trigger and nothing happened, Bud leaped to his feet and scrambled around to the front door of the sedan.

"Nice try, old-timer!" he yelled. "We'll send you a post card from Mexico!"

And then he hit the dirt again as the rifle came hurtling toward him. It was a freak throw. The gun spiraled in mid-air and came down butt-end first against a rock three feet from Curtis' face. One shell had jammed in the chamber, and when it exploded the barrel was pointed back to the shed. The old man—an expression of incredible surprise on his face—stepped directly into the gunfire and fell forward on his face.

He was dead when Bud rolled him over.

"He shot himself!" Stan screamed. "We didn't kill him! He shot himself!"

"Shut up!" Bud snapped.

"But we didn't even touch the rifle! It's his fingerprints on the trigger—"

"I said shut up! I'm thinking. Remember that car back at the place where we got the beer? That was a State Police car and that was a Deputy who saw us drive off with Curtis. And that road worker he waved at knows we drove him back here. Sooner or later somebody will find the body and the last people who saw him alive saw him with us."

"Let's bury him," Joe said.

"Idiot! Don't you get it? This is a dead-end road. There's only one way out and that's the way we came in. Suppose the old guy did have a friend—the road worker, maybe. If he comes back here and finds a fresh grave, I give you one guess who's going to be stuck with a murder rap—fingerprints or no fingerprints! We're vagrants—you know what that means around here."

They knew exactly what it meant. They couldn't hide the $17,000 behind a rock and then go tell the Sheriff that the old man went berserk and shot himself with his own gun.

"Joe," Bud said, "get the old man's Indian blanket."

"What are we going to do?" Stan asked.

"First of all, we'll heave this rifle in the ravine."

Bud took a pair of driving gloves from the car and put them on before he picked up the gun. He walked to the edge of the ravine and stared down at it in a moment of indecision. They could wrap the old man's body up in the blanket and roll it down the ravine with the gun, but there was always the matter of buzzards, and Bud did want to enjoy that money in Mexico without risking extradition. No, the ravine was no grave for the old man.

Bud hurled the rifle into the air and watched it bounce down the shrub-spotted slope until it was out of sight and there was no sound of falling rocks. Then he walked back to the old man's body and helped wrap him up in the blanket.

"Get his hat and prop him up in the back seat just the way he was when we drove in," he ordered. "If the men are still working on the culvert, we're going to wave when we drive past so they'll see Curtis riding out with us just the way he rode in."

And that was exactly how they did it. The highway maintainance truck was still parked on the shoulder at the turnoff. Bud tapped the horn and everbody waved—except Hamilton Jefferson Curtis who sat with his chin on his chest and the hat jammed down on his ears. Bud swung the Pontiac back on the highway and stepped hard on the accelerator.

They couldn't drive forever with a dead man in the back seat. The next town was a railroad loading junction and the crossing gates were down to allow passage of a slow freight. Bud approached the line of waiting cars and then made a sudden swing off the highway, following the tracks for several hundred feet before parking in the shelter of a warehouse. He cut the motor and watched the lumbering freight cars roll slowly before the windshield.

"Did you see him?" he asked.

"See who?" Joe demanded.

"In the car just ahead of us at the gates—the Deputy. The Deputy Sheriff from the beer place. We've got to get rid of the old man fast."

It was a long freight that would keep traffic stalled at the crossing for some time. Bud stepped out of the Pontiac and looked about. On a siding next to the warehouse, men were loading fresh vegetables into insulated cars. As each loading was completed, a worker yelled for an inspector to lock the doors. The inspector never bothered to look inside. He slid the doors shut, secured them, and chalked a huge X on the side of the car.

Bud waited until another car was ready for an X and then, while Stan stood guard, he and Joe carried the old man to the open car and laid him out among the lettuce.

They watched from behind the warehouse until the doors were sealed. Then, before they could drive away, something unexpected happened that gave everything a nice clean finish. As the last car of the train passed by, the switchman swung the siding tracks into place, the train backed up and coupled to the insulated cars, and Hamilton Jefferson Curtis went rolling across the desert in an air-conditioned hearse.

"May he rest in peace," Bud said. "He didn't plan it this way but he was a generous soul."

At sundown they stopped at a plush motel with two swimming pools, a dining room, and a bar.

They paid in advance, showered, put on clean shirts, and went downstairs to scout female companionship for the evening. It was during the first cocktail that Deputy Dempsey broke up the party to be.

The motel manager didn't like public trouble. They moved to his office for questioning. Dempsey had the twenty dollar bill that Bud had used to pay in advance for the room.

"Where did you get this?" the Deputy demanded.

"Won it in Vegas," Bud lied. "My buddies and me took the machines for five hundred bucks."

That was the sum they were carrying with them. The rest of the $17,000 was in the inner tube of the spare tire in the trunk of the Pontiac, with a vulcanizing patch over the slash made for insertion and enough air added to make the tire look right.

"It's possible," Dempsey admitted. "Professionals like Harris and Zelke wouldn't be that careless, but considering that this bill—and one an old desert rat named Hamilton Jefferson Curtis left at Sam's Wayside Inn this morning—considering that both bills check out with the serial numbers of the Hollister payroll that was robbed in Tempe three months ago—"

"Tempe?" Bud echoed. "We didn't come through Tempe. We came through Albuquerque and cut up to Vegas from Kingman. And three months ago we didn't even know each other—"

"Nobody's accusing you of the robbery, boy," Dempsey said softly. "I told you—it was a professional job. Three weeks ago a hunting party found a big sedan stuck in the sand forty miles off the highway. Inside—dead of dehydration—were Duke Harris and Lefty Zelke, a pair of payroll heist artists the law has been after for years. Hollister guards identified their bodies. We think they wandered off the highway in a sandstorm and couldn't get out. But somebody found them before the hunters did because the payroll money was gone."

Dempsey reached down behind the manager's desk and came up with two heavy canvas sacks stamped Tempe Pioneer National Bank.

"We found these in Curtis' shack this afternoon," he added. "Where is he, boys? Where's Hamilton Jefferson Curtis?"

The room was quiet. From across the two-pool patio the faint echo of dance music made an inappropriate background, and then the haunting moan of a train whistle snapped a taut nerve fiber.

"He lied to us!" Stan shrieked. "That old coot lied to us! He didn't have a mine!"

"Shut up!" Bud ordered.

"But he didn't! He was nothing but a stinking thief!"

"Lawman," Bud said quickly, "what my infantile friend is trying to communicate is that we didn't cop this roll at Vegas." Bud slid his hand into his pocket and pulled

out a bulging wallet. He tossed it to Deputy Dempsey. "Check the numbers on these bills, too," he said. "Curtis gave them to us. We found him in our car this morning. He wanted a thirty-mile ride that turned into a couple hundred before we got him back to his shack on Three Virgins Pass. He said he wanted to pay us for our trouble, so we waited. He went in the shack and came out with five hundred dollars and told us to drive him to Los Angeles. About an hour ago he got sore because we couldn't get Western music on the radio and left us for another hitch. The last we saw of him he was headed west on a truck."

"We'll pick him up," Dempsey said. "But right now we're all going over to the police station so you can make that statement official."

"And then can we go?"

"You boys in a hurry?"

Bud tried not to oversell a story that was going so good.

"Now that you've got our bankroll," Bud admitted, "yes. We were heading for the Imperial Valley to get us some crop-picking jobs."

"Maybe I can help you," Dempsey said, "but now we're all going to get that statement of yours typed up and signed."

He led them outside where two Deputies were completing a search of the Pontiac. The doors were open, the trunk lid was up, and all their gear was piled on the spare tire out on the asphalt.

"We even emptied the ashtrays," one Deputy reported.

"These three may be telling the truth," Dempsey said. "From what I hear this Curtis is wild enough to do anything."

They climbed into Dempsey's sedan and drove down the highway. Dempsey explained that his brother was in a bind for field workers and he would call him in the morning to fix up jobs for the boys. Bud listened with both ears. If a farmer's need for quick labor could keep them out of jail, there was a chance of sneaking back into town and getting to the spare tire before the Feds gave the car a real going-over.

"It's a place up the same highway you traveled today," Dempsey added. "Lettuce crop. Has to move fast. They pick and load the freight cars one day—and by the next day the empties are back for reloading."

"By the *next* day?" Bud echoed. "Don't those insulated cars lay over a few days?"

"Not with a perishable crop like lettuce. Today's cars will be unloaded by tomorrow morning and on their way back to the fields for reloading. You boys will be able to earn some pocket money, and when we pick up old Curtis and get his side of the story, I'll know exactly where to find you."

Bud remembered the huge X scrawled on the doors as he felt the ice forming in his stomach.

"Yeah," he said. "You sure enough will.'

Well, Pop, how Campy can you get? You can get with it, Pop—you can get smart . . . Here's an outrageously surrealistic tale—we warn you, really far out!—that you have to read to believe (and have to believe to read) . . . about the Man from E.A.R.T.H., a superspy in the Universe of the Absurd, who with all his lives has to protect a precious gizmo in a satchel. If he fails in his secret mission, our planet will be attacked by the people of C on planet Amp, and Earth will turn into a fireball. So get with it, Pop, get with it, get with it, get with . . .

CAPITAL C ON PLANET AMP

by JOHN T. SLADEK

I COULD HAVE GONE BACK TO Earth, thought Peter, hurrying through the fog-shrouded evening. I could have hitchhiked to California and had hot dogs at a big fluorescent-lighted drive-in.

Under every streetlight Peter paused and looked back. And always the little man with sunglasses was there. Always one streetlight behind him.

The gutters of C, capital of the planet Amp, were littered with every variety of garbage. Up to a few hours ago, Peter thought, I was part of that garbage. And now? Now I am a spy, a secret agent of the United States government . . .

"Me a spy? Here on Amp? I can't do it! I don't even look like a spy. I'm only a space bum. Look, my clothes are canvas from a spaceship. My belt is a discarded piece of dural-alumin wire."

The man in the green hat sighed. "You'll do. As the great n-tuple agent, Waldmir, said, 'More than anyone else, a spy must look like anyone else.' " The face was invisible beneath the brim of the green hat; Peter saw only a row of jagged lower teeth. "Now here's the plan: Amp wants war with the U.S., and they're ready to attack. All they need is for their computer to give the word. When the auspices are right, they'll launch enough interspace missiles to turn the United States of Earth into a fireball.

"Your job is to steal the gizmo that programs the computer. It's a small device, easily concealed in this satchel. You're to deliver it at the rocket terminal to a man named Adrian. He'll be wearing a green hat like this, and he runs the postcard concession. Got it?"

"Where *do* I get it, though? And how?"

"It's locked up in the safe of the

Amp War Department." The man handed Peter a pack of cigarets. "This is in reality a time machine. You'll simply project yourself into the future, watch yourself open the safe, and thus learn the combination. Then you come back into the present and open the safe. Got it?"

"Seems to me there's a contradiction there somewhere," mused Peter, scratching his unshaved chin. "But go on. What happens after I deliver it?"

"Once we have the gizmo—which closely resembles a rare old phonograph record, they say—we'll be able to re-program their computer. We'll fool it into believing the war is over, and that the U.S. has won. Our troops will land at once, and our army of trained tourists will follow, to rehabilitate the Ampians through space aid." The man ran his tongue over the jagged teeth. "But you'd better get started. There isn't much time."

The little man in sunglasses was still behind him. Ahead was a sign: *Annie's Earthside Bar. Your Home Away From Home—No Credit.*

Gratefully Peter ducked into the ill-lit, evil-smelling taproom. How well he knew this derelict retreat—and its lovely proprietress.

Annie came to his table and leaned over him, her raven hair brushing his cheek. Her slender alabaster throat worked with unspoken emotion, as huskily she breathed, "No credit."

"Annie, you've got to hide me."

But no, already it was too late! Pressing his pack of cigarets, Peter could see that the little man would find him here. Sighing, he ordered a beer and began to tell Annie about the fauna of that exotic planet, Earth.

"Then there's the animal ghosts. Like the Bansheep. You're walking alone at night, see? Suddenly you hear this awful wail—Gaaaaa. You see something big and white moving out there in the darkness—"

"You told me that one," she said. The small weasel-faced man came in and sat at the next table. He removed his sunglasses, and Peter saw that his eyes never strayed from the satchel in Peter's hand.

"Then how about the Grisly Bear? That's the blood-dripping spirit of a bear that prowls the forests of Iowa. He can't get back to his body, see, because someone killed it while he was sleeping. Hibernating. He prowls in Ireland—"

"You said Iowa."

"I meant Ireland, of course, where all bears' souls go when they are hibernating. That's why they call it Hibernia."

The little man drew a laser gun, just as Peter knew he would. "What have you got in that satchel?" he asked, right on cue.

"Only an old phonograph record." It was a desperate move, but the wrong one.

"Is it the Andrews Sisters, singing

Apple Blossom Time? If so, then I arrest you in the name of C and Amp—"

Taking a tighter grip on the satchel, Peter passed out . . .

He came to his senses in an opulent apartment, where an equally opulent blonde was arguing with the weasel-like man. Waving a saw, the girl exclaimed, "It's the only way! The satchel is made of some impenetrable substance, and he refuses to let go of it."

"Mmmf. You may be right, my dear. But can't we just search him and get the key to the satchel?"

"Search him? Ugh! I refuse to touch that foul earthly creature," she replied, giving a ladylike shudder.

"I'm awake!" Peter announced. "Here, I'll open the satchel for you."

"Do not try any tricks, my filthy friend," the little man snarled. "Roberta, keep him covered with the saw."

While he pretended to ply the lock, Peter stalled for time. "Have I ever told you about the Were-Hen? In eastern Iceland, when the hen-bane blooms, and the moon looks like a big deviled egg, the peasants lock all their doors—"

A blur of motion and Peter was leaping out the window.

To his astonishment he found himself back in the same room! "What happened?" he asked, as Roberta once more pointed the saw at him.

"You cannot escape," the ferret-faced man chuckled. "For the simple reason that there is nowhere to escape to. Mmmf. You see, we are in a re-oriented universe, bounded by the walls of this room. *There is no outside.*"

The blonde moved closer emitting an odor of musk. "For that matter, darling, why try to escape?" she said. "Wouldn't you rather stay here with me—always?"

"If this were a closed universe, what would we have to eat and drink?" asked Peter warily.

"We could live on love. Now put down your satchel and kiss me."

"Nope. There's something phony about you, woman. For one thing, your teeth look too real. And that musk. You seem to be exuding it through a single pore on your lovely alabaster neck."

At that moment Roberta's whole body began to throw off a deadly, high-voltage corona.

"A robot!" he exclaimed, jumping back. "I should have known—only robots call everybody darling."

Her arms outstretched, she stumbled about the room after him. ". . . darling . . ." she kept murmuring. With all escape cut off, with her fire-crackling, million-volt arms reaching out for him, Peter stumbled over a curiously carved Buddha —and the room disappeared!

He found himself seated under a blinding white light, while shadowy figures moved around him.

"Who are you? What are you doing here? What is in the—mmmf—the satchel?" asked the ferret's voice, full of scary echoes.

Peter did not reply.

"A lovely girl you have. It would be a pity if anything happened to spoil her loveliness," continued the little man in the sunglasses.

"You wouldn't dare!" Peter shouted, struggling to rise.

"Wouldn't I? What is your name?

"Rumpelstiltskin is my—" Something cracked him across the side of the head, a stunning blow that made bells ring and stars whirl . . .

The bells and stars were real. In the control room of the spaceship the alarm signaled a meteor swarm dead ahead. Why isn't the ship automatically veering off? Peter wondered.

The answer was a shadowy figure hunched over the controls, keeping the steering wheel locked on course. Its face leered around at him, a ferine face with beady eyes and a cruel, mad-scientist smile.

"Unless you give me that satchel this instant, I shall—mmf—send us both to our death," the little man chortled.

"Speaking of death," said Peter, "I have heard tales from the West Indies of animal zombies. For example, the Undead Duck—"

Deftly Peter swung the satchel at the malicious face. The weasel was slapped to the floor, and the space ship began to veer—but too late! Already the meteors were there, patiently boring into the hull!

Instantly Peter shifted into reverse, minus the speed of light. Hurtling across the universe, the spaceship aimed at its counterpart, moving at plus the speed of light. *POW!* Matter met anti-matter, and both exploded in a flash of light and antilight! *Zungg!* Off went Peter sidewise at the speed of light, pursued by residual matter in the form of a slimy alien. It was all mush, with two beady antennas.

"Wait till I get my mandibles on you. Mmmf!" the alien thought at him.

"You've got another think coming," Peter's mind shot back. "I've been pursued by worse."

"Really? Put down your satchel and tell me about it."

Peter did not slacken his speed, but he began to spin his tale. He spoke of a time in India when he had been pursued by a giant lumbering beast that was totally invisible—the Cellophant!

But now the slimy alien was fast closing the gap between it and its prey. Seeing a lump of inert matter by the roadside, Peter dodged behind it and let the clumsy alien blunder on past.

"Whew!" he said, glancing at the lump of inert matter.

On closer inspection it proved to be really a fast, late-model sports

car. Peter leaped in and expertly tooled the machine down the road.

A speck appeared in the rear-view mirror and grew into a taxi. "It follows, that cab," Peter said grimly. He revved up, but the taxi continued to gain; now he could make out the driver's sharp nose and beady eyes. Peter knew he could never outdistance the taxi, for it was no doubt a disguised ground-effect machine.

And dead ahead was Hairpin Turn. This spot had received its colorful name from the fact that one could throw a hairpin over its edge and never hear it strike bottom. Often women came to toss bobby-pins into the abyss, and listen in vain for their clatter. Just now, in fact, a lone woman stood at the brink, jettisoning *objets de coiffure* over the precipice, and unsuccessfully endeavoring to hear their collision with the ground. She wore a trenchcoat.

As the taxi drew abreast of him, Peter suddenly braked to a stop. The taxi plunged into space and tumbled end over end, finally bursting into flames.

"Want a lift?" said Peter, eyeing the girl. Without a word she was in his arms and pressing her hot lips to his.

As they drove away he switched on the radio.

"—and partly cloudy. The most sensational news story of the day is the escape of condemned criminal Peter O'Hare, alias Pierre Lapin, scheduled to die this noon by the guillotine. Police say the notorious satchel thief made his escape this morning in the midst of an interrogation. He is believed to be hiding out in parallel universes, other dimensions, or in the Paris sewers."

The glove compartment popped open, and out stepped a small stoat-like man holding an ugly automatic.

"Mmmf. Would you be so good as to hand over that satchel?" he said, his beady eyes regarding it hungrily. "I shall reward you, of course—with death."

"Have I told you about the Octicorn?" asked Peter. "It is that strange beast having the body of a unicorn and the head of an octopus. It runs madly about, utterly harmless, and annoying no one, waving his big flabby head—"

"I do not care for animal jokes," said the man coldly. "Greta here and I are ingeniously mutated, carefully trained foxes. Rather, I am a fox she is a vixen. I forget whether our children are called pups or cubs. While she stopped your car, I hid myself in your glove compartment. Sly, was it not?"

"A vixen!" Peter exclaimed. "Why, the little minx!" He pinched Greta's cheek, and she bit his finger. "Ow. This reminds me of an Arab I once knew who ran a flea circus in Iran. Perhaps you've heard of the The Thousand and One Arabian Mites? No? Well, one day one of them escaped. To make sure,

the Arab had to count them. One mite, two mites, three mites—"

Peter worked loose two wires from the dashboard. These he led back to the gas tank, while his story created the necessary diversion. Fishing a copper and a zinc penny from his pocket, he spit on a piece of paper and placed it between them.

"Nine hundred ninety-eight mites, nine hundred ninety-nine mites—" Pressing the two wires to his pennies, Peter flung himself from the car. He felt a blast of heat at his back, and a moment later heard a distant roar as the vehicle blew up.

"The old penny-battery trick always works," he mused, watching a column of smoke rise from what once was Kansas City. Great clouds of locusts swept by him, on their way to devastate wheatfields and dominate the planet . . .

Peter rushed to his anti-grav machine, which opened to the image of his earprint. As he lifted off, he felt he was not alone in the cabin. Keep calm, he thought, and continued to adjust the huge steam valves as if nothing were wrong. All the same, he knew he was being watched by someone — or something. He turned.

And gasped. A Horrible Spore was rolling toward him, seeking food.

"Mmmf," it bellowed.

There was no time for escape. Already the Spore's pseudopods were reaching for him. Peter's entire life passed before his eyes. Then, for the pseudopods had not yet clutched him, he speculated on the sort of life he could have had.

Roping steers, reading billboards, trading in my car, he thought bitterly. Chewing a stick of gum and throwing the wrapper into the Grand Canyon. Taking home movies of the wife and kids. For that matter, a wife and kids.

The Horrible Spore surrounded him and began its peculiar pattern of digestion, a fission process. Peter was split into two duplicates of himself, and these fissioned in turn. Shortly there were 100,000 tiny hims inside the Spore.

Peter knew a smidgen of mob psychology. He knew that by nature mobs are quarrelsome and arrogant, willful and dissatisfied. They long to plunder and burn, are terrible when frustrated, and generally are composed of cowards. He keenly felt all these qualities within himselves.

There was nothing to plunder, and only the pseudostomach of the Spore to burn. Seizing torches, the mob of himselves set fire to the Spore, which immediately disgorged them on a desert plain . . .

He had been pent up too long, and now he milled about, frustrated. Great droves of him threw down their satchels and wandered away, weeping, to die cowards'

deaths. A few of him, however, took up the abandoned luggage and began to pile it in great heaps. They started to quarrel over whether to plunder these satchels or to burn them, and soon they were battling furiously.

It was difficult to tell friend from foe in the confusion of fists and torches. Friend killed friend, and foe burned foe, until the sun went down on their madness. The last one of him fell asleep by the embers of his late allies . . .

Her name badge read *Melissa Forbes*. She had long ash-blonde hair and a lab coat that fitted snugly over soft breasts and hips. She was shaking him awake.

"Doctor, get up. We have work to do."

"Hmm? Oh, yes. Must have fallen asleep over the Fromminger equations. But who wouldn't?" He grinned, and Melissa caught her breath. Dr. Peter O'Hare was well aware of the power of his crooked grin. "Now where were we?"

"We must save the universe from certain destruction," she said throatily. "Two parallel universes have wandered off course. They will collide in minutes, exploding into a drop of pure energy, unless—"

"Do you mean—?" he gasped, struggling into his own lab coat. One side had been cut away to accommodate the satchel he seemed always to be carrying.

"Yes, Doctor. Only you can find a way out."

A few calculations with his slide rule, and the scientist had done so. "We will each go back into the past of one of the universes. There we will make the necessary adjustments to insure that the two will never meet. Alas, we will never be able to return."

"Then I can tell you," she sobbed. "Doctor, I love you." A bright tear ran down her cheek and splashed into the test tube in her hand.

"Do you mean—?" he gasped, and took her in his arms.

"No." She pushed him away. "There isn't time, darling. If only you could give me some token of remembrance—say, that satchel."

Peter turned away to hide his own emotion, and as he did he realized the lab had only three walls! Where the fourth should have been was a dark void, fil'ed with hostile, gleaming eyes. It was a trap, then. How well he knew the Ampian police, with their combination line-up and psychodrama!

Snatching up a convenient gun, Peter fired into the crowd. "*Sic semper tyrannis!*" he cried, leaping for the stage.

"All well and good," he said, pocketing the weapon, "but now how am I to get out of this hell?"

He realized for the first time that the incessant drumming had stopped. Those savages are surely

up to some devilment, he thought.

A white man stepped out of a thicket. He wore a white, flowing robe, and had a dissipated look about him.

"Are you by chance the White God?" asked Peter.

"I am Virgil, come to guide you out of this hell."

"Great Dante's Ghost! What do they call this place, O noble Mantuan?"

The poet looked blank for a moment. "Oh, the Slough of Despond, I guess. Here, pilgrim, let me carry thy burden."

"Hold this, instead," snarled Peter, and pumped eight slugs into Virgil. The poet assumed his true shape and scuttled away.

Adrian, the man he was supposed to meet, lay tied up in the alley behind the rocket terminal. As he loosened Adrian's bonds, Peter related the case to him.

"Rub your wrists to restore circulation, while I explain. They tied me up, too, and blindfolded me. They took me to another planet, but I counted the turns the spaceship made so that I could find my way back. They're an unscrupulous gang of servo-mechanisms, all right. The old phonograph record was just a smokescreen, a blind. What they really wanted was *the satchel itself.*"

"The satchel?"

"It's an antique, worth millions. The owner was stealing it from himself to collect the insurance. But I wasn't sure, so I hid the old phonograph record."

"Quick thinking, Chief. Where did you hide it?"

"In the most obvious place—*Annie's old phonograph.*"

"Amazing! But how did you know he wasn't the real Virgil?" asked Adrian.

"He gave himself away when he mentioned the Slough of Despond. You see, William Faulkner didn't invent the name until years *after* the *real* John Bunyan's death. From there on, the rest was easy—simple deduction, and adding two and two."

Peter punched the dents out of Adrian's green hat and handed it to him. He held a pocket mirror while Adrian put on the hat. Then Peter reloaded his gun and put eight slugs in him . . .

Well, that's the spy game, he thought. The good die young. You never get rich, but you get your kicks. One week the Arcrusian space pirates get out of hand, and the next week something rises out of the sea to nibble at Los Angeles.

I'll miss old Earth, though. Along about now it's turning into a ball of flame as the people of C on planet Amp go to war.

Chuckling, he pushed open the door of Annie's Earthside Bar . . .

Drought and heat and silence and isolation can do strange and unpredictable things to a person—especially to a lonely, starved woman . . . Another heart-filled and poignant "tale from home."

THE LONG HOT DAY

by L. E. BEHNEY

MAEDELL KELSHAW, STANDING at the dusty kitchen window, listened to the stir of the hot breeze in the dead corn leaves. All around the house, the sheds, and the barn, the corn stood whispering, shimmering palely in the white sunlight.

The men at the seed store had told Argus, "Don't plant corn this year. There hasn't been enough rain. It'll never make." The other farmers had heeded the advice, but not Argus. "I aim to plant my corn," he had said with a stubborn set to his big square jaw, and he had planted corn. The ditches had dried up; the river ran a scum-pooled trickle; heat poured up from the red seared earth; and the corn had died.

Argus, blank-faced, had shucked the dying ears, baring the withered, empty, milk-white kernels. His big sun-browned hands trembled. "I'll have to get a job," was all he said, and he left at dawn to work for Pete Sutter on his ranch in the valley.

All the long summer Argus had worked for another man. When he came home at night covered with dirt, his shirt and overalls sweat-rimed, he ate wordlessly, undressed, and dropped into bed. He was asleep even before Maedell had finished the dishes and blown out the lamp . . .

Maedell opened the neck of her dress and rolled up her sleeves. She wiped her hot face on a damp towel. It didn't help much—nothing did. The sun's blazing heat seemed to suck greedily every breath of coolness from the parched land.

Once she had thought the land beautiful, coming up the road in her husband's old truck, a new bride, full of hope and bright imaginings. They had come to the top of the hill and below them the little valley lay like a cup of green velvet held in the palm of the hills. It was spring and the killdeers trilled from the fence posts and the tall wild grasses rippled and shone in the sunlight. The branches of the willows along the river were tipped with golden green. Even the first sight of the raw frame house and the cluster of sheds and barns, all so naked and ugly on the barren mud-caked hillside, hadn't stilled her

excited wonder. She had clasped Argus' big hand and felt his fierce pride in his small farm.

It had seemed so simple and right for her to marry Argus. She had been keeping house for her widowed father and her two brothers. She had been 33 that spring and the neighbor women had said to her, "Here's Argus Kelshaw come home to find a wife. He's a good man, Maedell, he'd be a good catch for you," and she had gone to church with him in her best dress and put a touch of color on her dry lips. Excitement had made her sallow cheeks pink and lightened her dull eyes behind the gold-framed glasses. He had taken her to Wednesday night prayer meeting. On the way home he had proposed.

She thought now with sick longing of her father's tree-shaded white house and of the coolness of the wide lawns. She had been a fool. It was not that Argus had ever been mean to her; he had not; it was his calm acceptance of her. She cooked his meals, she did his washings. He bathed and shaved on Saturday nights and once a week he made love to her, on Sunday mornings, in a perfunctory, plodding way, as though it were just another chore. He seldom spoke.

She had brought her favorite books with her in a twine-bound cardboard box. The box was at the bottom of the bedroom closet. Dickens, Thackeray, Ruskin, Browning, C. A. Stephens—but she couldn't read; the words had lost their savor. She spent the long hot days sitting idly or walking without purpose through the tiny rooms. The walls were single board and covered with building paper, and the furnishings were meager—an ancient wooden icebox, a four-burner kerosene stove, a worktable and some open shelves in the kitchen, a threadbare couch and two chairs in the living room, an iron-frame bed and a gilt-knobbed dresser in the bedroom.

When she first came she had made curtains and scrubbed and cleaned—but now she did only the necessary things. She had even tried to raise a garden and flowers—once. Now the dead skeletons of the rose-bushes tapped on the bedroom window at night as she lay sleepless as an animal caught in a trap . . .

She sighed and mopped her streaming face. Today seemed hotter than ever. The sun was a glaring eye staring down at her. The hillside, tawny as a lion's pelt, rose around the house and closed off the faint breath of air, smothering her. She felt like running and screaming; but it was too hot. She went into the living room and found a paper to fan her face.

Something moved in the shimmer of heat on the road—a tall figure striding purposefully, a man bare-headed in the sun, a lean, bronzed, bearded man with a pack on his back and a long staff in his hand.

The dog, his back bumping on

the floor joists, rushed out from under the house with a sharp-tuned yapping.

The stranger stopped and raised his head and called, "Hello, there! Anybody home?" His voice had a lilting quality as though he were about to burst into laughter.

Maedell's fingers hurried to button the neck of her dress and smooth her sweat-matted hair. She stepped out onto the back porch letting the screen door slam behind her.

"Hello," he called again. "Will your dog bite?"

"Here," she said sharply. "Rusty, come back!"

The dog looked at her, his pink tongue dripping. The brown spots above his eyes lifted as if in inquiry.

"That's enough!" she said, stamping her foot. The dog ran back under the house stirring up a dust that rose through the warped boards of the porch floor.

The man came up to the steps. "I wonder if I could have a drink of water, Ma'am?"

"Of course," she said. "I'll get you some."

She stared down at him and a strange warmth that was not of the day came into her throat. He was neither young nor particularly handsome; his open-throated blue shirt was sweat-soaked and his face and arms were dust-grimmed. His thick hair and beard were brown and curly and so were the sun-glinting hairs on his muscular arms and broad chest. He had laughing red-brown eyes and his teeth were even and white against the darkness of his beard.

When she stood silent so long he said quietly, "With your permission I'll get water at the pump, Ma'am."

"Oh, no!" she said quickly. "It will be warm. I've got a pitcher in the icebox nice and cold. Come on in."

He hesitated a moment, then came up the steps into the shade of the porch, leaned his staff against the wall, and let his pack slip from his back to the floor.

"I thank you, Ma'am," he said smiling at her. "That sounds mighty good."

He sat at the kitchen worktable while she lifted the thick lid of the icebox and chipped a sliver from the dwindling cake of ice. She put the ice in a glass and poured water from the pitcher over it.

"Would you like some lemonade?" she asked. "I can fix it real fast."

"This is fine," he said, sipping from the glass. The back of his hand was hairy too.

Maedell suddenly thought of his hands hard and warm on her shoulders. *Shame!* she thought wildly. *Shame! Him a stranger and you a married woman! What if he suddenly told her she was pretty and tried to kiss her? She'd run and she'd scream—but nobody could hear her out here. Nobody at all. What if he tried to—*

She took off her glasses and set

them on the shelf. The pulse in her throat was beating so hard she thought he could hear it. Everything looked blurry without her glasses, and the rectangles of the windows were edged with rainbow shimmers. She'd always hated the glasses. Four-Eyes, the kids in school had called her. "Hey, Four-Eyes! Go away, Four-Eyes!"

"Can I get you some more ice?" she asked.

"Oh, no, this is fine," he said. His quick, red-brown eyes glanced around the room, seeing the stained paper on the walls, the crusted stove, the cobwebs in the corners, the dust that covered the worn linoleum rug, the breakfast dishes soaking in a pan of greasy water. She knew he saw the slovenliness and condemned her for it.

She said. "I've been sick. You'll have to excuse the mess. Usually I keep everything spic and span." She laughed lightly. Her voice sounded like a shrill whinny in her throbbing ears.

His warm brown eyes appraised her with a sort of impersonal pity. He smiled. *Was he laughing at her?* He said, with a courteous little bow, "I'm sure you are a wonderful housekeeper when you can be."

He put the glass on the table. Moisture had gathered on the sides and it ran down in silvery rivulets onto the faded oilcloth. He stood up. "I do thank you," he said, "for your kind hospitality and a cold glass of water on a hot day."

He went out onto the porch and picked up his pack. "Could you tell me how far it is to town?"

"About seven miles," she said faintly. Even without her glasses she could see the sparkling droplets of water caught in his beard and the laugh-wrinkles lacing the corners of his eyes. "It's a little shorter if you use the short cut to the main road. Go by the big barn and then take the path over the hill."

"Seven miles. Phew-ee, that's a far piece on a day like this."

"Wait here till it's cooler," she said, and her throat was suddenly aching and dry.

He glanced at her with quick awareness and moved a step away. She could feel his instinctive withdrawal.

"I thank you, Ma'am, but I guess I'd best be moving on."

He settled the pack on his shoulders, picked up his staff, and strode across the yard toward the barn.

She watched numbly leaning against the splintery railing of the porch. His free-striding, upright figure didn't come out on the path across the hill. He was resting in the barn's shadowy interior, waiting for the evening's coolness.

She stepped down from the porch and stood in the sun looking toward the barn. Then she remembered his impersonal glance and the look she had glimpsed on his bearded face—the alarmed awareness, the fleeting revulsion.

She fled back into the house. The

sun was lowering and it would soon be time to prepare supper. Argus would be coming home. She lighted a burner on the kerosene stove and put on a kettle of water. That emptied the water bucket, so she went out into the backyard and hung the bucket on the pump spout.

The metal pump handle was so burning hot that she had to wrap her apron around it before she could pump the bucket full. She poured the water into the wooden trough beneath the button bush for the hens, then filled the bucket again and carried it brimming into the house. She carefully didn't look at the barn, though she walked as gracefully as she could.

In the hot kitchen she washed the dishes, swept away the cobwebs, and mopped the floor. Once started, she swept and dusted the other two rooms—not that Argus would notice; he never did. Then it was time to prepare the evening meal.

She had it almost ready when Argus swung the old truck into the front yard. Dust swirled behind him and hung like a reddish pillar in the still air. Even the dead corn leaves drooped unstirring. Heat filled the little valley like a cup of molten glass.

Argus stopped the truck and climbed stiffly down from the seat. His heavy shoulders were slack and his face wore its usual cold, sullen frown. He brushed the dirt from his overalls and came into the house. He looked at his wife without changing expression and asked, "Supper ready?"

She nodded and he sat down at the table while she filled his plate. She sat down across from him but she had no appetite. One of her violent headaches had started and she had put her glasses back on, but the throbbing behind her eyes grew worse.

Argus ate unnoticing, his eyes fixed on his plate. She could hear him chew. He smelled of sour sweat. His fingers were thick and the nails black and broken. His beard stubble was graying. His Adam's apple jerked up and down each time he swallowed.

She sat with her arms tightly folded, her hands clenched. Suddenly she shouted at him, "He kissed me! He put his filthy hands on me!"

Argus Kelshaw grunted. He took a bite of the watery potatoes. His jaws stopped moving and he raised his eyes to her red, weeping face.

"What?" he asked.

"That man!" she cried hysterically. "He came here today! He kissed me. He put his filthy hands on me. He tried to—to do—awful things!"

"What man?" Argus demanded.

"A tramp! A dreadful tramp! He came here today and asked for a drink of water. When I gave it to him he came after me like an animal. It was awful!" She stood up and leaned across the table.

When Argus still sat staring at her incredulously she screamed, "I'm

your wife! Don't you care? Aren't you going to do something?"

Argus Kelshaw's heavy face had gone dead-white. He sprang to his feet sending his chair crashing to the floor. He seized her arms in a crushing grip. "What did he do to you? *What?*"

"He kissed me! He had a great awful beard! He put his filthy hands on me!"

Kelshaw shook her fiercely. "What else did he do?"

"Nothing," she sobbed. "I swear it! He wanted to but I wouldn't let him!"

"Where'd he go? Where is he?"

"In the barn."

Argus Kelshaw rushed out of the house.

Maedell waited, her pounding head in her hands. Her mouth hung open, she breathed in shuddering gasps, her eyes behind her gold-rimmed glasses had a glazed look. Why had she said those things? The words had come tumbling out as though her tongue and her mouth belonged to someone else. The man, he had done those things, hadn't he? At least he had wanted to—or was it she who had wanted him to?

From the direction of the barn came two thunderous explosions so close together they sounded almost as one. The shotgun! Argus kept it in the shed for shooting crows and hawks.

She ran out of the house and across the barn lot through the reddish dusk to the towering bulk of the hay barn. In the shadowy darkness she saw Argus standing over the bearded stranger with the still-smoking shotgun in his hands. His broad face had a dazed look.

Maedell looked down at the man. His tall body seemed twisted and shrunken. A dark wetness had spread across his shirt front. Blood ran from his mouth and stained his thick curly beard. His eyes were half open and a film of dust covered the wide pupils.

"I lied," Maedell said dully. "I lied to you, Argus. He never touched me. Never. Oh, dear God, what have I done?"

Kelshaw raised his big head. He turned his eyes slowly and looked at his wife. "I didn't mean to kill him," he said heavily. "He was layin' there asleep and all of a sudden it come over me. Seems like everything's gone wrong lately. The corn crop and the heat and tryin' to make enough money so's the mortgage could be paid and we wouldn't lose the place. Looks like we're gonna lose it anyway. I was countin' on that corn—and then on you, the only thing I had left. I couldn't stand the idea of someone pawin' over you—the only blessed thing I had left to me."

She stared at him. "You do love me, don't you? Oh, Argus, seemed like somebody had to. I've been so lonesome."

"I'm not much on words, Maedell," Argus Kelshaw said. "I guess I figured you knew."

He dropped the shotgun on the hay-strewn earth floor, got a canvas from a stall in a corner of the barn, and covered the dead man. Already the blow flies were beginning to swarm.

"Pack your things, Maedell. I'll take you into town and you can catch the train back to your folks. I got paid today. I'll give you what I got. It ain't much, but I reckon it'll be enough."

"What will you do?" the woman asked, barely able to speak.

"I'll have to tell the Sheriff. I'll tell him me and the stranger had a quarrel and I shot him. No use draggin' you into it."

Maedell came close to her husband and put her hand on his arm. "I'm not going back home," she said. "It was my fault, what happened. I'll go with you into town."

They came out of the shadowy barn into the glow of twilight. A faint cooling wind had sprung up and now it stirred the field of dead corn.

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

It is not often that detection and criminalistics become matters of deep national concern; but the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy has made them so. The murder fancier should be even more impressed than the average citizen by Mark Lane's RUSH TO JUDGMENT (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $5.95); for he will know enough to be shocked time and again by inadequacies and incompetencies of investigation such as no writer of police procedural novels would dare to present. This convincing documentation of the charge that the Warren Commission failed in its task of truth-finding makes a profoundly disturbing book.

★★★★ **KILLER DOLPHIN, *by Ngaio Marsh*** (Little, Brown, $4.95)

A gorgeous novel of the theater—Elizabethan, Victorian and contemporary—embellished by a prettily-clued murder problem for Superintendent Roderick Alleyn. Elegant entertainment.

★★★★ **AT BERTRAM'S HOTEL, *by Agatha Christie*** (Dodd, Mead, $4.50)

Miss Marple investigates the peculiar undercurrents to life in a conservatively exquisite London hotel; her creator's skill is as magically adroit as ever. And do not miss our Jane in 13 CLUES FOR MISS MARPLE (Dodd, Mead, $3.50), stories selected by R. T. Bond from three earlier volumes, 1933–61.

★★★★ **SUNDAY; THE LITTLE MAN FROM ARCHANGEL, *by Georges Simenon, translated by Nigel Ryan*** (Harcourt, Brace & World, $4.95)

Two of Simenon's inimitably subtle, muted and revealing studies in death; SUNDAY is one of his best in years.

★★★★ **IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH, *by Ruth Rendell*** (Crime Club, $3.50)

The rapidly rising Rendell offers, in the vein of the romance-thriller, one of the most admirable jobs of surprise-plot-construction that I have ever seen.

★★★ **CONSIDER THE EVIDENCE, *by Jeffrey Ashford*** (Walker, $3.50)

A striking new kind of plot for the procedural novel, which my son the policeman found "both shocking and sympathetic"; I concur.

The theft of great works of art is a peculiar kind of crime, psychologically unlike all other stealing; and Milton Esterow reveals much of its nature and allure in THE ART STEALERS (Macmillan, $5.95), highlighted by the superb story of the theft of the *Mona Lisa* in 1911. He also makes a few suggestive points about artists, art dealers and art critics, some of whom make the pathological thieves seem relatively rational.

★★★ **CONCEAL AND DISGUISE, *by Henry Kane*** (Macmillan, $3.95)

The CIA ensnares ex-Inspector McGregor in a plot unlike any other in private-eye fiction, brightly and crisply told.

★★★ **MURDER, LONDON-SOUTH AFRICA, *by John Creasey*** (Scribner's, $3.95)

The international puzzle of diamond-smuggling is good; but more interesting is Creasey's unconventional and acute study of Superintendent Handsome West as a man going through the tensions of the male menopause. For Creasey in a less serious thriller, a wildly Wallace-like science-fiction entertainment, see THE INFERNO (Walker, $3.95).

★★★ **THE GHOST CAR, *by Bill Knox*** (Crime Club, $3.50)

Chief Inspector Colin Thane (Millside Division, Glasgow) stars in a fine solid combination of the spy novel and the procedural story.

★★★ **FANCY'S KNELL, *by Babs H. Deal*** (Doubleday, $3.95)

Brutal rape-murder exposes hidden evils of small Tennessee town. Restrained but savage specimen of the sociological detective novel.

★★★ **THE SHAMIR OF DACHAU, *by Christopher Davis*** (New American Library, $4.50)

Vengeance on a war criminal in today's Germany makes a well-plotted, well-written thriller, with sharp offtrail ironies.

★★★ **THE MORNING AFTER DEATH, *by Nicholas Blake*** (Harper & Row, $4.95)

Nigel Strangeways encounters murder at Cabot University, Mass.; his reactions to the American scene are as entertaining as the puzzle.

Murder and its literature are among the many topics touched upon (and by no means lightly) by Fredric Wertham, M.D., in A SIGN FOR CAIN (Macmillan, $6.95). Subtitled "an exploration of human violence," this is a curious attempt to found a new science of "violentology." Dr. Werthem's maverick opinions, upon a myriad of allied subjects, are at times irritating, but always stimulating and occasionally perturbing.

a "locked room" mystery by

JOHN DICKSON CARR

"It happened out in the hall there. A poor woman was killed where there was no one to kill her, and no one could have done it. But she was murdered."

Resist that if you can . . .

TO WAKE THE DEAD

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

ALTHOUGH ONE SNOWFLAKE HAD already sifted past the lights, the great doors of the house stood open. It seemed less a snowflake than a shadow; for a bitter wind whipped after it, and the doors creaked. Inside, Rodney and Muriel Hunter could see a dingy, narrow hall paved in dull red tiles, with a Jacobean staircase at the rear. (At that time, of course, there was no dead woman lying inside.)

To find such a place in the loneliest part of the Weald of Kent—a Seventeenth Century country house whose floors had grown humped and its beams scrubbed by the years—was what they had expected. Even to find electricity was not surprising. But Rodney Hunter thought he had seldom seen so many lights in one house, and Muriel had been wondering about it ever since their car turned the bend in the road.

"Clearlawns" lived up to its name. It stood in the midst of a slope of flat grass, now wiry white with frost, and there was no tree or shrub within twenty yards of it. Those lights contrasted with a certain inhospitable and damp air about the house, as though the owner were compelled to keep them burning.

"But why is the front door *open?*" insisted Muriel.

In the driveway the engine of their car coughed and died. The house was now a secret blackness of gables, emitting light at every chink, and silhouetting the stalks of the wisteria vines which climbed it. On either side of the front door were little-paned windows whose curtains had not been drawn. Toward their left they could see into a low dining room, with table and sideboard set for a cold supper; toward their right was a darkish

library moving with the reflections of a bright fire.

The sight of the fire warmed Rodney Hunter, but it made him feel guilty. They were very late. At five o'clock, without fail, he had promised Jack Bannister, they would be at "Clearlawns" to inaugurate the Christmas party.

Engine trouble in leaving London was one thing; idling at a country pub along the way, drinking hot ale and listening to the radio sing carols until a sort of Dickensian jollity stole into you, was something else. But both he and Muriel were young; they were very fond of each other and of things in general; and they had worked themselves into a glow of Christmas, which—as they stood before the creaking doors of "Clearlawns"—grew oddly cool.

There was no real reason, Rodney thought, to feel disquiet. He hoisted their luggage, including a big box of presents for Jack and Molly's children out of the rear of the car. That his footsteps should sound loud on the gravel was only natural. He put his head into the doorway and whistled. Then he began to bang the knocker. Its sound seemed to seek out every corner of the house and then come back like a questing dog; but there was no response.

"I'll tell you something else," he said. "There's nobody in the house."

Muriel ran up the three steps to stand beside him. She had drawn her fur coat close around her, and her face was bright with cold.

"But that's impossible!" she said. "I mean, even if they're out, the servants—! Molly told me she keeps a cook and two maids. Are you sure we've got the right place?"

"Yes. The name's on the gate, and there's no other house within a mile."

With the same impulse they craned their necks to look through the windows of the dining room on the left. Cold fowl on the sideboard, a great bowl of chestnuts; and, now they could see it, another good fire, before which stood a chair with a piece of knitting put aside on it.

Rodney tried the knocker again, vigorously, but the sound was all wrong. It was as though they were even more lonely in that core of light, with the east wind rushing across the Weald, and the door creaking again.

"I suppose we'd better go in," said Rodney. He added, with a lack of Christmas spirit, "Here, this is a devil of a trick! What do you think has happened? I'll swear that fire has been made up in the last fifteen minutes."

He stepped into the hall and set down the bags. As he was turning to close the door, Muriel put her hand on his arm.

"I say, Rod. Do you think you'd better close it?"

"Why not?"

"I—I don't know."

"The place is getting chilly

enough as it is," he pointed out, unwilling to admit that the same thought had occurred to him. He closed both doors and shot their bar into place; and, at the same moment, a girl came out of the door to the library on the right.

She was such a pleasant-faced girl that they both felt a sense of relief. Why she had not answered the knocking had ceased to be a question; she filled a void. She was pretty, not more than twenty-one or -two, and had an air of primness which made Rodney Hunter vaguely associate her with a governess or a secretary, though Jack Bannister had never mentioned any such person. She was plump, but with a curiously narrow waist; and she wore brown. Her brown hair was neatly parted, and her brown eyes—long eyes, which might have given a hint of secrecy or curious smiles if they had not been so placid—looked concerned. In one hand she carried what looked like a small white bag of linen or cotton. And she spoke with a dignity which did not match her years.

"I am most terribly sorry," she told them. "I *thought* I heard someone, but I was so busy that I could not be sure. Will you forgive me?"

She smiled. Hunter's private view was that his knocking had been loud enough to wake the dead; but he murmured conventional things. As though conscious of some faint incongruity about the white bag in her hand, she held it up.

"For Blind Man's Bluff," she explained. "They do cheat so, I'm afraid, and not only the children. If one uses an ordinary handkerchief tied round the eyes, they always manage to get a corner loose. But if you take this, and you put it fully over a person's head, and you tie it round the neck"—a sudden gruesome image occurred to Rodney Hunter—"then it works so much better, don't you think?" Her eyes seemed to turn inward, and to grow absent. "But I must not keep you talking here. You are——?"

"My name is Hunter. This is my wife. I'm afraid we've arrived late, but I understood Mr. Bannister was expecting—"

"He did not tell you?" asked the girl in brown.

"Tell me what?"

"Everyone here, including the servants, is always out of the house at this hour on this particular date. It is the custom; I believe it has been the custom for more than sixty years. There is some sort of special church service."

Rodney Hunter's imagination had been devising all sorts of fantastic explanations: the first of them being that this demure lady had murdered the members of the household, and was engaged in disposing of the bodies.

What put this nonsensical notion into his head he could not tell, unless it was his own profession of detective-story writing. But he felt

relieved to hear a commonplace explanation. Then the woman spoke again.

"Of course, it is a pretext, really. The rector, that dear man, invented it all those years ago to save embarrassment. What happened here had nothing to do with the murder, since the dates were so different; and I suppose most people have forgotten now why the tenants *do* prefer to stay away during seven and eight o'clock on Christmas Eve. I doubt if Mrs. Bannister even knows the real reason, though I should imagine Mr. Bannister must know it. But what happens here cannot be very pleasant, and it wouldn't do to have the children see it—would it?"

Muriel spoke with such sudden directness that her husband knew she was afraid. "Who are you?" Muriel said. "And what on earth are you talking about?"

"I am quite sane, really," their hostess assured them, with a smile that was half cheery and half coy. "I dare say it must be all very confusing to you, poor dear. But I am forgetting my duties. Please come in and sit down before the fire, and let me offer you something to drink."

She took them into the library on the right, going ahead with a walk that was like a bounce, and looking over her shoulder out of those long eyes. The library was a long low room with beams. The windows toward the road were uncurtained; but those in the side wall, where a faded red-brick fireplace stood, were bay windows with draperies closed across them. As their hostess put them before the fire, Hunter could have sworn he saw one of the draperies move.

"You need not worry about it," she assured him, following his glance toward the bay. "Even if you looked in there, you might not see anything now. I believe some gentleman did try it once, a long time ago. He stayed in the house for a wager. But when he pulled the curtain back, he did not see anything in the bay—at least, anything quite. He felt some hair, and it moved. That is why they have so many lights nowadays."

Muriel had sat down on a sofa, and was lighting a cigarette—to the rather prim disapproval of their hostess, Hunter thought.

"May we have a hot drink?" Muriel asked crisply. "And then, if you don't mind, we might walk over and meet the Bannisters coming from church."

"Oh, please don't do that!" cried the other. She had been standing by the fireplace, her hands folded and turned outward. Now she ran across to sit down beside Muriel; and the swiftness of her movement, no less than the touch of her hand on Muriel's arm, made the latter draw back.

Hunter was now completely convinced that their hostess was out of her head. Why she held such fascina-

tion for him, though, he could not understand. In her eagerness to keep them there, the girl had come upon a new idea. On a table behind the sofa, bookends held a row of modern novels. Conspicuously displayed—probably due to Molly Bannister's tact—were two of Rodney Hunter's detective stories. The girl put a finger on them.

"May I ask if you wrote these?"

He admitted it.

"Then," she said with sudden composure, "it would probably interest you to hear about the murder. It was a most perplexing business, you know; the police could make nothing of it, and no one ever has been able to solve it." An arresting eye fixed on his. "It happened out in the hall there. A poor woman was killed where there was no one to kill her, and no one could have done it. But she was murdered."

Hunter started to get up from his chair; then he changed his mind, and sat down again. "Go on," he said.

"You must forgive me if I am a little uncertain about dates," she urged. "I think it was in the early eighteen-seventies, and I am sure it was in early February—because of the snow. It was a bad winter then; the farmers' livestock all died. My people have been bred up in the district for years, and I know that. The house here was much as it is now, except that there was none of this lighting—only paraffin lamps, poor girl! And you were obliged to pump up what water you wanted; and people read the newspaper quite through, and discussed it for days.

"The people were a little different to look at, too. I am sure I do not understand why we think beards are so strange nowadays; they seem to think that men who had beards never had any emotions. But even young men wore them then, and looked handsome enough. There was a newly married couple living in this house at the time—at least, they had been married only the summer before. They were named Edward and Jane Waycross, and it was considered a good match everywhere.

"Edward Waycross did not have a beard, but he had bushy side-whiskers which he kept curled. He was not a handsome man, either, being somewhat dry and hard-favored; but he was a religious man, and a good man, and an excellent man of business, they say—a manufacturer of agricultural implements at Hawkhurst.

"He had determined that Jane Anders would make him a good wife, and I dare say she did. The girl had several suitors. Although Mr. Waycross was the best match, I know it surprised people a little when she accepted him, because she was thought to have been fond of another man—a more striking man, whom many of the young girls were after.

"This was Jeremy Wilkes who

came of a very good family, but was considered wicked. He was no younger than Mr. Waycross, but he had a great black beard, and wore white waistcoats with gold chains, and drove a gig. Of course, there had been gossip, but that was because Jane Anders was considered pretty."

Their hostess had been sitting back against the sofa, quietly folding the little white bag with one hand, and speaking in a prim voice. Now she did something which turned her hearers cold.

You have probably seen the same thing done many times. She had been touching her cheek lightly with the fingers of the other hand. In doing so, she touched the flesh at the corner under her lower eyelid, and accidentally drew down the corner of that eyelid—which should have exposed the red part of the inner lid at the corner of the eye. It was not red. It was of a sickly pale color.

"In the course of his business dealings," she went on, "Mr. Waycross had often to go to London, and usually he was obliged to remain overnight. But Jane Waycross was not afraid to remain alone in the house. She had a good servant, a staunch old woman, and a good dog. Even so, Mr. Waycross commended her for her courage."

The girl smiled. "On the night I wish to tell you of, in February, Mr. Waycross was absent. Unfortunately, too, the old servant was absent; she had been called away as a midwife to attend her cousin, and Jane Waycross had allowed her to go. This was known in the village, since all such affairs are well known, and some uneasiness was felt—this house being isolated, as you know. But Jane was not afraid.

"It was a very cold night, with a heavy fall of snow which had stopped about nine o'clock. You must know, beyond doubt, that poor Jane Waycross was alive after it had stopped snowing. It must have been nearly half-past nine when a Mr. Moody—a very good and sober man who lived in Hawkhurst—was driving home along the road past this house. As you know, it stands in the middle of a great bare stretch of lawn; and you can see the house clearly from the road.

"Mr. Moody saw poor Jane at the window of one of the upstairs bedrooms, with a candle in her hand, closing the shutters. But he was not the only witness who saw her alive.

"On that same evening, Mr. Wilkes—the handsome gentleman I spoke to you of a moment ago—had been at a tavern in the village of Five Ashes with Dr. Sutton, the local doctor, and a racing gentleman named Pawley. At about half-past eleven they started to drive home in Mr. Wilkes's gig to Cross-in-Hand. I am afraid they had been drinking, but they were all in their sober senses.

"The landlord of the tavern remembered the time because he

had stood in the doorway to watch the gig, which had fine yellow wheels, go spanking away as though there were no snow; and Mr. Wilkes was wearing one of the new round hats with a curly brim.

"There was a bright moon. 'And no danger,' Dr. Sutton always said afterwards; 'shadows of trees and fences as clear as though a silhouette cutter had made 'em for sixpence.' But when they were passing this house Mr. Wilkes pulled up sharp. There was a bright light in the window of one of the downstairs rooms —this room, in fact. They sat out there looking round the hood of the gig, and wondering.

"Mr. Wilkes spoke. 'I don't like this,' he said. 'You know, gentlemen, that Waycross is still in London; and the lady in question is in the habit of retiring early. I am going up there to find out if anything is wrong.'

"With that he jumped out of the gig, his black beard jutting out and his breath smoking. He said, 'And if it is a burglar, then, by Something, gentlemen'—I will not repeat the word he used—'by Something, gentlemen, I'll settle him.'

"He walked through the gate and up to the house—they could follow every step he made—and looked into the windows of this room here. Presently he returned looking relieved—they could see him by the light of the gig lamps—but wiping the moisture off his forehead.

" 'It is all right,' he said to them. 'Waycross has come home. But, by Something, gentlemen, he is growing thinner these days, or it is shadows.'

"Then he told them what he had seen. If you look through the front windows—there—you can look sideways and see out through the doorway into the main hall. He said he had seen Mrs. Waycross standing in the hall with her back to the staircase, wearing a blue dressing wrap over her nightgown, and her hair down round her shoulders. Standing in front of her, with his back to Mr. Wilkes, was a tallish, thin man like Mr. Waycross, with a long greatcoat and a tall hat like Mr. Waycross'.

"*She* was carrying either a candle or a lamp; and he remembered how the tall hat seemed to wag back and forth, as though the man were talking to her or putting out his hands towards her. For he said he could not see the woman's face.

"Of course, it was not Mr. Waycross; but how were they to know that?

"At about seven o'clock next morning, Mrs. Randall, the old servant, returned. A fine boy had been born to her cousin the night before. Mrs. Randall came home through the white dawn and the white snow, and found the house all locked up. She could get no answer to her knocking. Being a woman of great resolution, she eventually broke a window and

got in. But when she saw what was in the front hall, she went out screaming for help.

"Poor Jane was past help. I know I should not speak of these things; but I must. She was lying on her face in the hall. From the waist down her body was much charred and—unclothed, you know, because fire had burned away most of the nightgown and the dressing wrap. The tiles of the hall were soaked with blood and paraffin oil, the oil having come from a broken lamp with a thick blue-silk shade which was lying a little distance away. Near it was a china candlestick with a candle.

"This fire had also charred a part of the paneling of the wall, and a part of the staircase. Fortunately, the floor is of brick tiles, and there had not been much paraffin left in the lamp, or the house would have been set afire.

"But she had not died from burns alone. Her throat had been cut with a deep slash from some very sharp blade. But she had been alive for a while to feel both things, for she had crawled forward on her hands while she was burning. It was a cruel death, a horrible death for a soft person like that."

There was a pause. The expression on the face of the narrator, the plump girl in the brown dress, altered slightly. So did the expression of her eyes. She was sitting beside Muriel, and moved a little closer.

"Of course, the police came. I do not understand such things, I am afraid, but they found that the house had not been robbed. They also noticed the odd thing I have mentioned—that there was both a lamp *and* a candle in a candlestick near her. The lamp came from Mr. and Mrs. Waycross' bedroom upstairs, and so did the candlestick; there were no other lamps or candles downstairs except the lamps waiting to be filled next morning in the back kitchen.

"But the police thought she would not have come downstairs carrying both the lamp *and* the candle as well.

"She must have brought the lamp, because that was broken. When the murderer took hold of her, they thought, she had dropped the lamp, and it went out; the paraffin spilled, but did not catch fire. Then this man in the tall hat, to finish his work after he had cut her throat, went upstairs, got a candle, and set fire to the spilled oil.

"I am stupid at these things; but even I should have guessed that this must mean someone familiar with the house. Also, if she came downstairs, it must have been to let someone in at the front door; and that could not have been a burglar.

"You may be sure all the gossips were like police from the start, even when the police hemmed and hawed, because they knew Mrs. Waycross must have opened the door to a man who was not her

husband. And immediately they found an indication of this, in the mess that the fire and blood had made in the hall. Some distance away from poor Jane's body there was a medicine bottle, such as chemists use. I think it had been broken in two pieces; and on one intact piece they found sticking some fragments of a letter that had not been quite burned.

"It was in a man's handwriting, not her husband's, and they made out enough of it to understand. It was full of—expressions of love, you know, and it made an appointment to meet her there on that night."

Rodney Hunter, as the girl paused, felt impelled to ask a question.

"Did they know whose handwriting it was?"

"It was Jeremy Wilkes's," replied the other simply. "Though they never proved that, never more than slightly suspected it, and the circumstances did not bear it out. In fact, a knife stained with blood was actually found in Mr. Wilkes's possession. But the police never brought it to anything; for, you see, not Mr. Wilkes—or anyone else in the world—could possibly have done the murder."

"I don't understand that," said Hunter, rather sharply.

"Forgive me if I am stupid about telling things," urged their hostess in a tone of apology. She seemed to be listening to the chimney growl under a cold sky, and listening with hard, placid eyes. "But even the village gossips could tell that. When Mrs. Randall came here to the house on that morning, both the front and the back doors were locked and securely bolted on the inside. All the windows were locked on the inside. If you will look at the fastenings in this dear place, you will know what that means.

"But, bless you, that was the least of it! I told you about the snow. The snowfall had stopped at nine o'clock in the evening, hours and hours before Mrs. Waycross was murdered. When the police came, there were only two separate sets of footprints in the great unmarked half acre of snow round the house. One set belonged to Mr. Wilkes, who had come up and looked in through the window the night before. The other belonged to Mrs. Randall. The police could follow and explain both sets of tracks; *but there were no other tracks at all, and no one was hiding in the house!*

"Of course, it was absurd to suspect Mr. Wilkes. It was not only that he told a perfectly straight story about the man in the tall hat; but both Dr. Sutton and Mr. Pawley, who drove back with him from Five Ashes, were there to swear he could not have done it. You understand, he came no closer to the house than the windows of this room. They could watch every step he made in the moonlight, and they did.

"Afterwards he drove home with Dr. Sutton, and slept there, or, I should say, they continued their terrible drinking until daylight. It is true that they found in his possession a knife with blood on it, but he explained that he had used the knife to gut a rabbit.

"It was the same with poor Mrs. Randall, who had been up all night about her midwife's duties, though naturally it was even more absurd to think of *her*. But there were no other footprints at all, either coming to or going from the house, in all that stretch of snow; and all the ways in or out were locked on the inside."

It was Muriel who spoke then, in a voice that tried to be crisp, but wavered in spite of her. "Are you telling us that all this is true?" she demanded.

"I am teasing you a little, my dear," said the other. "But, really and truly, it all did happen. Perhaps I will show you in a moment."

"I suppose it was really the husband who did it?" asked Muriel in a bored tone.

"Poor Mr. Waycross!" said their hostess tenderly. "He spent that night in a temperance hotel near Charing Cross Station, as he always did, and, of course, he never left it. When he learned about his wife's duplicity"—again Hunter thought she was going to pull down a corner of her eyelid—"it nearly drove him out of his mind. I think he gave up agricultural machinery and took to preaching, but I am not sure. I know he left the district soon afterwards, and before he left he insisted on burning the mattress of their bed. It was a dreadful scandal."

"But in that case," insisted Hunter, "who did kill her? And if there were no footprints and all the doors were locked, how did the murderer come or go? Finally, if all this happened in February, what does it have to do with people being out of the house on Christmas Eve?"

"Ah, that is the real story. That is what I meant to tell you."

She grew very subdued.

"It must have been very interesting to watch the people alter and grow older, or find queer paths, in the years afterwards. For, of course, nothing did happen as yet. The police presently gave it all up; for decency's sake it was allowed to rest. There was a new pump built in the market square; and the news of the Prince of Wales's going to India in '75 to talk about; and presently a new family came to live at 'Clearlawns,' and began to raise their children. The trees and the rains in summer were just the same, you know. It must have been seven or eight years before anything happened, for Jane Waycross was very patient.

"Several of the people had died in the meantime. Mrs. Randall had, in a fit of quinsy; and so had Dr. Sutton, but that was a great mercy, because he fell by the way when he was going out to perform an

amputation with too much of the drink in him. But Mr. Pawley had prospered—and, above all, so had Mr. Wilkes. He had become an even finer figure of a man, they tell me, as he drew near middle age. When he married he gave up all his loose habits. Yes, he married; it was the Tinsley heiress, Miss Linshaw, whom he had been courting at the time of the murder; and I have heard that poor Jane Waycross, even after *she* was married to Mr. Waycross, used to bite her pillow at night because she was so horribly jealous of Miss Linshaw.

"Mr. Wilkes had always been tall, and now he was finely stout. He always wore frock coats. Though he had lost most of his hair, his beard was full and curly; he had twinkling black eyes, and ruddy cheeks, and a bluff voice. All the children ran to him. They say he broke as many feminine hearts as before. At any wholesome entertainment he was always the first to lead the cotillion or applaud the fiddler, and I do not know what hostesses would have done without him.

"On Christmas Eve, then—remember, I am not sure of the date—the Fentons gave a Christmas party. The Fentons were the very nice family who had taken this house afterwards, you know. There was to be no dancing, but all the old games. Naturally, Mr. Wilkes was the first to be invited, and the first to accept; for everything was all smoothed away by time, like the wrinkles in last year's counterpane; and what's past *is* past, or so they say. They had decorated the house with holly and mistletoe, and guests began to arrive as early as two in the afternoon.

"I had all this from Mrs. Fenton's aunt—one of the Warwickshire Abbotts—who was actually staying here at the time. In spite of such a festal season the preparations had not been going at all well that day, though such preparations usually did. Miss Abbott complained that there was a nasty earthy smell in the house.

"It was a dark and raw day, and the chimneys did not seem to draw as well as they should. What is more, Mrs. Fenton cut her finger when she was carving the cold fowl, because she said one of the children had been hiding behind the window curtains in here, and peeping out at her; she was very angry. But Mr. Fenton, who was going about the house in his carpet slippers before the arrival of the guests, called her 'Mother' and said that it was Christmas.

"It is certainly true that they forgot all about this when the fun of the games began. Such squealings you never heard!—or so I am told. Foremost of all at bobbing for apples or nuts was Mr. Jeremy Wilkes. He stood, gravely paternal, in the midst of everything, with his ugly wife beside him, and stroked his beard. He kissed each of the ladies on the cheek under the mistle-

toe; there was also some scampering to kiss him; and, though he *did* remain for longer than was necessary behind the window curtains with the younger Miss Twigelow, his wife only smiled.

"There was only one unpleasant incident, soon forgotten. Towards dusk a great gusty wind began to come up, with the chimneys smoking worse than usual. It being nearly dark, Mr. Fenton said it was time to fetch in the snapdragon bowl, and watch it flame. You know the game? It is a great bowl of lighted spirit, and you must thrust in your hand and pluck out a raisin from the bottom without scorching your fingers.

"Mr. Fenton carried it in on a tray in the half darkness; it was flickering with that blueish flame you have seen on Christmas puddings. Miss Abbott said that once, in carrying it, he started and turned round. She said that for a second she thought there was a face looking over his shoulder, and it wasn't a nice face.

"Later in the evening, when the children were sleepy and there was tissue paper scattered all over the house, the grownups began their games in earnest. Someone suggested Blind Man's Bluff. They were mostly using the hall and this room here, as having more space than the dining room. Various members of the party were blindfolded with the men's handkerchiefs; but there was a dreadful amount of cheating.

"Mr. Fenton grew quite annoyed about it, because the ladies almost always caught Mr. Wilkes when they could; Mr. Wilkes was laughing heartily, and his great cravat with the silver pin had almost come loose.

"To make it certain nobody could cheat, Mr. Fenton got a little white linen bag—like this one. It was the pillow cover off the baby's cot, really; and he said nobody could look through that if it were tied over the head.

"I should explain that they had been having some trouble with the lamp in this room. Mr. Fenton said, 'Confound it, mother, what is wrong with that lamp? Turn up the wick, will you?' It was really quite a good lamp from Spence and Minstead's, and should not have burned so dull as it did.

"In the confusion, while Mrs. Fenton was trying to make the light better, and he was looking over his shoulder at her, Mr. Fenton had been rather absently fastening the bag on the head of the last person caught. He has said since that he did not notice who it was. No one else noticed, either, the light being so dim and there being such a large number of people. It seemed to be a girl in a broad blueish kind of dress, standing over near the door.

"Perhaps you know how people act when they have just been blindfolded in this game. First they

usually stand very still, as though they were smelling or sensing in which direction to go. Sometimes they make a sudden jump, or sometimes they begin to shuffle gently forward. Everyone noticed what an air of *purpose* there seemed to be about this person whose face was covered; she went forward very slowly, and seemed to crouch down a bit.

"It began to move towards Mr. Wilkes in very short but quick little jerks, the white bag bobbing on its face. At this time Mr. Wilkes was sitting at the end of the table, laughing with his face pink above the beard, and a glass of our Kentish cider in his hand. I want you to imagine this room as being very dim, and much more cluttered, what with all the tassels they had on the furniture then; and the high-piled hair of the ladies, too.

"The hooded person got to the edge of the table. It began to edge along towards Mr. Wilkes's chair; and then it jumped.

"Mr. Wilkes got up and skipped—yes, skipped—out of its way, laughing. It waited quietly, after which it went, in the same slow way, towards him again. It nearly got him again, by the edge of the potted plant. All this time it did not say anything, you understand, although everyone was applauding it and crying encouraging advice. It kept its head down.

"Miss Abbott says she began to notice an unpleasant faint smell of burned cloth or something worse, which turned her half ill. By the time the hooded person came stooping clear across the room, as certainly as though it could see him, Mr. Wilkes was not laughing any longer.

"In the corner by one bookcase, he said out loud, 'I'm tired of this silly, rotten game; go away, do you hear?' Nobody there had ever heard him speak like that, in such a loud, wild way, but they laughed and thought it must be the Kentish cider.

" 'Go away!' cried Mr. Wilkes again, and began to strike at it with his fist. All this time, Miss Abbott says, she had observed his face gradually changing. He dodged again, very pleasant and nimble for such a big man, but with the perspiration running down his face. Back across the room he went again, with it following him; and he cried out something that most naturally shocked them all inexpressibly.

"He screamed out, 'For God's sake, Fenton, take it off me!'

"And for the last time the thing jumped.

"They were over near the curtains of that bay window, which were drawn as they are now. Miss Twigelow, who was nearest, says that Mr. Wilkes could not have seen anything, because the white bag was still drawn over the woman's head. The only thing she noticed was that at the lower part of the bag, where the face must have been, there was a curious kind of discoloration, a

stain of some sort which had not been there before: something seemed to be seeping through.

"Mr. Wilkes fell back between the curtains, with the hooded person after him, and he screamed again. There was a kind of thrashing noise in or behind the curtains; then they fell straight again, and everything grew quiet.

"Now, our Kentish cider is very strong, and for a moment Mr. Fenton did not know what to think. He tried to laugh at it, but the laugh did not sound well. Then he went over to the curtains, calling out gruffly to them to come out of there and not play the fool. But after he had looked inside the curtains, he turned round very sharply and asked the rector to get the ladies out of the room.

"This was done, but Miss Abbott often said that she had one quick peep inside. Though the bay windows were locked on the inside, Mr. Wilkes was now alone on the window seat. She could see his beard sticking up, and the blood. He was dead, of course. But, since he had murdered Jane Waycross, I sincerely think that he deserved to die."

For several seconds the two listeners did not move. She had all too successfully conjured up this room in the late 'seventies, whose stuffiness still seemed to pervade it.

"But look here!" protested Hunter, when he could fight down an inclination to get out of the room quickly. "You say he killed her after all? And yet you told us he had an absolute alibi. You said he never went closer to the house than the windows . . ."

"No more he did, my dear," said the other.

"He was courting the Linshaw heiress at the time," she resumed; "and Miss Linshaw was a very proper young lady who would have been horrified if she had heard about him and Jane Waycross. She would have broken off the match, naturally. But poor Jane Waycross meant her to hear. She was much in love with Mr. Wilkes, and she was going to tell the whole matter publicly; Mr. Wilkes had been trying to persuade her not to do so."

"But—"

"Oh, don't you see what happened?" cried the other in a pettish tone. "It is so dreadfully simple. I am not clever at these things, but I should have seen it in a moment: even if I did not already know. I told you everything so that you should be able to guess.

"When Mr. Wilkes and Dr. Sutton and Mr. Pawley drove past here in the gig that night, they saw a bright light burning in the windows of this room. I told you that. But the police never wondered, as anyone should, what caused that light.

"Jane Waycross never came into this room, as you know; she was out in the hall, carrying either a lamp or a candle. But that lamp in the

thick blue-silk shade, held out there in the hall, would not have caused a bright light to shine through this room and illuminate it. Neither would a tiny candle; it is absurd. And I told you there were no other lamps in the house except some empty ones in the back kitchen.

"There is only one thing they could have seen. They saw the great blaze of the paraffin oil round Jane Waycross' body.

"Didn't I tell you it was dreadfully simple? Poor Jane was upstairs waiting for her lover. From the upstairs window she saw Mr. Wilkes's gig drive along the road in the moonlight, and she did not know there were other men in it; she thought he was alone. She came downstairs—

"It is an awful thing that the police did not think more about that broken medicine bottle lying in the hall, the large bottle that was broken in just two long pieces. She must have had a use for it; and, of course, she had. You knew that the oil in the lamp was almost exhausted, although there was a great blaze round the body.

"When poor Jane came downstairs, she was carrying the unlighted lamp in one hand; in the other hand she was carrying a lighted candle and an old medicine bottle containing paraffin oil. When she got downstairs, she meant to fill the lamp from the medicine bottle, and then light it with the candle.

"But she was too eager to get downstairs, I am afraid. When she was more than halfway down, hurrying, that long nightgown tripped her. She pitched forward down the stairs on her face. The medicine bottle broke on the tiles under her, and poured a lake of paraffin round her body. Of course, the lighted candle set the paraffin blazing when it fell; but that was not all.

"One intact side of that broken bottle, long and sharp and cleaner than any blade, cut into her throat when she fell on the smashed bottle. She was not quite stunned by the fall. When she felt herself burning, and the blood almost as hot, she tried to save herself. She tried to crawl forward on her hands, forward into the hall, away from the blood and oil and fire.

"That was what Mr. Wilkes really saw when he looked in through the window.

"You see, he had been unable to get rid of the two fuddled friends, who insisted on clinging to him and drinking with him. He had been obliged to drive them home. If he could not go to 'Clearlawns' now, he wondered how at least he could leave a message; and the light in the window gave him an excuse.

"He saw pretty Jane propped up on her hands in the hall, looking out at him beseechingly while the blue flame ran up and turned yellow. You might have thought he would have pitied her, for she loved him very much. Her wound was not really a deep wound. If he had

broken into the house at that moment, he might have saved her life.

"But he preferred to let her die—because now she would make no public scandal and spoil his chances with the rich Miss Linshaw. That was why he returned to his friends and told a lie about a murderer in a tall hat. It is why, in heaven's truth, he murdered her himself. But when he returned to his friends, I do not wonder that they saw him mopping his forehead. You know now how Jane Waycross came back for him, presently."

The girl got to her feet, with a sort of bouncing motion which was as suggestive as it was vaguely familiar. It was as though she were about to run. She stood there, a trifle crouched, in her prim brown dress, so oddly narrow at the waist after an old-fashioned pattern; and in the play of light on her face Rodney Hunter fancied that its prettiness was only a shell.

"The same thing happened afterwards, on some Christmas Eves," she explained. "They played Blind Man's Buff over again. That is why people who live here do not care to risk it nowadays. It happens at a quarter-past seven—"

Hunter stared at the curtains. "But it was a quarter-past seven when we got here!" he said. "It must now be—"

"Oh, yes," said the girl, and her eyes brimmed over. "You see, I told you that you had nothing to fear; it was all over then. But that is not why I thank you. I begged you to stay, and you did. You have listened to me, as no one else would. And now I have told it at last, and now I think both of us can sleep."

Not a fold stirred or altered in the dark curtains that closed the window bay; yet, as though a blurred lens had come into focus, the curtains now seemed innocent and devoid of harm.

Rodney Hunter, with Muriel following his gaze, walked across and threw back the curtains. He saw a quiet window seat covered with chintz, and the rising moon beyond the window. When he turned round, the girl in the old-fashioned dress was not there. But the front doors were open again, for he could feel a current of air blowing through the house.

With his arm round Muriel, who was white-faced, he went out into the hall. They did not look long at the scorched and beaded stains at the foot of the paneling, for even the scars of fire seemed gentle now. Instead, they stood in the doorway looking out, while the house threw its great blaze of light across the frosty Weald. It was a welcoming light.

Over the rise of a hill, black dots trudging in the frost showed that Jack Bannister's party was returning; and they could hear the sound of voices carrying far. They heard one of the party carelessly singing a Christmas carol for glory and joy, and the laughter of children coming home.

the *newest* *SHORT NOVEL* by
RUFUS KING

Strangely enough, we do not usually think of Rufus King's stories about Florida's Gold Coast as "inverted detective stories"; yet they are—stories told from two opposing viewpoints, one the murderer's, the other the detective's (in this instance, the detailed inquiry by our old friend Stuff Driscoll, Chief Criminal Investigator of the Sheriff's Department) . . . and which one will outwit the other?

Rufus King's newest short novel is the story of two stepbrothers and the $3,000,000 that came between them; it is also in the "pure" tradition of the inverted detective story: scrupulously fair to the reader, but we hasten to warn you—be on your guard every paragraph of the way, be on the alert for every carefully planted clue. Remember the art of the magician: the hand is quicker than the eye, and misdirection is the key to bafflement. The detective-story magician uses words instead of hands, and words can be faster than the mind: the words seem to mean a certain thing but if you interpret the words correctly they mean something else—the truth. Yes, beware the legerdemain of verbal misdirection . . .

ANATOMY OF A CRIME

by RUFUS KING

AMONG THE MORE ARTISTIC CIRCLES of Florida's Gold Coast the Helber stepbrothers were, with fair regularity, news. They were never more so, however, than on that heat-drugged morning of Sunday, July 11th, when Edmund Helber was discovered in a bloody red mess because his throat had been permanently sliced.

Edmund was the older of the two young men and the controller of the large Helber fortune. He was usually engaged in discovering, publicizing, and coddling some new young artistic talent, whereas Saltus, whose appreciation of art was limited to the engravings that graced United States paper money, would be irritatingly busied in exposing his image among the intelligensia as a stinker, a Philistine, and a superlative cad.

Both were bachelors. Edmund, the offspring of his father's first marriage, took after his mother.

She, Esthasia, had been constructed along the swaying, rhythmical lines of a Botticelli and had herself been an artist of, well, local note. She had died in an anemic fashion shortly after Edmund's birth.

When Edmund had reached the age of 16, his father— *the* Clifford ("Stoneface") Helber—acquired a second wife. Diana was a widow and the mother of one child, Saltus, then aged ten. Superficially, Diana was a pastiche of Esthasia, but whereas Esthasia's approach toward art had been inherent and genuine, Diana's was nothing more than a calculating acquired veneer that had been hastily slapped on for the sole purpose of gaffing Stoneface's pelf.

This predilection of Stoneface for art-saturated wives was a peculiar thing. His fortune had been based on oil, with his earlier wildcatting days having earned him his sobriquet —his rugged features and monolithic physique having been comparable to a Borglum attack on Mt. Rushmore. By the time he was settled enough, and loaded enough, for matrimony, you would have expected him to select as a mate someone more wholesomely busty, along Mae-Westian lines, rather than any hybrid flower from the Arcadian fields. Undoubtedly his later life addiction and craving for Culture lay at the bottom of it, his own casual acquirement of the commodity having been stopped, by request, at the 8th grade.

This marriage Number 2 lasted for twelve years—a stretch that carried Edmund to the age of 28 and his stepbrother Saltus to 22.

Saltus by this time had developed physically into a pictorial prototype of the All-American boy, but with, unhappily, the inner furnishings of an intelligent diamond-back rattler. All attempts on Stoneface's part to pump Culture and a sense of civic responsibility into the handsome reptile had failed, and his stepfather finally recognized him for what he was—a clean-limbed, honest-faced con artist, a potential hustler, and beneath his pleasing surface a significantly overripe egg.

Edmund, on the other hand, completely filled the bill of what Stoneface sentimentally dreamed a second generation scion of a wealthy, self-made, ill-educated man should be. Edmund had been graduated from Duke with academic honors and a workable patina of good manners that extended from what to do when your dinner partner knocks over a plate of soup to how properly to defer to an elder stuffed shirt or stuffed bosom.

Furthermore, to Stoneface's gratification, Edmund had elected after Duke to sojourn for a year among the ateliers of Paris where he purely applied himself to the study of painting. But the Left Bank had remained for him a river's edge and nothing else.

Following this Parisian stint, Edmund had solidified his cultural

status by opening an art gallery in the Helber home town of Halcyon, a pleasant small community that lies on the coast between Miami and Fort Lauderdale. He named the gallery somewhat whimsically, if aptly, the Salle des Inconnus. He became a ranking member of the Episcopal Church, an active sponsor of the local YMCA, and was also on his way toward becoming a director of the South Florida Council of the Boy Scouts of America.

The termination of marriage Number 2 (and the beginning of this rather Machiavellian crime report) was the unfortunate result of Stoneface's private plane crashing in the Everglades shortly after a takeoff from Halcyon's Aero Club en route to St. Petersburg. He and Diana were the plane's sole occupants, an assortment of dinner-happy alligators were the sole witnessing attendants, and a convenient amount of features, teeth, et cetera, were left to afford accurate identification of the bodies when search parties located the scene a couple of days later.

What might be considered as having been the incubation period of murder undoubtedly occurred at the reading of Stoneface's last will and testament. This stereotyped formality took place at Trianon, the Helber estate which sprawled immaculately over several subtropical landscaped acres just to the west of Halcyon.

Artemus Wilksby, the Helber family lawyer, presided. A contemporary and longtime friend of Stoneface, Wilksby was in complete accord as to the characteristics of the two Helber heirs, being satisfied that Edmund, at 28, was an examplar of the best moral and civic virtues, and that Saltus, at 22, was endowed with all the makings of an incipient wastrel and a grade double-A bum.

"I'm going to cut this short," he said to both of them when they had gathered (after the dual parental funeral) in Trianon's culture-choked library. "I'll leave this lengthy copy of the will for you to wade through at your leisure, and don't get it into your heads that because it's a bit odd that it isn't unbreakably sound. I frankly admit I feel that Stonefa—that Clifford went somewhat overboard in not appointing a more mature and less propinquous (that was the word he used) executor; but you are both familiar with how pigheaded he could be once he made up his mind."

"Leading up, I suppose," Saltus said with sugar-coated venom, "to the fact that Edmund inherits the estate and the control of it, and my share is the dear old cliché of the one-dollar bill."

"On the contrary." Wilksby's voice stayed professionally restrained. "The estate is divided between you straight down the middle with the exception of this house and grounds, which become wholly Edmund's. But, I must add, the in-

heritance is subject to certain conditions."

"Ah!" Saltus exposed an Italian smile. "The snapper. I refer, sir, to the tail of your statement."

"Quite so."

"The scorpion's sting?"

"Now really, Saltus!" Edmund placed a pale, beginning-to-get-pudgy hand on his stepbrother's strapping shoulder. "You say too many things that you don't truly mean. Just for effect."

Saltus, whose mind had a quicksilver fluidity for figuring a situation's angles, decided that the proper attitude for the moment called for a splash of humility.

"Oh, I'm sure that the conditions are reasonable," he said, but he couldn't keep from adding, "or at least bearable."

Wilksby shot him a glance from under a set of eyebrows that suggested two shags of Spanish moss. "You must understand," he said, "that Diana, due to her death, no longer figures in any provisions that had been made for her. The estate now involves no one but you two."

"Conditionally."

"Exactly, Saltus, and particularly as it concerns you. Briefly, each half of the estate will add up—after taxes and other essential nuisances—to around three million dollars—six million in all. Edmund's half is his with no strings attached. Yours, Saltus, is to be held in trust until your thirtieth birthday—eight years from now. Your stepbrother is the sole executor of this trust and is empowered to pay you part or the entirety of its income at his discretion."

"I understand, sir." Saltus' outer casing, especially his face, took on a wafer-thin transfer depicting the Birth of Reformation. It was slightly shattered by his tone of voice as he asked, "And at the age of thirty?"

"If then, in Edmund's sole opinion, your character and approach toward life warrant it, the trust is dissolved and the inheritance becomes unconditionally yours. If Edmund's decision at that time is negative, the capital goes to forming a Cultural Foundation, the purposes and structure of which you will find outlined in loving detail in the will. Finally, if Edmund were to die before your thirtieth birthday the trust is automatically dissolved and your share of the estate becomes freely yours. Edmund's share, of course, will go in any manner he may care to bequeath it."

"This," Saltus could not help saying, "is straight out of a dime novel."

"I agree, my boy, that a tinge of the old-time melodrama is indeed apparent. Unfortunately, Clifford's in some ways simple mind worked that way."

"Please," Edmund's slender features became surfaced with stepbrotherly concern, "please—both of you—surely you can see that father did what he thought and hoped was for the best? For *your* best, Saltus?

You'll come to thank him for it. I know you will."

And in such fashion—stern hand from beyond the grave—was the scene set for the kill. With kind, good, upright Edmund Helber cast in the leading role of Sitting Duck. The virus of homicide festered within Saltus for three months before coming to a head . . .

Blunt force—stab wound—bullet and other missile wounds—strangulation — suffocation —asphyxiating gas— inorganic poison—organic poison—miscellaneous poisons—a blissful galaxy of surefire instruments for a homicidal death. All were cozily contained, dissected, and expounded at infinite detail in an estimable volume that Saltus had unearthed from the research stacks of the Halcyon Public Library. The Messrs. Gonzales, Vance, Helpern, and Umberger were responsible for the illuminating work under the covering title of *Legal Medicine: Pathology and Toxicology.*

A gold mine, Saltus decided. One that yielded to his crafty mind precious nuggets of not only how such things were done, but what happened during autopsies after you did them.

Even though the library's air-conditioning system had broken down, he endured three visits on three successive heat-sweated July days to thumb through the tome. His ultimate decision for the best, the *safest* (for the murderer) setup for a presumed "suicide," fell within a chapter dealing with stabs and cuts. He absorbed with interest the fact that the majority of incised fatal wounds *were* suicidal and that such cases, at date of the book's publication, averaged about 35 to 40 a year in New York City alone.

The suicidal cuts, he learned, were most commonly inflicted on the throat. Of special interest was the fact that the characteristic pattern of the suicidal wound consistently revealed *repeated hesitant attempts to slash the throat in the same line of incision.*

Saltus felt confidently assured that these "hesitation marks" would offer unquestionable proof to any trained observer (and the Sheriff's Department of Broward County had just that) or Medical Examiner (ditto) that the case was one of self-destruction. As a clincher, he read that on the other hand *homicidal* wounds of the neck and throat did *not* show any such marks of hesitation.

The room's air-conditionless heat seeped from his pores as he closed the book for the last time and returned it to the stacks. Overriding this delightful bouquet of lethal flowers which he had just gathered was the fortuitous realization that stepbrother Edmund always shaved with an old-fashioned, tenderly stropped straight-edge razor.

The next item on the murderous agenda was the problem of motivation. For what reason would up-

right, wealthy, honorable, and civically honored Edmund take his own life? The more rakish scandalous causes such as women, gambling, and peculation were out. Women, for Edmund, were largely abstract entities, and were certainly so insofar as any illicit or grand passions might be concerned. His attitude toward them was that of uncle-to-niece, or if they were older specimens of the sex, which they usually were, of complacent nephew to tolerated aunt.

All forms of gambling (Church Fair knock-'em-downs excepted) stood in Edmund's book as devices of the Devil, and any suggestion of peculation with a $3,000,000 inheritance under his belt was of course absurd.

Well, what then?

Suddenly, with one of those illuminating flashes that so delight in inspiring the wicked, Saltus thought of Oscar.

Young Oscar Fortisman was stepbrother Edmund's current protégé. A Muscle Beach specimen so far as his physical attributes went, Oscar's career up to the moment of his having been discovered by Edmund had been the exasperating one of a local third-string fighter in the light-heavyweight class. By the age of 24 this had brought him little more glamorous than hamburgers and was showing no promise of enriching his menu in the future.

Somewhere among Oscar's genes, however, must have lain an atavistic linkage with some indeterminate ancestor who had had a bent toward paint. This, Oscar expressed in furtive studies that were intended to depict varying aspects of the manly art. His talent, for he did have talent — the intrusive gene took care of that — lay in the genre of Grandma Moses gone overboard about ringside fauna rather than barns and bucolic life.

Edmund's discovery of Oscar had been the result of a joke. Semiannually, the Junior Art Guild of Halcyon would put on an exhibition by rapt amateurs in the bandshell purlieu of Tropicana Park. A couple of Oscar's fellow hammerheads had got wise to his hidden weakness and had laughed themselves sillier than usual by swiping three of his canvases and inserting them in the exhibition's lineup. The high point of the jest had been the tacking on of cards penned with Oscar's name and address and pricing each sketch at the ridiculous sum of $500.

Edmund bought all three paintings.

"Look here, Oscar," Edmund had said, after Oscar had come out of shock, "you may not realize it but you have a positive talent. I might even go so far as to say that you touch on genius—a bit primitive, but still genius. What you need is a guiding hand. In short, me."

All this had occurred two months back in the middle of May. Oscar,

still partially stupefied from his stroke of good fortune, found himself lifted from his accustomed athletic-supporter milieu and installed in what Edmund called his "protégé studio" on the Helber estate. This was a small building of almost-Spanish design having one large workroom with a glass wall of clear northern light, a bedroom, bath, and utility kitchenette. It was separated from Trianon by a good half-acre stretch and stood secure in the privacy of a guarding stand of live oak trees and banyans.

In this idyllic setting, supplied with all imaginable tools of his craft including a complete spectrum of Winsor & Newton paints, Oscar was housed, gormandizingly fed via transport from the mainhouse kitchen, and encouraged by Edmund's inspirational pep talks to let loose upon a totally unsuspecting world the fruits of his genius. These pugilistic canvases were programmed to explode around year's end in a one-man show at Edmund's Salle des Inconnus.

Yes, Saltus decided, *that* would be the one sort of nightmare scandal that could unquestionably be swallowed by a Sheriff's Investigator and a Medical Examiner as having caused Edmund (a shining pillar in church and youth activities) to take his own life . . . under threat of blackmail and extortion as a member of the Gold Coast's Lavender Set.

Whether the actual fact of Edmund being a homosexual were true or false had no bearing. Implication, suspicion, plain libel were enough. How avidly, Saltus pondered happily, was the fickle public willing to accept and castigate an idol's reputed feet of clay!

What the effect of any such frameup as Saltus proposed to arrange would have on young Oscar's reputation did not concern Saltus in the least. Pawns were essential in any macabre game of lethal chess and, being pawns, they were expendable . . .

The deathly morning of Sunday, July 11th, began at five o'clock for Edmund with the pleasant serenity that characterized the majority of his days. There was nothing irrational about this early rising. The Gold Coast's bacchanalia of cocktail gambols, splash parties, alcoholic cookouts, and ribald night clubs were but forms of mental and physical poison in his estimation, and so, except for occasional evenings of antiseptic bridge, he would usually go to bed around ten and feel slept out by five a.m.

Trianon's staff naturally had no such idiotic a schedule. Consequently, while Edmund would be sniffing the dawn scents of break-of-day, the Swiss butler and his wife the cook, the Jamaican housemaid, the Virgin Island gardener, and the Haitian yard boy would all be corked off in their separate quarters and would stay corked off

for another hour or more at the least.

Edmund's getting-up routine rarely varied. He took a series of deep breaths, standing in cotton pajama shorts at French doors that opened on a blossom-scented patio. This was followed by twelve push-ups with no special effect on his muscular development, which was skimpy. In a small service pantry he filled and turned on an electric coffee percolator. He split and toasted two English muffins and, when they were done, buttered each hot half lavishly with the real product from a cow.

He arranged the *petit dejeuner* on a tray which he placed on a table in front of the patio French doors. He was working on his second still-warm and butter-drenched English muffin, and placidly contemplating the beauties of the morning, when Saltus came in.

Speculation rippled through Edmund at such an unprecedented dawnlike appearance of his stepbrother. Could the leopard truly be changing his spots? Saltus' unusual visits to the Halcyon Public Library had been remarked upon to Edmund by a Miss Ascerton, an assistant librarian who was also a member of an art class that met once a week at the Salle des Inconnus. The report had pleased Edmund as he considered it to be a hopefully indicative step on Saltus' part along the road to Culture. He had agreed with Miss Ascerton that the visits were especially commendable in view of the then sparsity of library visitors owing to the broken-down air-conditioning system having turned the building into a hothouse.

And now this—this healthy early-rising, clear-eyed greeting of the day. A flick of disapproval touched him at the flamboyancy of Saltus' dressing gown—a puce Chinese affair splotched over with crimson dragons—but such sartorial quirks were inconsequential when stacked against the ethical and moral drive toward reformation of his stepbrother's character.

"Well, good morning, Saltus," he said cheerfully. "Sit down and have some coffee. Toast more muffins, if you like."

"I will," Saltus said. "Got to use your bathroom first."

Edmund's inner speculating altered slightly from the pleasing to the puzzled. Something odd in Saltus' manner, something tense as his stepbrother headed for the bathroom door and vanished through it, bothered him. And why *this* bathroom in the first place? Why not have used the one in his own quarters in the other wing of the house? A sudden need, of course—such trivial crises did occur—but the whole *air* of the matter was disturbing.

Edmund was further startled (almost to the point of dropping the last half piece of the deliciously buttered muffin back on the plate)

when the bathroom door was flung open and Saltus came moving toward him in a fashion that Edmund could only define as being ominously determined. He felt, absurdly, that his stepbrother had a positive nemesis look.

And why under the sun was Saltus holding his right hand behind his back as though it were concealing something?

This mystery was briefly exposed to Edmund as Saltus stepped around the table in order to reach the rear of Edmund's chair. Surely, Edmund decided, the object he had caught a glimpse of in Saltus' inexplicably white-cotton-gloved hand had been—

"Isn't that my razor?" Edmund asked in bewilderment. "What on earth are you going to do with it?"

"This," Saltus said.

And he proceeded to do it.

Making the all-important "hesitation marks" proved to be the job that was to blow up Saltus' iced control. The operative incisive slash had been effective so far as ending Edmund's existence was concerned but—the blood. It took a long moment for Saltus to suppress the jolt which the sight of the sanguine flow gave him, and he stood graven, his eyes fixed glassily on Edmund's body as it slumped in the chair with both arms hanging macaroni-like toward the floor.

The hypnotic blood, now that Edmund's heart was stilled, had decreased to a lethargy of seeping. It was a lethargy comparable with the slowdown of Saltus' power to think. A mourning dove symbolically set up its measured dirge outside in a banyan tree and slowly, fearfully slowly, Saltus' wits began to reactivate.

He forced himself again to seize Edmund by the hair and pull his head back until the full horror of the cut throat lay exposed. The moment had come when, with surgical precision, the clue must be planted that would officially stamp Edmund's death as irrevocably one of suicide.

The "hesitation marks" — the repeated hesitant attempts to slice the throat in the same line of the fatal cut.

Still holding the razor with cotton-gloved fingers in such a manner that prints left in Edmund's daily shaving would not be smudged, Saltus forced himself to cut several hesitant slashes in the direction of and alongside the major incision. Then he dropped the razor on the floor beneath Edmund's dangling right hand.

Done. And to perfection.

There remained—*must that damned dove keep moaning?*—only the placing of the note. This consisted in a sheet of cheap paper on which (aping many precedents) an exposure threat and extortion demand had been pasted with words cut out by Saltus from newspapers and magazines.

Before removing the suicide note from a pocket of his dressing gown

—where it lay loosely folded in a handkerchief that served as a guard against any direct contact with his own fingers—Saltus went into the bathroom and held his blood-stained, gloved right hand under cold running water until the red flow paled. He then wrung the glove as dry as possible and shoved it (for later disposal) into an opposite pocket from the one containing the note.

He dried his hands, leaving no hint of bloodstain, then threw the towel into a hamper.

The point had now arrived when a necessary amount of improvisation was called for. In all his detailed planning the precise setup of the suicidal scene could not have been prearranged except in the most general terms of time and locale, and for a short period of intensive thought Saltus found himself faced with a serious dilemma.

As the scene stood, Edmund had been placidly eating toasted muffins and drinking coffee at the very moment when he had decided to kill himself. Obviously this was absurd, and the incongruity would surely be noted. The requisite essentials were easy to catalogue: Edmund must receive the note (how?), read it, decide on suicide, procure his razor from the bathroom, and then (why? why? why?) return to his chair at the breakfast table and cut his throat.

Rarely had Saltus' Machiavellian brain operated more keenly under stress. Only the element of time seemed in his favor: a good hour still remained before the household staff would be astir. He also knew that he would not be faced with the common run of law-enforcement officers. Trianon stood just outside the incorporated area of Halcyon, and the county authorities would be in charge. A questionable Helber death would call for the best—for the Chief Criminal Investigator of the Sheriff's Department himself. A certain Stuff Driscoll.

Saltus had never encountered Driscoll, but he was aware of his record from laudatory publicity covering previous cases, and the man was undeniably tops in his field. In one sense this was exactly what Saltus had hoped for in his planning—that the investigation would be in charge of the trained type of criminologist his murder plot required—a man for whom the "hesitation marks" would clinch a verdict of suicide.

But in another sense this placid breakfast setup would emphatically give a man of Driscoll's intellect and experience pause. Saltus took a grip on his nerves and refused to panic. Take things, he commanded his brain, in their proper order.

First, how and when was the note received? Swiftly a succession of possible solutions were discarded as he viewed each through the clinical eyes of detective Driscoll.

There must be an immediacy in the method of delivery. It must be

timed to have reached Edmund after he had arranged his breakfast and while he had still been in the process of leisurely eating.

And then it came—again that flash of inspiration that so delights, as had been previously noted, in inspiring the wicked.

Stepping out into the patio, Saltus went to a rock garden that graced one of its corner arrangements and selected a lemon-sized piece of coral. Using the protective handkerchief as a guard against leaving his own fingerprints, he wrapped and pressed the note around the coral. Standing a bit back from the French doors, he tossed the chunk into the room so that it fell squarely on the breakfast table.

He then followed it inside and, still using the protective handkerchief, unwrapped the note and left it lying flat, face up, on the table near Edmund's plate. He replaced the hankerchief in his pocket.

Saltus then reconstructed the scenario as he presumed it would be deduced through Driscoll's eyes: Edmund at breakfast, sipping coffee, when plunk on the table falls the note-wrapped piece of coral. Certainly a shock. As an artistic inspirational touch Saltus lifted by its slender handle (so that no fingerprints were possible) the half-filled cup of coffee, as though it had been raised to Edmund's lips when the note smacked in. Then he let the cup drop back onto the table where it lay overturned in its puddle of spilled coffee.

He continued to envision Driscoll's reconstruction: swiftly Edmund leaps to his feet and examines the patio for the rock thrower who, adroitly, has made good his escape through the bordering shrubs. Calmer, but still deeply puzzled, Edmund returns to the table and removes the note from the coral. He reads.

Edmund's previous shock would be as nothing compared with the one he experiences now. His mind is shattered, paralyzed, at this threat of disclosure of his perverted relationship with his "protégés," at the demand for $10,000 as the price of silence, at the knowledge that this initial demand would be pyramided throughout all the coming years, with public disgrace dangling a sword of Damocles constantly over his head.

Bewildered, all but insane from shock, Edmund staggers to the bathroom, gets his razor, then—

Then?

Why not have cut his throat right then and there above the wash basin?

Because he is impelled once more to read the note. So he totters back to the table, sits, reads, and there follow the few dreadful moments of screwing up enough courage to take the plunge. At last the decision is finalized. A hesitant cut with the razor, then another hesitant cut—followed by the deadly slash.

Yes, Saltus decided, in just such fashion would Driscoll reconstruct the scene—assisted, if necessary, by oblique suggestions from Saltus himself. The scenario would hold—it was foolproof.

And that's the way it went.

For a while.

Almost.

Shortly after eight o'clock Mr. Artemus Wilksby, with the measured leisure of the mid-sixties, got out of bed. He indulged in nothing so feeble-minded as setting-up exercises but headed directly for the bathroom where, prior to any other amenities, he downed a good slug of bourbon and branch water. By ten of nine, shaved, showered, and comfortably clothed in a church-going suit of lightweight material, he was ready for breakfast.

A widower and childless, Wilksby's household staff consisted of a middle-aged couple, Washington and Liza-May Jackson, who ran his upper-bracket ranch-style home in Halcyon's northeast section with an engaging amount of non-irritating efficiency.

Sunday breakfast being always considered something special, Liza-May had in readiness for Wilksby's appearance an opening gun of iced papaya balls, sprigged with fresh mint and damped with Lemon French Dressing. These were to be followed by Southern Corn Bread (*never* put sugar in Southern Corn Bread), and a casserole of Eggs New Orleans. This was a Creole fantasy involving a brace of otherwise blameless eggs baked on a bed of tomatoes, green pepper, onion, celery, seasonings, bread crumbs, and one removable bay leaf, the entire confection topped by an overlap of grated American cheese. Coffee, of course.

Before sitting down to this production number in his Florida room, Wilksby turned on a TV set in anticipation of the nine o'clock news. He had downed the papaya balls and was starting a cautious approach (they were sizzling hot) to the Eggs New Orleans when the news came on. National and international problems were skimmed through with headline brevity, punctuated with a tastefully diagrammed sure cure for athlete's foot.

Then the local news took over in a shock wave that froze Wilksby with a forkful rigid in midair.

". . . This just in—police have reported the suicide of one of Halcyon's most honored citizens, Mr. Edmund Helber. It has been tentatively suggested that the tragedy occurred sometime between the hours of five and six this morning at the palatial family estate of Trianon. Although Chief Criminal Investigator Driscoll of the Sheriff's Department refused to divulge any known motivation for the act, it was learned from one of the servants that a blackmail and extortion note has entered the picture. This station

will bring further details as they become available. An easterly wave off the Lesser Antilles . . ."

Wilksby, while not exactly tottering, managed to reach the set and turn it off midcenter in a suggested would-be aphrodisiac effect resulting from the use of an underarm deodorant. He cancelled any further thought of breakfast and going out to the garage got into a solid, no-nonsense sedan and headed for Trianon.

He had rarely felt more deeply shocked. That Edmund, the paragon, should have committed suicide was bad enough; but that the motivation should have been blackmail and extortion only added the gall of some hidden form of disgrace to the act. How far preferable, for example, would have been an incurable disease, the lingering torture of which Edmund had not had the courage to face!

Wilksby considered it fortunate, owing to mutual membership in several civic organizations as well as legal trials in which both had participated, that he and Stuff Driscoll were on the friendliest of terms. Wilksby hoped to use this leverage to soft-pedal as far as possible whatever shameful motivation for self-destruction Edmund's might have been.

On reaching Trianon, Wilksby realized from the number of law-enforcement cars parked in the chateau's stone-paved courtyard that the investigation was already in full progress. A small cluster of news- and cameramen blocked him at the patrolman-guarded entrance door.

He parried their questions with an honest stance of total ignorance, identified himself to the guard, and was admitted into the impressive entrance hall. He asked the patrolman where he might find Driscoll and was directed to Edmund's suite.

En route to this wing of the house Wilksby met Dr. William Ainsworth, the county Medical Examiner. They paused for a brief exchange.

"I suppose there's no doubt?" Wilksby said.

"Of suicide? Not a shadow of one. I'm completely satisfied. Classical case of suicide, including hesitation marks—in fact, a suicide for the textbooks. Of course, Stuff—" (Ainsworth's deceptively Byronesque lips broke into the thin smile that his female patients found so fascinating) "—well, you know Stuff, Mr. Wilksby, and his ever-present little doubts."

"He isn't convinced?"

"Let's say he is convinced up to ninety-nine per cent. Personally I think he's just straining at a gnat."

Wilksby pondered this one per cent enigma of hope as he continued toward Edmund's quarters. Hope of what? Accident? Murder? With a wrench he realized how preferable to a verdict of suicide even murder would be.

He found Stuff alone in Edmund's

study, going through some papers at a desk.

"I hope you don't mind my butting in," he said.

"Mr. Wilksby." Stuff stood up and shook hands. "Glad you came. There are some things I've wanted to ask you."

"A wretched business! In a way it's a good thing that Stoneface is dead. It would have killed him. You have no idea, Stuff, how deeply the old man regarded Edmund."

Both men sat down, the aging one and the younger. Each felt for the other a solid respect.

Wilksby said, "I ran into Bill Ainsworth on the way here. He tells me you have, as he puts it, one lingering per cent of doubt."

An expression that his wife Vi called his "Rodin look" settled on Stuff's agreeable face. He found it difficult to put his disquietude into words. Balance the pros and cons, and the weight lay preponderantly on Dr. Ainsworth's emphatic conclusion of suicide. And still . . .

He said, "You know how these things are, Mr, Wilksby. There are certain reports I want from the lab. I still have to talk with Saltus Helber—got him parked over in his quarters away from the Press. Then there's that artist fellow out in the studio—yes, there are still some angles to be cleared up before things are set."

"Anything—special?"

"They're all fairly special. There's the extortion note for one. I want to know who concocted it and tossed it in onto the table while Edmund was eating breakfast."

"Look here, Stuff. I know nothing but what was said on a brief newscast. Exactly what *did* happen?"

Stuff told him in digest, while a shock of repugnance ran through Wilksby at the implication of perversion.

"It's even worse than I imagined," Wilksby said. "I find it hard to believe. Very hard."

"I do, too," Stuff agreed. "I knew Edmund fairly well. My wife's opinion of him is the same as mine, a high one. She goes to those art classes he held at his Salle des Inconnus. I'm going to do my damnedest, Mr. Wilksby, to get to the bottom of this. To me it just doesn't ring true."

"Any way I can help—but you know that, of course. You did say there were some things you wanted to ask me. What about?"

"About Trianon. About the Helber estate in general."

Wilksby reserved nothing. Just how all of it would help he did not know. He offered a synopsized version of Stoneface's will, underlining the stepbrotherly situation of Edmund as the judge of Saltus' character and as the controller of the purse strings. He indicated Edmund's status as the final arbiter whether Saltus should inherit or not when, eight years from now, Saltus attained his thirtieth birthday.

"All that, of course," he said, "is now washed up. Edmund's dead."

"Yes," Stuff said, "I can see how it's all apple pie for Saltus from now on in. No more trust fund, no more restrictions. All shackles off, and a cool three million dollars to go to town with."

"Unhappily, that is the picture."

"How about Edmund's half of the estate? I suppose he left a will?"

"He had me draw one up about a month ago, shortly before a weekend he spent at some art festival or other in Vermont. He flew there and his father's fatal plane crash must have been on his mind. Anyhow, as a precaution he wanted to insure that his half of the estate would end up furthering what had been Stoneface's wishes."

Wilksby blew his nose trumpet fashion into a paper handkerchief. "Lots of good in the boy in spite of that other wretched business. Yes, there was plenty on the credit side of Edmund's ledger—plenty to be proud of. Oh, well!"

Wilksby rejected the soothing bromide that we can't all be perfect and sank into a brooding morass steamed over with deaths by violence and the miasmas engendered in secret vice.

"Just what is in this will of Edmund's, Mr. Wilksby? Mind telling me?"

"Not in the least. Briefly, there are a few minor bequests, an endowment for the continued operation of the Salle des Inconnus, and the main bulk goes into a trust—myself, incidentally, as executor—for establishing a Cultural Foundation along parallel lines with the one outlined in his father's will."

"How about the minor bequests?"

"The only one that might interest you—and it's not so very minor, come to think of it—involves a hundred thousand dollars, tax free, that Edmund left to his latest protégé, Oscar Fortisman."

"Interesting. And unfortunately suggestive."

"No, it's completely understandable. Perfectly in line with Edmund's character. He told me he felt that he'd lifted Fortisman from his normal socio-economic status into a higher one of implied financial security and comparative luxury. Edmund simply didn't want an accidental death—you must remember that a possible plane crash was on his mind—well, he didn't want the props knocked out from under a man over whose career he had assumed a definite responsibility. Make sense to you?"

"Having known Edmund, yes. But I'm not the general public. How they're going to interpret the gift if the papers should publicize it you know very well. I'm wondering whether Fortisman knew about this."

"I haven't the slightest idea. But I doubt it."

"It's a provocative angle any way you look at it. I think I'd better

take a walk over to the studio and have a chat with young Oscar right now."

Both men stood up.

"I'll be with Saltus," Wilksby said.

There was a curiously unlived-in air about Saltus' suite. It remained static as the prominent interior decorator ("impressed" upon Stoneface by his high fees and burnished elegance of manner) had arranged it: basically French Provincial with a few screamingly daring accents. Saltus had teened in it, attained his majority in it, and had imprinted no personal touch whatsoever.

Any amateur psychiatrist could have tossed the answer to this easily over his left shoulder: Saltus loathed Trianon. The reasons could be academically glib—he had respected his mother Diana as being a charmingly enameled, double-dealing, successful gold digger; he had feared and yet admired his stepfather Stoneface even while seeking with irritatingly provocative acts to gain his attentions; he had cordially envied and detested his stepbrother Edmund. Result, the house meant nothing to him beyond a stone-walled stopping place for bed and board.

Largely, all this handy jargon was perfectly true, and had Saltus been penniless during his late adolescent years it might have been unbearable. A meager inheritance from his real father and an allowance given him by Diana had left him reasonably independent so far as pocket money went. It had offered a slender escape valve from the Trianon environment.

For such of his private diversions as required the cooperation of a member of the opposite sex he had secretly established an inexpensive *pied-à-terre*. At least (again the amateur psychiatrist talking) that was the conscious reason for his having acquired it. His subconscious, however, said differently.

What he had deeply wanted, and what he got in the rented cottage on the outskirts of Halcyon's southwestern section, had been a refuge that he could identify as being strictly his own. A place where, secluded from any close neighbors, he and his actions would be individual in their own right. He had even assumed a second identity in connection with the haven, using his father's name of Hilderstone and renouncing the hated adopted one of Helber.

This cottage, this own true *home*, was brought forcibly to Saltus' mind when Josef, the Swiss butler, came to the suite at half-past nine with a Special Delivery letter. Startlingly, Saltus found it signed Seraphine—a misnomer if ever there was one. Seraphine had been the co-occupant of the cottage for the past several weeks. She was a ripe, comfortably unintellectual, oversexed young woman who worked as a semi-nude barmaid in Halcyon's Barracuda

Club. When not otherwise employed.

The letter was startling because the envelope was addressed to Mr. Saltus Helber—not Hilderstone.

Saltus baby (Seraphine had written), the old Scrooge stopped in to remind you that the rent was overdue and would you kindly snap out of it and come across. I would have paid but I need the scratch for a trip to my aunt in Tampa to who I am off to for a sudden visit of a week or more or maybe to stay there for a while. I am sending this special delivery because tomorrow is a Sunday and I would not wish you maybe to come here and find the joint empty without reason. I did not use your alias of Hilderstone but used your real name and your real address which you should be more careful about letting letters addressed to you lay around in your jacket pockets if you wanted to keep them secret from snoops. Well, it has been fun, baby, but as Puggsy says (he is driving me to Tampa in his Yale blue Caddy) there is nothing like greener pastures to keep a young girl young.

Seraphine

Having gone through the upsetting strain of murdering his stepbrother less than five hours ago, this abrupt defection of his latest inamorata on the Cadillac wheels of a Puggsy—whoever under the sun *he* was—was too insignificant barely to think about. Seraphine's pocket-exploratory discovery and her use of his real name could have been dangerous, in a blackmail sense, had Edmund still been alive and riding herd over Saltus' morals and future wealth.

But Edmund was dead and the slave days were over and done with. Saltus was a free man. A very rich free man. A very *clever* very rich free man—for he had accomplished the impossible. He had committed the perfect crime.

There was no doubt whatever in Saltus' mind that this was a fact. Dr. William Ainsworth, the Medical Examiner, had pounced on the "hesitation marks" with professional acumen and, with the extortion note's indication of palpable motive, had proclaimed Edmund's death a suicide beyond question. And that bright-brain, Ivy-league type, button-mouthed Driscoll had tacitly agreed. No slightest hint of any contradiction had passed the man's courteously sympathetic lips.

Well then, Saltus began to wonder with a growing touch of impatience, why the delay? Why didn't the pack of them clear out, with their cameras and camel's-hair brushes and peerings and heaven knew what? But after all, Saltus decided, with such a prominent corpse as Edmund Helber it would be almost obligatory to make a spectacular out of the job.

His thoughts flicked back to his *pied-à-terre*, now obviously emptied of any female companion, and he weighed the advantages of either keeping the place on, or due to his

new wealth and freedom of action giving it up. Better keep it, he decided. It would come in handy for one-night stands.

There was a knock on the door and he called "Come in." He expected it would be dreamboy Driscoll, but it was Artemus Wilksby who entered.

A surge of pleasure, almost one of power, swept over Saltus. No longer was subservience necessary on his part in regard to Wilksby. He, Saltus, was now in the Helber saddle and there wasn't one solitary abusive thing that the sour old goat could do about it.

Saltus decided, however, to maintain an outward show of deference, appreciating that the dissolution of the trust was in Wilksby's hands and that the antagonistic ancient blister could either speed or dawdle the settling.

A few shallow affectations of distress were kicked around and disposed of before Saltus got down to brass tacks. He asked Wilksby with an air of commendable deference whether he was right in assuming that the trust no longer obtained.

"Yes," Wilksby said, "as of the moment when Edmund died your share in your stepfather's estate became unconditionally yours."

"I imagine, however, there are certain formalities, sir?"

"There are. Certified accountings —papers for signatures—but nothing excessive."

"How about inheritance taxes?"

"They do not obtain in regard to the trust. As for Edmund's estate, he left you nothing, so there'll be none."

"He informed me of that fact, sir, after he had arranged with you to draw up his will. Just how does Trianon now stand in the picture?"

"After probate it will be put up for sale, the proceeds to be included in the Cultural Foundation. You can, if you wish, buy the property for yourself."

"Me?" The mask momentarily slipped. "Rattle around in this penal monstrosity? Believe me, I've got other plans, Mr. Wilksby."

"I do indeed believe you, Saltus." Wilksby's voice was acid. "However, there is no question of having to leave here or moving out for a long while. A property of this size and value, especially in this unfashionable location, is a white elephant."

"And the dissolution of the trust, sir? How long will that take?"

"A matter," Wilksby said with a grimace of distaste at this open avidity for grabbing the cash, "of days. Now about the funeral, Saltus—"

"The what? Oh, yes."

"I'll make the arrangements, if you wish."

"I'd appreciate it, sir."

"Under the miserable circumstances they should be as private as possible and the details withheld from the Press. I will see that the interment takes place as soon as the body is released."

"Released?" A thin, almost negligible sliver of ice touched Saltus' nerves. With suicide an accepted fact, what else? "How do you mean released?"

"Autopsy—inquest—formalities, of course."

"Oh—of course." Yes, they would comprise the frills of the spectacular. Publicity for the Sheriff's Department with their crown-jewel Driscoll in the limelight. The careful hounds meticulously pirouetting through their bag of tricks for a greedy little moment in the public eye.

No danger, Saltus decided. Impossible that there could be, no matter how probingly they carved his stepbrother up.

He said again, "Of course."

Stuff Driscoll left Oscar Fortisman and the protégé studio in a very thoughtful frame of mind. As he walked toward the main house along a twisting pathway fringed with tall hibiscus, he was more deeply concerned than ever with the possibility that murder had been done—deviously, cleverly done.

And if he was right, there was every probability that the murderer would get away with it.

There was the rub.

Even if he was right, he needed proof.

Clear-cut evidence that would convince Jerry Atterbury, the County Prosecutor, that a Grand Jury would hand down an indictment. Clear-cut in the face of Bill Ainsworth's official insistence as Medical Examiner that any verdict other than suicide was simply reaching for the moon. The thought caused Stuff to smile. The venerable cliché no longer held water: the moon had been reached if only, to date, with a couple of cruel smacks against its inoffensive and romantic face.

He reviewed his so-far slender handful of pointers. It was indicative enough for him. For Atterbury, no. For Ainsworth, no. For a Grand Jury, decisively no. It needed weight —tangible flesh on its skeleton bones.

Would the killer have to be driven from his overconfident sense of success and security into some overt, self-incriminating act? Was it along those lines that the case must develop? A psychological sniping with verbal bullets, each one depositing its festering virus of doubt, exposure, finally of panic? And then—?

A trap.

That was the answer—a trap.

The pathway, private within its sheltering hibiscus hedges, skirted the northern border of Edmund's patio before forking toward the highway in one direction and toward an entrance to Edmund's wing of the chateau in the other. Stuff paused at the fork and looked through interstices in the shrubbery, out across the patio, and focused on

the French doors through which the extortion note had been tossed.

If, Stuff thought, a chance passer-by—no, a passer with a purpose—

He filed the thought, and pushing through the hedge, crossed the patio and went into Edmund's suite. Edmund's body was gone to Memorial where Ainsworth would handle the post mortem. The technicians were finished, their gadgets packed to go. Stuff had a word with a lab man regarding certain exhibits that were specified for analysis. Perhaps the oddest among these objects designated was a crumpled ball of facial tissue.

Stuff then issued a blanket dismissal, with the exception of one patrolman to stand guard in a roving assignment against curiosity seekers and the Press.

Then, alone, he went to a desk telephone and put through a call to his Fort Lauderdale home.

"Vi?"

"Yes, Stuff?"

"I'm at the Helbers'. I'm afraid the luncheon date with Hal and Jenny is out. Explain for me, will you?"

"Of course." Vi had been breakfasting with Stuff when the call had come through linking suicide and blackmail with Edmund, and ordering Stuff to take over. She had been incredulous. She remained so. "Dear, is it true? The suicide angle, I mean. It's so abysmally out of character for Edmund."

Stuff said noncommittaly, "Bill Ainsworth insists there's no doubt about it. He called it a classical case."

"And is there a blackmail and extortion note aimed at *Edmund?*"

"There is."

"Women? A fire-breathing husband? It's too silly!"

"Not women, Vi. Gent protégés. The latest one specifically."

"Oh, no! *No!* I simply don't believe it. It's a despicable frameup, some rotten joke."

"No joke about his throat being cut, Vi."

"I *know*, and knowing Edmund as we both knew him it just doesn't make sense."

"Granted. Just the same, it's about the most pat open-and-shut case I've ever come up against. On its surface."

Vi said fiercely, "Then dig."

"I'm going to. I'm about to have a chat with stepbrother Saltus."

"That hypocrite!"

"Why the vehemence? You almost sound as though you'd had a run in with him."

"By proxy, yes."

"What do you mean by that?"

"There's a woman I know who's in the art class with me. Helen Ascerton. She's an assistant librarian at the Halcyon Public Library. She's nice, *very* nice, but sort of gushy. She's a pushover for faces. Thinks they show true character—angels, devils, you know the routine. You couldn't convince her in a hundred years that they could be masks."

"We're approaching, one presumes, Saltus' face?"

"Sidestepping the sarcasm, dear, we are."

"At the Salle des Inconnus?"

"No, at the library."

The tentacle of a thrill brushed Stuff. "Saltus?" he said skeptically. "At the public library?"

"My own reaction exactly."

Stuff's voice edged on a certain sharpness. "When, Vi? Just when did this miracle occur?"

"Little over a week ago. Helen Ascerton wasn't specific, and do I gather from your tone that the incident might have some significance?"

"Might. Let's have a few details, please."

"In the first place, the library's air conditioning had broken down and the building was like a Turkish bath."

"So?"

"So visitors were scarce as hens' teeth. Whereupon on three successive blistering days enter that alleged unregenerate cultureless stepbrother of our Edmund, one Saltus Helber."

"Well?"

"Stuff, you know as well as I do from remarks of Edmund's that Trianon is as loaded with literature as the Halcyon Public. Probably more so."

"I see the point. And Miss Ascerton didn't?"

"She did not. She burbled to Edmund about it at the art class while he was giving me a critique on that still life composition I'm doing. She drizzled honey about how wonderful it was that Saltus was 'seeking some drafts at the bibliophile's font'—her words, not mine"

"I should hope so."

"Edmund, poor lamb, swallowed it whole. He loved it. A new-leaf-for-Saltus sort of thing. It never struck either of them as an act put on by a Grade A hypocrite. In that heat it had to be. Any sipping at the bibliophile's font could have been done right at home in Trianon's library with air-conditioned comfort. I suppose this is all pretty trivial."

"It isn't. Tell me, did your starry-eyed Miss Ascerton happen to notice what Saltus was reading? The odds are on *Lolita*."

"No, Edmund asked her that. All she noticed was that he stuck to the research stacks. Some large book with a dark green cover. Nonfiction."

"My dearest Vi, both you and Miss Ascerton are angels. Kiss both of you for me, please. And now, goodbye."

During the quarter hour that followed Wilksby's departure, Saltus indulged in a flush of anticipated acquisitions that ranged from a jet-streamed convertible through a beauty contest assortment of *chère amies* to a speculative houseboat patterned on the elegancies of a Cleopatra's barge. This agreeable

dream-world was shelved when Stuff Driscoll knocked and was asked to come in.

Saltus initially detected nothing in Stuff's greeting other than a continuation of the sympathetic-social that had marked their earlier encounter. He suggested that Mr. Driscoll sit down and Stuff sat. He suggested an early eye-opener of Scotch, bourbon, vodka, or what would you, which Stuff declined.

Saltus then began to sense a subtle change and caught a momentary impression, considerably offbeat, that Stuff resembled a cat. Not a domestic cat, but one of the large feral variety. A hunter cat. Very slowly Saltus' muscles and nervous system started to tighten. He had always been sensitive to atmosphere, to a prescience of anything inimical to his interests or his security, and this aptitude—call it ESP or whatever—was shimmering a warning in the air.

"Could you tell me, Mr. Driscoll," he said with a crocodile approach toward solemnity, "just when we might arrange to have Edmund buried?"

"I should imagine any time from tomorrow on, Mr. Helber."

"Mr. Wilksby has been kind enough to take over the arrangements. I'll let him know. He suggested, incidentally, the probability of there being an inquest?"

"That, I should say, will be held before Justice Harling Haverstalk. Probably around next Tuesday. Of course you'll be formally notified."

"It does seem a lot of red tape for a suicide."

"Yes, doesn't it?" Stuff agreed pleasantly. "It's obligatory, however, with any unusual death—suicide—accidental—" he permitted a slight hiatus before adding, "—or murder."

Saltus caught the hesitant break, and a tiny fissure occurred in his shell of absolute confidence. He said, "Even where there is no doubt, Mr. Driscoll?"

"Even then. Also, there is the matter of the attempted blackmail and extortion to clear up. Can you suggest anyone among your stepbrother's associates who might be responsible?"

Saltus succeeded in giving the impression of a lapse into deep thought, while the shimmer of warning increased in tempo. Without having attached importance to it one way or the other, he had imagined that official interest in the threat note would evaporate once Edmund, its target, was dead. The naiveté of this belief had never struck him.

He decided to toss Stuff a fish.

"My bet," he said, "would be on Oscar. You could figure that he either got tired of his pretty-boy role, or it could be that Edmund threatened to cut that crazy hundred grand bequest out of his will, and Oscar decided to cash in on blackmail."

"Interesting that you should say that, Mr. Helber."

"Yes? Why?"

"Because a potentially explosive situation did seem to exist—at least, to Oscar's way of thinking. It was neither of the things you suggested, however. No, it was the fact of his secret marriage, and Oscar's fear that Edmund might learn about it."

"His *what?*"

"Oscar married a Miss Stella Linland two weeks ago. They agreed to keep it secret, Oscar told me, because of your stepbrother's aversion to any outside influence whatever intruding on Oscar's concentration toward his one-man show in December. I understand that your stepbrother was pretty explicit and mandatory on the point, explaining it was entirely in Oscar's best interest."

"That was Edmund, all right. I've had my own dose of the 'best interest' treatment."

"Then you will understand Oscar's concern." Stuff added almost negligently, "That's why his wife only came late at night to stay with him in the studio—when your stepbrother would invariably have retired."

"She stayed there nights? All night?"

"So Oscar tells me. Quite understandable, really—first flush of young love and all that. She'd park her car off the highway where it would be concealed behind brush, then walk to the studio along that pathway that passes your stepbrother's patio. It would generally be around daybreak when she would leave."

Stuff's eyes rested casually on the paling of Saltus' face. The point of the poniard had evidently pricked in. He shoved it deeper. He said, "She was there, as usual, last night and left the studio between five and six this morning. Of course, you can see how valuable that might be for us."

"I'm not quite sure that I do."

"It's valuable because of what she might have seen as she went along the path that skirts your stepbrother's patio—some glimpse, perhaps, of the person who threw in the blackmail note."

A highly unpleasant sense of suffocating was strong in Saltus, but he managed to speak in a fairly normal tone, "Surely, if she'd seen anything like that wouldn't she have raised an alarm? Run back to the studio and told Oscar about it?"

"Not necessarily. Not if she had only glimpsed the person and not the act itself. Just the sight of a man, say, moving about in the patio would mean nothing more to her than that he was some friend of Edmund's. No, what I'm hoping for, if she did catch sight of anyone, is to get a description."

Stuff paused, then went on easily, "Questioning her will have to wait until tomorrow morning. Today being Sunday, she's not working—

she's an instructress in a physical culture salon for women—and Oscar tells me she planned to visit friends in Pompano, possibly to spend the night. They're not mutual friends and he doesn't remember their names beyond his wife referring to them as Alice and Jack—down from the north on a brief vacation. Anyhow, there's no compelling rush. Tomorrow will do."

Stuff looked at his watch. Just after ten. He smiled, and said, "This extortion business doesn't concern you, so don't bother even thinking about it. We'll handle it." He went to the door. "Right now I've got a lot of work to do. Again my sympathies, Mr. Helber. I'll keep in touch."

The strictures of it being a Sunday did not interfere with Stuff's activities during the balance of the morning. On leaving Saltus he returned to the studio where he arranged with Oscar that Oscar get in touch with his wife. The song-and-dance he had given Saltus about Stella being in Pompano had been a purposeful fiction. He wanted both of them to join him in a strategy conference during luncheon at The Fish Tank Restaurant at noon.

Next, he drove to the Halcyon Public Library, routed out the day watchman, showed his credentials, and was admitted to the building. He was reasonably certain of the nature of the book he wanted, and equally certain that he had located it in a dark green copy of *Legal Medicine: Pathology and Toxicology* in the research stack. He convinced the complacent watchman that his official receipt would cover taking the volume out, and its ultimate return.

His next stop was the crime lab at HQ. He got the results of the tests he had asked for, and he was particularly grim at the report that Edmund's straight razor, the suicide weapon, had revealed only the victim's own fingerprints, made while Edmund had held the razor handle during shaving—his fingerprints and nothing else.

This proved to *his* satisfaction that suicide could be thrown straight out the window, and murder let in. He reflected, as he had so often reflected, on the ridiculous fact that murderers could make the most intricate, the most devious plans, and then ruin them by a neglect of the obvious.

He left the copy of *Legal Medicine, Pathology and Toxicology* to be gone through for fingerprints, with special attention to be paid to Chapter 15, particularly the Cuts or Incised Wounds section of it.

The morning by now had advanced to 11:30.

Mrs. Stella (Oscar) Fortisman was a young woman who never would have stopped a clock, nor would she have launched a thousand ships. Which is a fancy way of saying that Stella, so far as looks

went, was in the girl-next-door rather than the glamor galaxy.

On the other hand, Stella's physique was something extra-special, as testified to by a cluster of cups, medals, and trophies gleaned at tennis, swim meets, and exhibition judo. In the brains department she rated a solid A-plus, while among the more feminine pastures of romance her batting average could be compared to that of any major league pitcher who occasionally hits a single. With Oscar, however, she had scored a grand slam homer. They were the ideal mates and as happy as two kittens in a catnip stupor.

That is, they were so until the personal implications of the extortion note (telephoned to Stella by Oscar, who brought her up to date on the Helber tragedy and issued Stuff's command-performance invitation for lunch) had sunk in. Stella's first reaction had been a short burst of laughter at its ridiculous absurdity; but then its probable effect on their rugged circle of beefy friends and on people in general had plunged her into an icy rage that still retained its sub-zero temperature when she was greeted by Oscar and Stuff at The Fish Tank.

The opening civilities were, as a consequence, somewhat strained. They melted a bit during shrimp cocktails when Stuff advanced his opinion that the extortion note was a frameup, completely false, and that he had every intention of proving it so. By then he had sized Stella up and had reached the conclusion that both physically and psychologically she would do excellently for the plan he had in mind.

He said, "Mrs. Fortisman, I want to give you a rundown on exactly how things stand. Around half-past seven this morning the Helber yard boy was giving his usual morning checkup to Edmund's patio when he glanced through the open French doors of the suite's living room and saw Edmund's blood-spattered body seated at a table. For a moment he was horrified and in a state of shock."

"Should think he would be!" Stella said.

"Yes, anyone. He controlled his panic sufficiently to step into the room, go to a desk telephone, and call our department. He was given the familiar instructions not to touch anything and to stay put until a patrol car arrived. He took this literally and remained in the room without notifying either Saltus Helber or the staff. While waiting, he read the extortion note —later, incidentally, passing on a garbled version of it to a reporter."

"Just how big a deal will the papers make of it?" Stella asked.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Fortisman. The note will be fully exposed as a frameup by the time the case is closed. Now then, a cruiser reached Trianon within fifteen minutes and two patrolmen took over. I myself

got there around eight thirty. I'm going to ask you to memorize some details of the scene. I'll explain why shortly."

"Nuts on getting Stella mixed up in this," Oscar said thickly, both from emotion and a mouthful of lobster.

"Don't listen to him, Mr. Driscoll. I'll do anything you want me to that will help wipe out this smear."

"Just name me the bum responsible," Oscar insisted, "and I'll fracture him."

"I believe the plan I have in mind will be more effective," Stuff said. "When I reached the scene, Saltus Helber had been notified and was waiting with the patrolmen in Edmund's living room. He was wearing a dressing gown having a puce background on which there was an elaborate design of crimson dragons. Mrs. Fortisman, I'd like you to remember the description of that dressing gown."

Stuff then outlined the scenario of the crime much as Saltus had planned that it would be deduced—the tranquil breakfast scene, the note-covered rock hurled through the French doors, the shock, the spilled coffee, the horror at the note's contents, the getting of the razor from the bathroom, the return to the table to reread the note, the "hesitation marks"—then the suicidal slash.

"At least," Stuff finished, "that is the way *we were supposed* to conclude it occurred."

"But it didn't?"

"It didn't. The suicide setup was a complete phony."

"Why?"

"Simply, Mrs. Fortisman, for the reason that Edmund was already dead before that note was thrown in onto the table."

Saltus also lunched. At one o'clock he sat bleakly eyeing a platter of sandwiches he'd had Josef bring to the living room of his suite. Ever since Stuff Driscoll had left Saltus' nerves had been flirting with panic over speculation as to if, what, or how much that painter slob's secreted wife might have seen when she had gone slinking away around daybreak.

He had tried desperately to convince himself that she would have seen nothing, and would tell Driscoll so when he would question her tomorrow. He had been reinforcing this shaky sort of solace with frequent assaults on a fifth of Scotch, and after downing two sandwiches and a couple more slugs he was almost at the point of feeling secure again.

The hour had reached half-past one.

The telephone rang.

He thought it would be Wilksby. Funeral arrangements. He lifted the receiver. It was a woman's voice.

"Mr. Helber?"

"Yes?"

"We haven't met," Stella said, then paused for an instant before adding, "but I think we should."

"Who *is* this?"

"This, Mr. Helber, is Oscar's wife."

There is a physical pain brought on by shock caused through sudden fright, and Saltus felt it. He said stupidly, "But you're in Pompano."

"No, I'm not. Oscar only *thinks* I am. You see, Mr. Helber, I feel that our meeting should be private—strictly private."

"I don't get it," Saltus said. But he was beginning to. The initial confusion was draining away and his inspirational flashes were clicking again. Blackmail. She *had* seen something.

His voice came under control, coldly polite, "Exactly what do you have in mind, Mrs. Fortisman?"

"I'm wondering if you might be free tonight? Say around ten?"

Saltus' instincts were now working at computer speed. "And *I* am wondering just where your husband fits in on this conference idea?"

"He doesn't. Not only doesn't, but mustn't. I'm sure that you understand me, Mr. Helber, that you realize how much safer it would be for you if we keep this little get-together absolutely secret to ourselves."

Saltus' reactions to this palpably veiled threat were unprintable. The tramp, he decided, was out for it on her own. Even though she might be aware of the hundred grand that Oscar was slated to get, her problematic share of that would be peanuts compared to the slice she could gouge out of Saltus' three millions for her own private loot. The piracy, even the probable throwing overboard of a newly minted husband, did not strike Saltus as being in any way bizarre. It was exactly what *he* would have done under similar circumstances.

Truly, this threat, with a below-the-belt sock, contained a tremblor that held the potential of developing into a cataclysm that in turn could tumble his brilliantly successful edifice into rubble. With himself a designated murderer under it. Suddenly Saltus' skin had the feel of wet ice.

He said, "You make me curious, Mrs. Fortisman. How about a few definite details? Why be so cryptic?"

"Let's keep it that way for the time being, Mr. Helber. We can leave the details until this evening. Just where do you suggest we meet?"

A plan, still nebulous, sprouted in Saltus' feverish mind. He accepted without question the thought that this wretched creature, this female Jesse James, represented a deadly danger to his existence, and fright was now being supplanted with a calculating anger.

He said with an effect of resignation, as though complete capitulation had been achieved, "Trianon, I suppose, would be out of the question?"

"Obviously. Let me repeat that *no one* other than myself is concerned in this—let us say, in this proposed arrangement."

The plan, still tenuous in form, was beginning to make more solid shape as Saltus caught an inspirational mental image of the *pied-à-terre*, now void of Seraphines or any other occupancy. Good seclusion and established privacy were offered by the cottage in its outskirts' setting.

He said, "Have you a pencil and paper handy?"

"I have."

"There's a cottage that I rent for occasional use. It's in a fairly undeveloped area. I can assure you we would neither be observed nor disturbed."

"The address?"

"2760 Southwest Mimosa Drive. Can you find it?"

"Of course."

"At ten, then?"

"At ten."

The day had now reached two o'clock.

In a small conference room at Headquarters (to which they had gone from The Fish Tank) Stuff congratulated Stella on the manner in which she had handled her telephone conversation with Saltus. He then briefed her with explicit instructions covering her attitude and actions during the coming ten o'clock rendezvous at the cottage. He suggested that she submerge her girl-next-door appearance under the type of makeup and costuming that Saltus would expect a woman with blackmail in her basalt heart to present. He allayed Oscar's fears that Stella would be subjected to any personal danger, assuring him that the fullest protective measures would be arranged.

Before she and Oscar left, he gave Stella a Short Colt .38 revolver, having filled its rotating cylinder from a freshly opened box of cartridges, taken from a room holding an assortment of supplies maintained for just such special assignments.

After they left, Stuff put through a call to Wilksby.

"Stuff here," he said when Wilksby answered.

"Oh, yes, Stuff?"

"Need your help, Mr. Wilksby."

"It's yours."

"I'd like Saltus Helber to be pinned down this afternoon for a couple of hours—say between three o'clock and five. Either at your place or Trianon. So long as he stays put."

"I—yes, I think I can arrange it. Where are you now?"

"Headquarters."

"If I can get him on the phone I'll call you back in a few minutes."

"I'll be here."

While waiting, Stuff arranged to have a search warrant procured for the domicile and premises located at 2760 Southwest Mimosa Drive.

Wilksby's return call came through promptly.

"It's all set, Stuff. Dangled a quick dissolution of the trust before him. Handed him the line that if he would meet me at my office at three o'clock a lot of spade work could be got through. I suggested that I realized he was anxious to be in control of his inheritance as soon as possible, so I didn't mind making an immediate start."

"Can you hold him until five?"

"Simple as rolling off a log. I don't suppose—?"

"I'd better not say anything more. It's a case, Mr. Wilksby, where ignorance is the more discreet form of bliss."

"Got you. Good luck, Stuff, and goodbye."

Before leaving Headquarters, Stuff went again to the room that lodged equipment for special assignments. He selected, and carried to the car with him, a broom.

From the outset there was no question in Saltus' mind but that he would have to kill Stella Fortisman. The assurance of this remained hot as a smoldering fire through the tedious couple of hours spent over dry documents and arid legal verbiage droned at him by Wilksby. It broke into little tongues of crafty flame after he left the old windbag's office and drove back to Trianon.

It being late Sunday afternoon, the staff had decamped for their evening off. Not one of them had been even slightly moved by the bromidic ties reputed to link loyal retainer with beloved master into giving up this timetable contract for the domestic pattern of modern days. Of course, had it been Saltus who had cut his own throat rather than Edmund they might have rallied round the bereaved hearth. They might even have thrown a backstairs fiesta.

The roving patrolman also had been called off—so what Saltus found on arriving was an empty house, which suited him fine. He decided to use the fact as an alibi for the evening's homicidal activities. In the improbable event that he should be questioned, he would simply state that he had remained at home in his suite, eschewing his notable rounds of ribaldry out of deference to Edmund's death. No one would be able to back him up in this, but neither could anyone prove he hadn't.

Of course there was Oscar over in the studio, but Saltus discarded him from his calculations. Rarely, he reasoned, had the bum ever come near the main house, and then only when summoned by Edmund. Saltus could think of no reason why he should do so tonight.

As a precaution, however, against any hundred-to-one chance, he got out a bottle of sleeping capsules and put it on his bedside table. He would say he had locked the doors to his suite, taken a couple of capsules, and slept soundly drugged, impervious to any knockings, until morning.

He was quite fascinated with such clever details, and congratulated himself on having come up with them. Thoughtfully he revolved the better ways for sending that unmitigated female vulture to her just desserts.

The simplest plan was to take his .32 Smith & Wesson revolver with him and pump her full of lead. The neighbors were remote enough so that any reaction to the sound of a couple of shots would be negligible, if not zero. They would dismiss them as backfires on the highway.

But no. The gun was registered in his name, and his library delving into Gonzales *et al's* handsome book had briefed him well on the dangers to the killer resulting from laboratory comparisons of rifling marks on, respectively, lethal and test bullets. His gun very definitely was out.

A knife? He'd rather not. Blood would be unavoidably involved, and as he intended to load the body into a car and dump it into a hyacinth-blanketed canal, any blood traces would simply offer an unnecessary danger.

Blunt force seemed most reasonable. Surely he'd find some object in the cottage that he could crack her skull with, and dispose of later when he sank the body. Then his inspirational flashes broke through and he thought of the garrote.

One of his nylon scarfs folded loosely around his neck, to be whipped off and flipped around *her* neck—and bingo.

Ideal. Perfect.

All this cold-blooded ruminating had brought the evening to the twilight of seven o'clock. Three hours to go to post time. Saltus went to the chateau's elaborate kitchen and dug out the supper Josef had left for him under refrigeration. Chicken salad, mango tarts. He supplemented these with a bottle of Rhine wine and went right on ruminating, with the chill indifference of the totally amoral, while he ate.

He wouldn't use his own car which was a conspicuously flashy bucket-seat job, and while roomy enough for a live female companion would be exceedingly awkward for a dead one. The Trianon station wagon would serve best. It looked like any other of a thousand station wagons and would be most convenient for the stowage of Stella Fortisman's body.

The wine was comfortingly quieting the high pitch that his nerves had been operating on throughout the day. He even grew philosophically reflective, while munching a mango tart, and pondered the age-old problem of the curse of wealth. In his previous extended state of shallow economy nobody had ever had their hooks out to sink into him, whereas now that he wallowed in money the gouge was on.

He consoled himself with the conviction that the wolves were

only successful with the softies, with the Edmunds of this world. And just look, he thought dispassionately, where it had got Edmund.

He killed the bottle while speculating as to whether or not he should garrote the venomous Jezebel at the moment when she would step onto the cottage porch. He had no patience with the delayed action boys, a bit prevalant on the late-late TV, who dallied with dialogue through yards of self-exposition and vainglory before finally pulling the trigger.

On the other hand, he did seriously want to find out exactly how much of the daybreak performance she had seen or, more important, if she had passed any of it on. Yes, Saltus decided, better not be hasty. Better wait. And after all, no one knew of the rendezvous. With her artfully feline mind she would have attended to that. This he was convinced of. So time would in no sense be of the essence.

He glanced at his watch.

A quarter past eight.

If he shoved off, say, in an hour he could make the twenty-minute drive to the cottage and still have plenty of time to check the building and grounds before ten, to make sure all was A-okay and the cottage and grounds truly emptied of Seraphine.

The cottage on Mimosa Drive was a wooden relic of Halcyon's earlier days when the tomato reigned as king. Originally, it had served as the modest homestead of a raiser of the then profitably grown love apples. Later, when salt seepage had rendered cultivating the crop inadvisable, the owner had sold out to a small speculator in real estate. The new owner, inelegantly maligned by Seraphine as a Scrooge, had done little in the way of development, and the cottage, as a result, had the fairly unique distinction of being surrounded by a considerable area of vacant land.

Night had closed in by a quarter of ten when Saltus left the Trianon station wagon at the rear of the cottage. He made a perfunctory flashlight tour of the immediate vicinity, weaving among a clutter of unkempt semitropical shrubs before entering the cottage by its back door.

He pressed a switch lighting up an old-fashioned kitchen, and satisfied that it was Seraphineless (she had a habit of passing out cold in whatever locale she happened to be parked) he went into a moderate-sized living room where he lighted floor lamps. He opened the door of a closet in which Seraphine had stored her suitcases and saw that they were gone. The closet was empty except for a broom standing against a back corner and Saltus wondered, incredulously, whether she had gone haywire and done some sweeping up before she had left.

A bedroom and bath were devoid

of herself and her clothes, and Saltus was satisfied that he and Stella Fortisman would have the place in safe seclusion.

He opened living-room windows for ventilation against the room's stored-up heat, pulled the curtains together, then stepped through the front door onto a screened porch. The radium-coated hands of his watch showed five minutes to ten. He sat on a camp chair to wait.

His fingers absently played with the loosely arranged nylon scarf around his throat.

Stella's arrival was heralded by the headlights of her car. The car drifted along slowly, hesitated, passed the house, stopped, then backed up. It turned into the so-called driveway and parked at the porch door.

Stella got out.

"Mrs. Fortisman?" Saltus' voice came through the screening.

"Yes. Mr. Helber?"

Saltus held the porch door open.

"We're quite alone," he said.

"I felt sure we would be."

"Shall we go inside?"

"As you wish."

Light from the living room fell on her as they walked in, and Saltus found her much as he had expected the clever, conniving mate of a half-baked pro slugger would be. An overdose of mascara and blue shadow under her eyes had turned her into a travesty of any young lady predatory on the night. Her hairdo was barely offside from the fashionably absurd, and her dress had the tightness of a kid glove.

Stella took in the room. Curtains drawn at the windows. The doors and general arrangement of the furnishings were just as Stuff had described them during a second briefing that had been held earlier in the evening around six o'clock.

She said, "Handy."

"I've found it so."

"That I'd bet."

"Fix you a drink?"

"Maybe later."

Stella sat down at a table, placed centrally in the room where Stuff had said it would be. She put a large coconut-fiber handbag on it. She waited until Saltus had sat down across the table, facing her. Then she opened the bag and took out the Short Colt .38 that Stuff had given her.

"In case you develop any ideas," she said.

The jolt that the gun gave Saltus threw him momentarily off balance. It was not so much the weapon itself—he had half expected that she would be intelligent enough to carry some concealed means of self-defense; but its immediate and bare-faced introduction into the game shook him.

He did not for a single second expect her to use it unless she was attacked. The last intention in her mind would be to kill the prospective goose with its golden eggs.

"Surely that isn't necessary," he said.

"Oh, no?"

"No." His face was a mask of cold politeness, while his brain geared into high. It easily grasped the formidable hurdles erected against any garroting while the gun remained, as it was, negligently pointing toward his middle.

Distract her attention—that seemed the best answer. Distract her attention or capture it—then—

"Shall we cut this preliminary verbal fencing?" Stella said.

"Shortly." Surely the black spider wouldn't expect him to be gouged without knowing precisely what he was being gouged for. "The operative word," he said, "is *why*. Just why do you think, as you obviously do, that you hold all the aces?"

Her smile had the glacé texture of a winter's frost. "Perhaps, Mr. Helber, the description of a dressing gown might help? A somewhat conspicuous arrangement of crimson dragons on a background of puce?"

If there had been any doubt in Saltus' mind (there hadn't been, actually) as to her having seen something, it was now dispelled. But how much? And more important, *had she told?*

"The value," he said carefully, "of what you saw depends equally on how positively you can convince me that you have kept your mouth shut and will continue to do so."

The gelid smile remained.

"Isn't that a rather tacit admission that you did murder your stepbrother?"

"Oh, that!" Saltus said impatiently.

Somehow, in spite of the death-black eye of the revolver, he would kill this woman, so any admissions he might make would be as useless to her as a brick of fool's gold. But the absolute assurance that she had not spoken was of vital importance to the future of his very existence.

"Of course I killed him," he said, then added petulantly, "You yourself would have under the same circumstances. Under the rotten, endless pressures. You're that sort of a woman."

"I suppose I am. So shall we get down to business, Mr. Helber?"

"Just what is your proposition?"

String her along, his brain said. Wait. Wait patiently for the opportune moment to bag that gun. Devise some incident when her attention would be distracted. And in the meanwhile, comply. No matter what she demanded, be a sheep.

"The proposition, Mr. Helber, is that you first get a sheet of paper and a pen from that desk over there and write as I shall dictate."

"Dictate what?" Goad her, his brain said, into spilling more. "Your only ammo is the description of my dressing gown. Any high pressure defense attorney could rip that into an ashcan."

She said negligently, "I doubt it. Not with an identification of your face added to it, at the daybreak hour and in your stepbrother's patio. Not with your picking up a rock

and tossing in the note. Not with the still discernible tableau of your dead stepbrother slumped on the breakfast table. Enough?"

He said nothing. His body, his brain felt bloodless at the extent of her knowledge, even while reason reassured him it would do her no good. Not when she was dead. In the turgid chocolate-colored water under hyacinths.

His hand crept with a gentle inching across the table toward the gun.

"Don't try it," Stella said softly. "This business of our being here alone, of no one being wise to it, can work two ways, you know."

"Be sort of unprofitable for you, wouldn't it? My death, I mean."

"It would. But not as profitless to me as being dead myself. Get the paper, Mr. Helber."

He went. He considered it time to adopt a beaten look. He let his shoulders sag after one helpless shrug.

"That's better," Stella said.

He took his time. He picked up a writing tablet from the desk. A ballpoint pen. He permitted his fingers to tremble, while warning himself not to overdo it, not to ham it up. The woman was no fool. But neither, he thought savagely, was he.

He returned to the table. He stood abjectly across from this creature whose own nerves, he could see, were as tense as a tightly wound spring.

Now, he thought.

Careful—careful—now—

He placed the writing tablet on the table.

His fingers, still trembling, let the pen drop, and having given it a slight impetus it rolled rapidly toward the table's edge.

Instinctively—the reflex action was irrepressible—Stella reached to prevent the pen from falling off.

With a vicious grab Saltus snatched the gun from her hand and a hot bile of rage burst black in his head as he aimed and fired.

With a scream Stella clutched her breast and slumped sideways onto the floor, and Saltus, as she lay motionless in the table's shadow, fired two more blasts down at her body.

To make sure. To make absolutely sure.

Dawn broke before all the ends could be tied up, and Stuff at weary last was able to hit for Fort Lauderdale and home. His house, on the southern bank of one of the town's lovely canals, was doubly welcome by Vi being on deck with percolating coffee—he had phoned her of his imminent arrival—and hot Danish pastry.

He summed up for her, as always, the general details of the case, not in their sequence but as he recalled them between attacks on the food.

—the gun he had given Stella had been loaded with blanks. Psy-

chologically, he had been sure that Saltus, on her immediate production of the gun, would react just as he had reacted.

—at no time had she been without adequate protection. Before Saltus' arrival at the cottage Stuff and three deputies had been waiting a short distance back in the brush. After Stella's appearance they had moved in even closer—a deputy at each of the living-room's two windows, himself and the third deputy directly inside the kitchen.

—the talk, and the outright confession by Saltus to the murder of Edmund, had been picked up by one of the newer electronic bugging devices—a broom, having a transmitter in the straw part and the antenna running up inside the broom's handle, all the talk being taped outside the cottage on a special receiver.

—the originating idea for the "hesitation marks" had unquestionably come from *Legal Medicine: Pathology and Toxicology;* Saltus' sweaty prints were scattered throughout the significant Chapter 15.

—at the first shot and Stella's scream Stuff and the deputy had entered the living room, where the deputy succeeded in catching flashbulb pictures of Saltus firing the two succeeding shots down at Stella.

"That girl," Vi said, "must be composed of one-half Sarah Bernhardt and one-half Ethel Barrymore."

"She's a born actress, all right. Even though I knew the setup I got a chill when she let loose that yell."

"What Saltus got was probably a thrill of pure joy."

"Not when he spotted us it wasn't. He even emptied the rest of the blanks at the deputy and me."

"Superman stuff? Causing him to collapse when you two didn't?"

"Let's leave it at partial. The total collapse came when Stella rose up, as it seemed, from the dead, and he believed himself to be faced with a still-alive eyewitness to his daybreak high jinks in the patio."

"But can any of that be introduced in court as evidence? Isn't it technically entrapment?"

"Sure is, but there's the angle of his intended killing of Stella, documented with lovely pictures. My guess is that the prosecution won't even need it. After we booked and charged Saltus, he made and signed a voluntary confession that covers Edmund's murder down to the last dotted i or crossed t."

"Does it also clear Edmund and Oscar of that beastly charge in the blackmail note?"

"Completely." Stuff started on the last of the Danish. "It's a funny thing, Vi, but toward the end I got the impression that Saltus wanted us to appreciate how bright he'd been and to burst into applause. Bright!"

"Well, wasn't he? You said he

had Bill Ainsworth convinced it was a classical case of suicide, and you yourself were on the ropes."

"Yes. But I changed my mind."

"Knowing you as I do, dear, I have the impression you've been holding something back for a grandstand finish. Just what was it that tipped you off?"

"Edmund's breakfast."

"Oh, now honestly, darling!"

"No, look, Vi—it was like this. I was watching the lab man wipe off Edmund's fingers with a piece of tissue before taking prints of them—for comparison with the ones on the razor handle and on the extortion note."

"Wipe *what* off?"

"Ever eat a hot, toasted, thickly buttered English muffin?"

"You know very well I have."

"Well, that's what Edmund was doing when Saltus yanked his head back and cut his throat. It would have been just about impossible for Edmund to have held either the razor or the note without smearing butter on them. His fingers were coated with the hot, melted butter."

"And there was no butter on the handle of the razor?"

"The lab boys couldn't turn up the faintest trace."

"Maybe Edmund washed and wiped his hands—"

"Just before committing suicide?"

"No, of course not. He'd have been far too upset emotionally even to think of it. So it was not Edmund who held that razor. So it was murder."

"You know, Vi, this whole job of Saltus' makes me think of that proverb in the Old Testament—sort of covers all the eager-beaver bad guys who end by tripping themselves up."

"Couched, I'm sure, dear, in somewhat less colloquial language."

"Much less. It hits the nail smack on the head by simply stating, 'Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein.' "

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(Continued from page 162)

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(Continued from Other Side)

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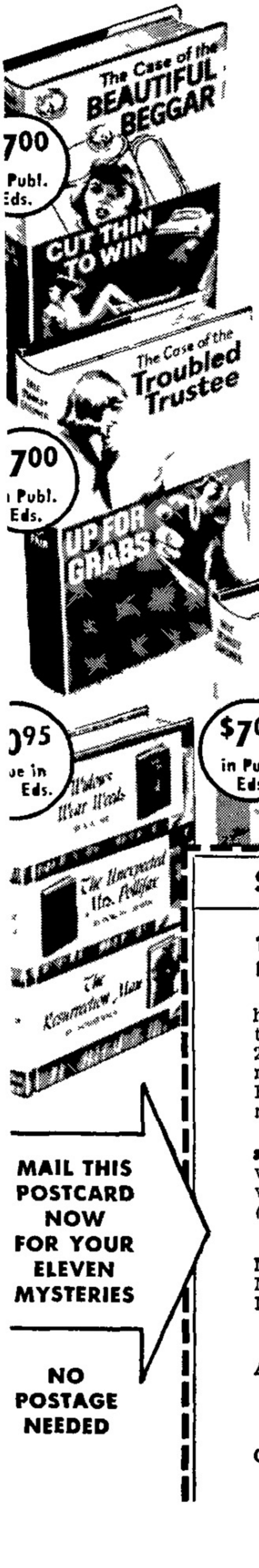

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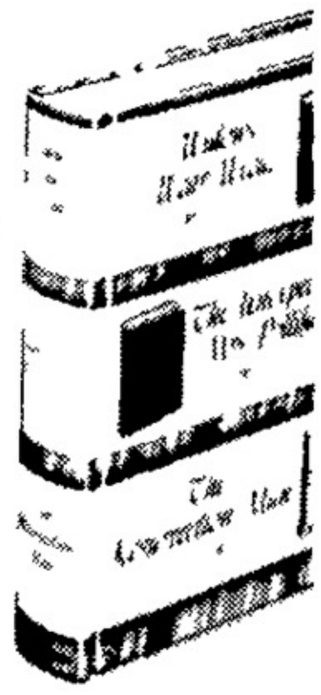

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