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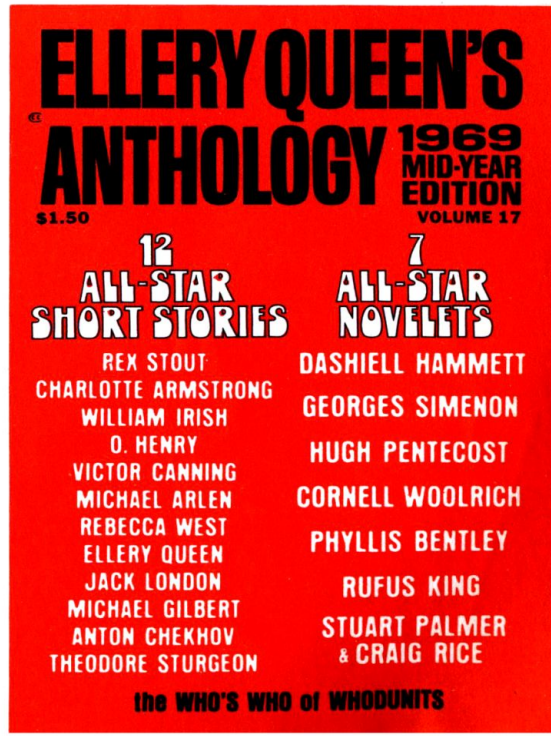

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The Beaumont, as Chambrun often insists, is not just a hotel, not just the most de-luxe hotel in the world; it is a way of life. On the record books it is owned by a Mr. George Battle, whom no one ever sees and who lives on the French Riviera, presumably counting an inexhaustible supply of American money. The absentee owner (foolish man to live in another hotel!) never interferes with Chambrun's management (sensible man to trust Chambrun implicitly!). Occasionally the foolish-sensible Mr. Battle will ask for special courtesies for a friend—and usually these occasions cause Chambrun nothing but trouble; for Mr. B.'s friends—as future stories will reveal—are not likely to be ordinary people.

The Hotel Beaumont is like a small city in the heart of Manhattan, and it has all the heartaches and heartbreaks of a contemporary small city—the difficulties of its permanent guests, the worries of its transients, the crimes and intrigues, the romances and tragedies, and inevitably, the successes and failures. Self-contained, the Beaumont has its own shops, restaurants, bars, its own traffic problems, and from time to time even its own housing problems —with the result that, in effect, it has to maintain its own almost-autonomous self-government, complete with law-enforcement personnel . . .

Now, let's go once more behind the scenes of the Beaumont—this time to the "show business" part of Pierre Chambrun's activities as "city manager" of New York's city within a city . . .

PIERRE CHAMBRUN AND THE SAD SONG

by HUGH PENTECOST

THE PROJECTED RETURN OF PAMela Powers into the public's awareness was a matter of increasing concern to me as the hour and moment grew closer. As public relations director of the Beaumont, New York City's top luxury hotel, it was my job to make certain that the occasion was placed in the proper spotlight, that the important columnists and critics were on hand to pass, we hoped, a kindly judgment on the Powers comeback, and that the Blue Lagoon Room of the hotel was bulging with celebrities to welcome back Pamela as the toast of the town she had once been.

I had never seen Pamela perform. Fifteen years ago I had been at a midwestern university, in my junior year. I'd never seen the inside of a New York City night club, or one in Las Vegas or Miami. Pamela had been the queen of all those places. I'd heard her recordings, of course. I had an album of hers with her picture on the cover—a slim dark girl with wide violet eyes that seem about to brim with tears. There was a sad and plaintive quality to her songs that made the whole world want to protect and love her. I'd been told that hearing her high, true voice on records was only half the magic; that when you saw her in person, standing in a spotlight by the piano, a long chiffon handkerchief twisted between her fingers, she could tear you to pieces. She was, they told me, an original, a "one and only."

Fifteen years ago Pamela had exploded like a tragic Roman candle, falling to earth in a hundred bright pieces that landed, sputtered, and went out, apparently forever. A combination of alcohol and drugs, they said. Now, in the late hours of the night, you could sometimes hear a disc jockey play one of her records and comment nostalgically on what had once been a great and haunting talent...

Pierre Chambrun, resident manager of the Beaumont and my employer, is a small dark man, stockily built, with heavy pouches under bright black eyes that can turn so hard that your blood freezes if you're guilty of a mistake, or, unexpectedly, can twinkle with humor. He has been in the hotel business for all his adult life. French by birth, he came to this country as a small boy and he now thinks like an American. His training in

the hotel business has often taken him back to Europe, and he can adopt a Continental manner to please a Queen. He's an excellent linguist. He's the sole operating boss of the Beaumont, handling his job without interference from the absentee owner.

I think Chambrun's genius as an executive lies in his ability to delegate authority while at the same time always being close at hand to take the responsibility for delicate decisions. His instinct for dealing with people on all levels from the lowest kitchen helper to visiting royalty, is not something you can learn from a course in hotel management at Cornell University.

We live by fairly rigid routines at the Beaumont. Chambrun breakfasts in his elegant office on the second floor at precisely 9:00. It is always a hearty breakfast because he never takes time to eat lunch. At precisely 9:22 I report to get any special orders for the day. Chambrun will be lighting his first Egyptian cigarette of the day and pouring his second cup of American coffee. There will be a third cup, and then he switches to Turkish coffee which Miss Ruysdale prepares for him on the carved Florentine sideboard. Miss Ruysdale is an incomparable secretary who seems to know in advance what Chambrun's needs will be even before he has thought of them himself.

The first order of business is to look through a collection of cards sent up by the reception desk—the newly registered guests of the night before. I'm always present for this routine because it's my job to know if any new celebrity has checked in and if there is any reason for a press release or the special "red carpet treatment."

The hotel uses a code system on these registration cards that Chambrun goes over each morning. The code letter A means that the guest is an alcoholic; W on a man's card means that he's a woman chaser possibly a customer for the expensive call girls who appear from time to time in the Trapeze Bar; M on a woman's card means a man hunter; O arbitrarily stands for "over his head"—meaning that particular guest can't afford the Beaumont's prices and mustn't be allowed to get in too deep; MX on a married man's card means he's double-crossing his wife, and WX means the wife is playing around; and D means diplomat.

On this particular morning Chambrun was fingering the cards passing them on to me after he read them. That day we had a famous film star, a Texas oil man with political aspirations, a South American diplomat on a visit to the U.N. The others were meaningless to me, particularly a Mrs. Donald Jepson. Her card was bare but Chambrun made two notations on it—A and O.

"A long-gone alcoholic and at last report stony broke," he said. There was a curious questioning glitter in his half hidden black eyes as he saw me put the card on top of my pile without much interest. "Mean anything to you?" he asked.

"I never heard of Mrs. Donald Jepson," I said, "drunk or sober."

"She is Pamela Powers," Chambrun said.

"The singer?"

"The one-time singer," he said. He didn't go on with his collection of cards. "Extraordinary girl."

"Woman," I said. "She quit fifteen years ago. She has to be flirting with forty, or past that."

Chambrun picked up the phone on his desk and flipped the switch on the conference box so that Ruysdale and I could hear Mr. Atterbury's dry voice when he answered. Atterbury is the head desk clerk and an old and trusted hand.

"'Morning, Atterbury," Chambrun said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Did Mrs. Donald Jepson have a reservation?"

There was the briefest hesitation. "No, sir. House seat."

The management holds out a half dozen rooms in case some VIP appears unexpectedly. We call them house seats. Only Atterbury and Chambrun are permitted to okay their release.

"You had a reason?" Chambrun asked.

"Yes, sir. I had a terrible crush on Pamela Powers twenty years ago. I couldn't say no."

"She's dead-broke from all accounts."

"I know. My responsibility, sir."

"And will you carry her out of the hotel when she gets screaming drunk and starts climbing the walls?"

"I will, sir."

A tiny smile moved the corner of Chambrun's mouth. "I'd have done the same thing, Atterbury. Good man."

"Thank you, sir." Atterbury's phone clicked off. His day was made.

"Sentimental ass," Chambrun said. He still didn't go on to the next card. His hooded eyes swiveled my way. "Let me know, Mark, if Miss Powers appears in any of the public rooms—bars, restaurants. I'd like to see her again, but I want it to seem casual."

I spread the word. At about 12:45 I was in my office on the fourth floor when my phone rang. It was Eddie, the head bartender in the Trapeze Bar.

"The lady's here," he said.

I called Chambrun.

"I'm tied up for the next fifteen minutes," he said. "Go down to the Trapeze and keep Miss Powers entertained until I show up."

The Trapeze Bar is suspended in space, like a birdcage, over the foyer to the Grand Ballroom. Its walls are elaborate with Florentine

grillework. An artist of the Calder school has decorated them with mobiles of circus performers working on trapezes. They sway slightly in the draft from a concealed air-freshening system, creating the illusion that the whole place is swinging slightly in orbit.

I saw Pamela as I walked into the Trapeze. She was sitting at a corner table alone—so very alone. I felt an unexpected protective pang for her. She was, somehow ageless. She was turning a champagne glass slowly round and round and round in her slim fingers.

I stopped at the bar to speak to Eddie and said, frowning. "She's started to booze it up already."

Eddie grinned. "Champagne glass, properly chilled," he said "loaded with four solid ounces of straight ginger ale."

"Ginger ale!"

"I kid you not," Eddie said "Shall I send over your usual dry martini?"

"I—I think not," I said.

As I walked toward Pamela's table I saw her suddenly involved in a tense withdrawal. Did she think I was an unwanted autograph hunter—or possibly a detective? You may ask why I thought "detective." It was because when I reached the table she stared up at me with those wide violet eyes and I could see terror in them. I thought, with a twinge, that she must be a little off her psychic rocker. There's nothing frightening, much less terrifying, about my very amiable professional approach.

"Miss Powers?" I said. "I'm Mark Haskell, the Beaumont's public relations director. I just wanted to tell you how delighted we are to have you with us."

Very slowly her panic seemed to ebb.

"Thank you," she said in a small quavering voice.

"May I join you for a moment?"

"Please do."

I sat down opposite her.

"I don't want any particular attention paid to my being a guest of the hotel, Mr. Haskell," she said.

"That may be hard to control," I said, smiling at her. "You'll be recognized by hundreds of people."

Her tiny smile had a bitter twist to it. "I've long since been forgotten," she said.

"I very much doubt that."

She lowered her eyes. "Did you know that I opened the Blue Lagoon Room here? Seventeen years ago. I was the first star to perform here."

I hadn't known that but I didn't admit it. "You've been missed," I said.

Just then I saw Chambrun coming across the room toward us. He had on his best "mine host" smile as he bent over her hand and kissed it.

"My dear child," he said.

"Dear Mr. Chambrun," she said.

But she wasn't looking at him. The violet eyes had widened. There had been terror in them before. Now it was stark and undisguised. She was staring past Chambrun at the bar. I followed the direction of her look.

Seated at the far end of the bar was a man wearing a black overcoat with an ornate fur collar. He had on a black hat, brim tugged downward. You don't keep your hat on in the Trapeze Bar. He was looking straight at Pamela with cold-blue eyes. His mouth was a thin slit over a granite jaw. He lifted a shot glass filled with whiskey and swallowed the contents at a gulp. He looked like a mobster right out of an old Warner Brothers movie. But it was not funny.

Pamela lowered her eyes and her whole body shook like someone with a malarial chill.

It was two afternoons later that I was summoned to Chambrun's office for a special conference. When I arrived I found only Mr. Cardoza and Miss Ruysdale with him. Cardoza is the Maitre D' in the Blue Lagoon, but he is more than a head waiter. He handles the entertainment and makes sure that only the right people have reservations. He is a dark, elegant gent who looks as if he might be the heir to the Spanish throne.

Chambrun sat at his desk, drumming with his short square fingers. "Jigs Henning is supposed to open in your room on Saturday, Cardoza," he said.

Cardoza nodded happily. Jigs Henning would jam the place for his four-week stay in the Blue Lagoon. He ranked among the top singers in the business, along with Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., and Tony Bennett.

"He's been trying to get out of his contract with us," Chambrun said. "He has a movie offer that would take him to the coast at once if he could accept. I have regretfully refused. But an hour ago I decided to let him off the hook."

Cardoza's dark eyebrows rose. "You have someone to replace him?"

"I have," Chambrun said, with a Cheshire-cat smile.

"May one ask—?"

"One may," Chambrun said. He leaned back in his chair. "Pamela Powers."

Cardoza stared at him and said, "Oh." It was his way of saying that Chambrun was out of his cotton-picking mind,

"She hasn't had a drink for more than a year," Chambrun said, "and she kicked the drug habit a long time ago. She's been working on her voice for the last ten months. I have persuaded Duke Adler, who arranged all her programs in the old days and acted as her accompanist, to play the engagement for her. She opens Saturday."

Cardoza moistened his lips. "Miss Powers has agreed?" I knew

what he was thinking. Pamela was a pro. She wouldn't try a comeback unless she believed in it—except that Chambrun could be ultra-persuasive. If he chose he could make it next to impossible for anyone to say "no" to him.

"She turned me down flat when I first suggested it," Chambrun said. "Childishly frightened. But I persuaded her that all good performers are scared, even the great ones. It's part of what makes them great. I got her to go to Duke Adler. He reported she was a miracle, her old self. She still refused. Then, an hour ago, she phoned me to say that if I hadn't changed my mind she'd do it. You'll have to admit, Cardoza, that a comeback engagement by Pamela Powers will be the biggest attraction you've had this year."

"If she doesn't fall on her face in front of the columnists and critics at the opening," Cardoza said.

"If she's any good at all they'll give her a sendoff for sentimental reasons," I said.

"Precisely," Chambrun said. "And Duke Adler assures me she'll be better than just good. She'll be terrific, he says."

Cardoza drew a deep breath. "It's your hotel," he said.

"Your confidence in my judgment overwhelms me," Chambrun said drily. He turned to me. "Your job is to notify the press, Mark, and to dust off our prime list of celebrities."

There wasn't any problem about getting the ace columnists and night-club critics there for the opening. All the tables were reserved before we got halfway through our list of famous people. We ran big ads in the entertainment pages of the papers, announcing that the opening night was already sold out.

I didn't see Pamela Powers again until the Thursday night before the opening. Friday morning to be exact—3 A.M. The Blue Lagoon had closed, the customers gone for the night. Then, in the empty room, Pamela and Duke Adler took over, along with our lighting man. It was largely a costume parade under the lights. Duke Adler sat at the piano, with his pale longish hair and tinted glasses hiding his eyes. He would play the tag end of a song, and Pamela, not really trying, would sing a few bars.

The voice was clear and true, and with that strange sad quality that had made her Number One. On cue the lighting man would follow his light plot, and Pamela and Duke would go into a bar or two of the next number. It was an ordinary technical rehearsal, but what I saw of it sent me away deciding that Chambrun was really a genius. Pamela was going to knock them in the aisles.

About two o'clock on Friday afternoon I was in Chambrun's office with Cardoza. We were going over the table reservations with the

great man. He wanted to be sure that just the right people sat in just the right places. While we were at it Miss Ruysdale announced that Eddie, the bartender in the Trapeze, was in the outer office to see the boss. Eddie should have been on duty at that time.

Eddie is a chubby brash young man who grew up on the lower East side and knows Fun City like the back of his hand, and has collected more gossip about the hotel guests and the hotel staff than even a Walter Winchell could have managed.

"Thought I'd like to talk to you, boss, where there aren't so many listening ears," he said to Chambrun.

"What is it, Eddie?"

"We got a new customer that bothers me," Eddie said. "The Beaumont ain't the usual kind of hangout for the Mafia."

"Get to the point, Eddie."

"The last five days, along about twelve thirty or a quarter to one, a guy named Max Wentzel comes into the bar. He sits at the far end and drinks three two-ounce hookers of Southern Comfort. This Wentzel is a gun for the Mafia. I know. We grew up in the same part of town."

"Just visiting you?" Chambrun said.

"He doesn't speak to me," Eddie said. "Like he never saw me before. He sits there, just watching. I get the creepy feeling he's waiting for the right guy to come in to be knocked off. He don't give me reason to kick him out of the bar. But I thought you ought to know."

Chambrun's forehead wrinkled in a dark frown. "He's down there now?"

"Been and gone," Eddie said. "He'll be back tomorrow if the pattern holds."

"Pass the word to Jerry," Chambrun said. Jerry Dodd is the Beaumont's security chief. "I'll drop in tomorrow and have a look in person."

"I thought you ought to know," Eddie said.

"You were right."

By Saturday afternoon I was in the middle of a highspeed merry-go-round. My phone was endlessly busy—people calling and demanding reservations for that night which we couldn't give them. Customers were ready to hang from the rafters. There were flowers to be arranged for, to be delivered to Pamela's dressing room, and a huge bouquet of white roses to be handed to her on stage after her performance.

About four o'clock I got a call from Eddie. I'd had the switchboard cut off my phone but they put Eddie through.

"Hate to be the bearer of bad news," he said.

"The bar ran out of liquor?"

"The bar just had an order from

Room Service," Eddie said. "A bottle of booze to Room 822."

"So?"

"Room 822 is where the boss's songbird is living."

"Pamela Powers?"

"Yeah," Eddie said. "Looks like she might celebrate in advance."

"Brother!" I said. "Thanks, Eddie."

I got through to Chambrun and heard him explode.

"Meet me on the eighth floor," he said.

Chambrun's peremptory knock on the door of Room 822 brought no immediate result. He tried again, calling out, "Miss Powers!"

A man's voice answered, asking us to wait a moment. It was a long moment, and then the door opened and Duke Adler faced us. A cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth. The hall lights glittered against the dark lenses of his glasses.

"May I come in?" Chambrun asked, and went in like an aggressive fullback wedging his way off tackle.

Pamela, wearing a filmy sort of peignoir almost the color of her violet eyes, was sitting in an armchair beside the center table. Room 822 consists of a small sitting room and a bedroom. Her hands gripped the arms of the chair so tightly that they were corpse-white. Beside her on the table was a half-empty bottle of liquor and one glass. Chambrun looked at the bottle and then at Pam.

"I'm disappointed," he said in a quiet, cold voice.

Pamela opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

Duke Adler, behind us, laughed. "You got it wrong, Dad," he said. "It's me, not Pam. I always operate half crocked. You knew that, didn't you?"

I remembered thinking he was a little tight during the lighting rehearsal. But it hadn't seemed to affect his fingers on the keyboard.

Chambrun's cold black eyes remained riveted on Pamela. "Have you been drinking?" he asked.

She shook her head. Then, suddenly, she was on her feet, her hands gripping Chambrun's shoulders. "Please, Mr. Chambrun, I can't go through with it! I can't! I'd rather die than let you down—but I'd rather die than fail."

"Come off it, baby," Duke said. "Opening-night nerves. You'll be great."

She broke into sobs, then lowered her head to Chambrun's shoulder. "Oh, please—God! Don't make me do it."

Duke Adler's long fingers closed over her wrist. He pulled her away from Chambrun, not too gently. The dark glasses looked down into her tear-red eyes. "Knock it off, baby. Just pull yourself together. You can do it. You know you have to do it, don't you?"

She seemed to make a superhu-

man effort. She nodded slowly. "Yes," she whispered.

"Is everything satisfactory here with your rooms?" Chambrun asked. Quite unexpectedly he walked past her into the bedroom. I thought that Adler suddenly froze.

Chambrun came back in a few moments and I heard Adler's breath go out of him in a long sigh.

"I understand your nervousness, Pamela," Chambrun said. "Just know that I believe in you one hundred percent."

"Thank you," she said, almost inaudibly.

I couldn't wait to get out into the hall again to call Chambrun's attention to what was a significant coincidence to me.

"Did you notice the bottle of liquor?" I asked Chambrun when we were alone in the corridor.

"Southern Comfort," he said, nodding. "Did you notice the half-smoked cigar in the ashtray? Adler is a chain cigarette smoker. Pamela doesn't smoke at all. He wasn't in the bedroom."

"He?"

"Eddie's man from Mafia," Chambrun said. "Tell Jerry I want this room watched. If this Max Wentzel shows up I want him covered every second."

"Right."

"Pamela will go to her dressing room about seven o'clock to prepare for the dinner show," Chambrun said. "I want you there. Let Cardoza take care of the VIPs. I don't want you to let Pamela out of your sight till she goes on stage. I could swear that girl isn't afraid to sing. It's something else."

"What?"

"I wish I knew," Chambrun said.

"Where will you be?"

"Around," Chambrun said.

I checked with Jerry Dodd, the security officer, about 6:45. There had been no sign of Max Wentzel. I waited in Pamela's flower-filled room. At 7:03 she and Duke Adler arrived. He had changed into a dinner jacket, but he still wore the dark glasses, and the ever-present cigarette drooped from the corner of his mouth. He frowned at me. "The lady has to dress," he said.

I gave him what I hoped was a fatuous grin. "I'm the watchdog to keep out eager autograph hunters and old friends with good wishes—till after the first show."

Adler shrugged. "I'll be back. Want to check the exact position of the piano." He went out.

The minute he was gone Pamela swung around, steadying herself with her hands on my shoulders. I was aware of a subtle, alluring fragrance when she stood so close. "Please, Mr. Haskell, for the love of God, don't make me do it."

"You're going to be just great," I said. "And whatever else is bothering you, Chambrun and I and the whole staff are standing by.

Care to tell me what it is?"

"Oh, God," she said, and turned away toward her dressing table.

Whatever we could have dreamed of in the way of a distinguished audience to welcome Pamela back came to the Blue Lagoon that night for the dinner show. Her dressing room was flooded with goodwill telegrams. It should have been a night of nights for her, but something was tearing her to pieces. I thought at last, when the call boy rapped on her door with a "Ten minutes, Miss Powers," that she was going to collapse. Duke Adler returned and literally dragged her to her feet and shook her.

"Damn you, pull yourself together!" he shouted at her. It was like slapping an hysteric.

She got out into the wings off the little stage. The lights dimmed. The buzz of voices subsided. Cardoza's well trained waiters avoided even the tiniest click of china or silverware. The curtain parted and Duke Adler walked out to the piano. There was warm but moderate applause.

Adler sat down and began to play a soft and plaintive melody. And then I heard a choked sob beside me. An ice-cold hand touched mine, as if searching for warmth and courage, and then Pamela Powers walked unsteadily out into the spotlight.

I thought they were going to tear the Blue Lagoon apart. They stood and cheered and shouted. Adler had to play the introduction three times. Then they were silent, with a kind of breathless silence. They were all wondering—could she do it?

The clear small voice began:

"A girl I know,
she is partly mad,
Yet beyond that smile
she is partly sad.
She is partly calm,
she is partly wild.
But she is mostly woman—
No,
She is mostly child."

When she came to the end, the first ovation was tremendous. She had it—all the old magic, all her old skill. I felt myself choking up like a sentimental old-timer. At last they subsided, eager for the next number, and Adler began to vamp the introduction. But Pamela stepped out of the spotlight and down toward the front of the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen—"

Adler's head jerked up. The lighting man was surprised, but quickly readjusted his spotlight so that it beamed on her. Adler struck a jarring chord and played the introduction louder — completely out of mood with the moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Pamela said again, holding up her hands for silence. "Your welcome, your applause, is overwhelming. After all these years—"

They let go again with clapping

and cheering, but she begged for silence with her hands. Once more Adler tried the introductory music, but she paid no attention.

"A comeback is a dangerous thing," Pamela said, "but not nearly so dangerous as my real reason for being here. I am here to betray myself, and to betray all the things decent people believe in. I am here to—"

There was the clear sharp crack of a gunshot. I stood rooted in the wings. I saw that Pamela still stood there, apparently unhurt, on the apron of the stage. Pandemonium had broken loose in the Blue Lagoon. At that moment Adler sprang up from the piano bench and started to race toward where I was standing in the wings.

Did I ever mention that I played football on the defensive team at my mid-western college? Instinctively I threw a block into Adler that knocked him flat on his back. Then I was on him. From that somewhat awkward position I saw Chambrun climbing up from the audience onto the stage to stand beside Pamela. His arm went round her and he held her very close. He held up his hand for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen, any cause for alarm is over."

I jerked Adler to his feet. He was still gasping for breath. I twisted his arm behind him and dragged him out onto the stage. At the back of the room I saw Jerry Dodd and two of his men. Mr. Max Wentzel, held between them, looked as if he'd had something of a going-over.

"I want to tell you a story," Chambrun said to the audience, still holding Pamela close. "I tried to persuade Pamela to stage this miraculous comeback, but she was reluctant. She didn't know how you would receive her. It meant so much. She finally refused. And then she changed her mind. I thought it was courage. I was to discover that it was terror.

"It cannot hurt Pamela now for me to remind you that her brilliant career ended when she began to drink—and became a drug addict. She was caught in the horror of both these sicknesses for many years, and then, by her own courage and will, she freed herself. But behind her lay something—I don't yet know what—a crime of some sort. Drug addicts turn to crime when they desperately need money.

"What happened to Pamela during her stay at the Beaumont is quite a story. After she had refused my offer she was approached by the criminal syndicate that handles the distribution of drugs and was blackmailed into accepting my offer of an engagement here. The purpose?" He turned to Pamela. "I think she was about to tell you when an attempt was made on her life. The syndicate had given orders to silence her. Fortunately my staff and I were waiting for just such a move. Would you care to go

on, Pamela? You're quite safe now."

"In my second number of each show," Pamela said, her voice low and trembling, "I was to alter the lyrics in a certain way. This was a code which would tell the pushers of drugs exactly where their receiving point was to be and when. I would have to go through with it —or go to jail. I—I've made my choice."

They gave her another full-throated ovation. Chambrun let them go on, then signaled for silence.

"Unfortunately one of the conspirators in this plot is Pamela's accompanist, so she won't be able to go on with her show as planned. But if she will permit me, I could play some of the old songs that made her famous. Would you like that?"

Would they like it!

Chambrun walked across to the piano and sat down. I just couldn't believe it! His strong, square fingers moved through the opening bars of "Bill," the song that made Helen Morgan famous years ago and that Pamela used to include in her repertoire.

Would you believe that incredible boss of mine was just plain great at the piano?

a *NEW* Inspector Chafik story by

CHARLES B. CHILD

We are delighted to welcome back Chief Inspector Chafik J. Chafik of the Baghdad police—the small, neat, shrewd, cynical yet compassionate detective with the index cards in his head; truly the little Inspector was a walking information bureau, a human filing cabinet of dossiers. It is two and one-half years since we published a new Chafik story—much too long (as we hope Mr. Child agrees, and does something about!).

In this curious case an invisible man leaves footprints on the stairway to an attic room. Curious indeed—and Inspector Chafik was worried: the constable in charge was inexperienced, and Chafik smelled evil somewhere ...

THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE

by CHARLES B. CHILD

ABDUL RAHIM, A FLEDGLING CONstable of the City of Baghdad police, halted a department car at the intersection of Rustan Higidar and the New Bund Road. The sergeant driver, a dour veteran, growled, "Debase yourself, you fool!"—and jerked his chin to indicate the passenger.

The passenger, a small man neatly dressed in a lightweight civilian suit, said, "Abdullah, suffer the officer to approach me."

He eased himself from the low-slung car and stood tiptoe, an unconscious habit that gave him more stature. He wore on his sleek head the black *sidarah* of the modern Iraqi. His face was thin, his large eyes were the drab color of desert sands where shadows drifted darkly like the shadows of kite-hawks gathering to a kill. "I am Chafik J. Chafik, Chief Inspector," he announced.

The constable, Chafik noted as he looked up into the tall young man's gaping mouth, needed dental care. I must reprimind the medical department, he said to himself. "Speak up!" he went on in a kindly voice. "Fear only God—the pun-

ishment I inflict is brief, His is eternal."

"Sir—I—it's about the man who isn't there—" stammered Constable Abdul Rahim.

"If he isn't there, why does he concern us?"

"But—but he *is* there, sir! He goes up the stairs. Mr. Faris has seen him. I keep constant watch, but—"

An ominous sound came from Sergeant Abdullah, whose bulk dwarfed the constable. "Permit me to discipline him," he said to Inspector Chafik, then turned his carved mahogany face to the hapless constable and roared, "Hup, you! What did they teach you at the Academy, hey? To give evidence clearly, concisely, chronologically, hey? Then do so, Father of Imbeciles!"

"Enough, Abdullah," the Inspector intervened.

Constable Rahim stood at attention, closed his eyes, and stated, "Sir, I was on duty patrolling Rustan Gardens when I was called to house number 12/4 New Bund Road occupied by the complainant, Zakir Faris. Mr. Faris said his premises had been entered by an unauthorized person. At his request I entered the premises and conducted a search. I did not find the alleged intruder, but there were alien footprints on the stairs to an unoccupied upper floor—"

"The front door to the house was closed?"

"Yes, sir, and secured by a heavy bar—"

"Yet the intruder passed the barrier and left footprints? Curious. Either a *jinni* or a creature of Mr. Faris' imagination."

"Imagination!" snorted Sergeant Abdullah.

"But I was called to the house three times this week!!" protested the constable. "On each occasion I found footprints on the stairs—and the complainant states he has *seen* the intruder—"

"And very properly you went for reinforcements," interrupted Inspector Chafik. "We are at your disposal." He patted the officer's arm, a habit he had to comfort one distressed.

Sergeant Abdullah said, "Sir, may I remind you of your appointment with the Director?"

"He is a civilian. We are policemen. The Director can wait."

They drove to the address, a narrow-fronted house isolated by a highway in process of construction. It had been built in the Turkish era of Baghdad and had an old-world, but shabby, elegance. The house was also a fortress: iron grilles protected all the windows and those on the upper and lower unoccupied floors were also heavily shuttered. The man who lived here was obsessively fearful, for it was a quiet neighborhood. Nearby was the Soldiers' Garden, Iraq's Arlington, and the villas of wealthy Baghdadis. A neighborhood, thought

Chafik, where a fledgling constable could try out his wings with few bruises. He smiled at the troubled young man.

"Inform me about Mr. Faris," he commanded.

"An Egyptian, sir. A recluse—no friends or visitors, no servants. A learned man. He has many books."

"And that is all you know?" The Inspector twisted the signet ring on the small finger of his left hand and his eyes reflected the ruddy glow of the stone as he recited: "Faris, Zakir. Born, Cairo, 1910. Profession, journalist. Editor of the defunct newspaper, 'Al Ra'ad.' Exiled for political activities, escaped severe sentence due to influence of his elder brother, who recently died. Only remaining relative, a nephew, Gamal Faris, from whom he receives a monthly pittance."

Chafik returned the dossier to the filing cabinet of his brain and said sternly to the discomforted constable, "You must memorize the records of everybody who lives in your area, with special attention to political misfits."

He squared his thin shoulders with the dignity of a Babylonian god-king, and entered the house.

Stone steps mounted to a landing, then continued to the upper floor. Here the stairway narrowed and they mounted in single file with Abdullah, as always, close behind the Inspector. The stairs were carpeted with dust which filtered from the moonscape of desert that surrounded the city. There was a confusion of footprints in which the square toes of police boots were prominent.

"I was very careful to avoid the tracks of the intruder, but Mr. Faris smudged them," explained the constable.

"Mr. Faris wears slippers?"

"Yes, sir."

"He favors the left leg. The other individual wore new shoes. One asks, why are the soles unblemished? Small shoes, possibly a small man, a lightweight—but he stamps when he marches." The Inspector fingered the line of his mustache and added, "A disembodied being should not have feet."

The tracks led to the upper floor and ended at a closed door.

"What is beyond?" asked Inspector Chafik.

"An empty room, so I understand, sir. I hesitated to force an entrance." The constable was nervous and eased the high collar of his tunic; then, alerted by a shuffling on the stairway, he wheeled and drew his gun with a speed which brought a grunt of approval from Sergeant Abdullah, in whose cobra-hooded hand a Mauser materialized.

The man who was now climbing the stairs wore a gray robe and flapping slippers. He was troubled by his left leg and eased it carefully on the high treads. A tall man, light-boned, narrow-chested, possibly consumptive, Chafik

judged by the occasional racking cough. And, yes, frightened, he thought, noting the wide staring eyes. Or alarmed, perhaps by me? He corrected his first impression and stored the thread of thought for later weaving.

Zakir Faris recovered his breath. "I demand protection," he said.

"You have it. *I* am here." Chafik introduced himself.

The corners of the man's wide mouth turned down. "I am grateful. But this—this intrusion—should not concern your Excellency—"

"My stomach is flat, therefore I am not an Excellency." Chafik tapped the door of the closed room with a manicured fingernail. "There is a key?"

Zakir Faris shook his head.

"Lovers and policemen laugh at locksmiths," said Inspector Chafik, and nodded to Abdullah.

The sergeant braced, raised a foot, flexed his knee, and drove an ironshod heel against the lock. The door crashed back on rusty hinges.

They looked into an attic-smelling room.

Nothing.

Sunshine slanted through weathered shutters and made a prison pattern on the dusty floor.

But no footprints.

"I heard him walk!" exclaimed Zakir Faris. "So did the constable," he added, turning to the young man.

Chafik also looked at the officer.

"Sir!—on the second occasion Mr. Faris called me I heard the intruder. I was in the apartment below this room and Mr. Faris called my attention—"

"How did the intruder walk? Lightly? Heavily?"

Officer Rahim's forehead creased. "Walked," he said. "Just footsteps—"

"In future pay attention to the sound of footsteps. Footsteps can be firm—an honest man going assured to his destination. Or hesitant—a man doubtful, unwilling, or guilty. Or dancing and gay—a man going to his mistress. Footsteps, Constable, are talkative, but the footsteps of this intruder apparently failed even to whisper. Seal the door, Abdullah," Chafik added to the sergeant.

He went down to Zakir Faris' apartment. The rooms were small, stuffy, and cluttered. In the main room were many books, as the constable had noted, and Chafik lingered, browsed, then said in precise English, "You have a very interesting library, Mr. Faris. All your books are from Foyle's of London."

"I attended the University of London—I took my degree in literature," Faris said proudly.

"I envy you. My English is of local vintage. No color. Robot talk, suitable for my profession. Ah, poetry!" Chafik exclaimed as he took out a book which was pushed to the back of a shelf.

It opened at a dog-eared page; he shook his head disapprovingly as he smoothed out the corner, then read aloud: "'*The Psychoed*' —what an odd title! '*Hugh Mearns, 1875*' ..." His voice trailed, he muttered in Arabic, then came back to English as he quoted from the text: "'*As I was going up the stair, I met a man who wasn't there*' ... How very appropriate, Mr. Faris!" The Inspector's thin nose twitched.

"Yes, that is why I marked the page—"

"It goes on: '*He wasn't there again today, I wish, I wish he'd go away,*" Chafik completed the couplet.

"My wish, too! But he *was* there, Inspector—I saw him clearly, a small dark man with a scar on his left cheek, prominent eyes, pointed ears almost like horns. He stood where the stair turns, bowed, went up—and vanished!"

Constable Rahim interrupted, "Sir, I did not actually *see* him, but there was a shadow on the stair—"

"You had just entered?"

"Yes—"

"The sunshine outside was bright?"

"High noon, sir."

Sergeant Abdullah laughed and said, "His stomach was empty!"

The Inspector disapproved. "Empty stomachs rumble, they do not see," was his sharp comment, and the sergeant accepted the reproof with a salaam.

Chafik toured the apartment, looked at clothing, and rooted out a pair of dusty shoes from a closet. "New?" he asked.

"I hope to wear them one day." Zakir Faris indicated his slippered feet. "Gout," he explained.

"I sympathize. We of the police also suffer from swollen feet. But these shoes look too small for you." The Inspector glanced at his watch and said to Sergeant Abdullah, "We have kept the Director too long. He will be bleating for his shepherd. There is nothing more to do here. I leave it to the officer."

He patted the constable's arm. "That man on the stair who isn't there would make an interesting trophy. Bring him to me—when you see him."

"Yes, sir!" The young man touched his holstered gun.

On the way back to the city Inspector Chafik confided to his assistant, "I don't like it. I don't like it at all. On the surface, so silly—and yet . . ." His voice trailed; then lost in thought he announced, "I gave bad advice—"

"To whom, sir?" asked the patient sergeant.

"That young man—our rookie—"

"Permit me to express an opinion, sir. Constable Rahim has the makings of a good policeman—"

The Inspector looked at Abdullah with astonishment. "You, too?" he said. Then he went on in his mixture of thinking and talking, "But he is so inexperienced. We

should not leave him with this problem—so inexperienced, and I smell evil somewhere—"

"There are roses in your garden —the Constable is a very fast gun," Sergeant Abdullah said comfortingly.

The following day, shortly before *Zuhr,* the midday prayer, Inspector Chafik was in his office on the second floor of a building on upper al-Rashid Street, when Sergeant Abdullah made silent entry. The Inspector, tied up with detested paper work, was annoyed.

"From where do you ooze?" he asked sharply. Then, recognizing the look that cracked the veneer of the big man's mahogany face, he pushed aside the papers. "Who? Where? What? he asked.

"Sir, the man who wasn't there —in the house of Zakir Faris—shot, by Constable Abdul Rahim—"

"A dead ghost cannot be classified as a corpse."

"The corpse," said Sergeant Abdullah, "is that of Mr. Faris' nephew, Gamal Faris, who made an unexpected visit to his uncle. He closely resembles the alleged intruder. The constable challenged him —the deceased ignored the order. I have ascertained the deceased suffered with deafness—"

"And the constable is a fast gun."

"Yes, sir."

"That budding rose in my garden has pricked my finger," Inspector Chafik said bitterly.

Long after *Isha,* the late prayer, the sergeant again intruded on his superior. Chafik had not moved from his desk; he sat crouched under a fog of cigarette smoke, and the ashtray at his elbow had grown a *ziggurat* of neatly stacked butts. "Do not tell my wife, Leila. She warns me of my smoking—she insists I set a bad example for our son, Faisal," said the Inspector as he opened a new pack of Ghazis.

"I do not have that trouble. I have daughters," Abdullah said smugly.

"Four," said Inspector Chafik, and added absently, "Sons such as mine may be your trouble later, my friend."

His long fingers flexed like the legs of a spider spinning a web; sometimes he plucked an invisible thread from the air and added it to his weaving. He muttered. Then he said aloud, "What a devil!" Then he went back to silence and his fingers moved faster, twisting and knotting. The understanding sergeant waited.

"A complicated and dark pattern," Chafik announced in a clear voice.

"So I observe, sir."

"Dark and ugly."

"Yes, sir. Dark and ugly for the constable," said Abdullah, "who has been suspended. Dark and ugly for ourselves. Mr. Faris has been to the Director, crying and complaining that you left an inexperienced officer in charge—"

"The complaint is justified. I am at fault."

The sergeant raised his hands in protest, palms outward, like shields.

"I need no defense," Chafik said sternly. "When I told the constable to bring me the man who wasn't there as a trophy, my humor was misplaced. He obeyed literally. All this is part of a pattern, the device of a remarkable, but sick, brain. Abdullah, do you believe that an individual entered Mr. Faris' house through a barred door, walked up the stairs, bowed to him, and then vanished in a locked room?"

"Without a precedent, sir."

"There is always a precedent!" The Inspector rearranged scattered papers, marshaled the pencils on his desk, removed specks of dust with a crisp white handkerchief. When he spoke again, it was with the uninflected intonation of self-talk, an incurable habit. "Footprints," he said. "New shoes—flat-footed impressions — too clear — stamped, no weight of body above them." Shadows swirled and shaped in the radar screens of his eyes and with an abrupt return to normal communication he asked his assistant, "Where were there new shoes?"

"In Mr. Faris' closet, sir."

"Mr. Faris said they were unworn because of his gout. An unsatisfactory explanation, since the shoes were too small for him. Yes, new—yet there was dust on the soles. The shoes could have been manipulated by a man's hands as he cautiously crawled up the stairs—"

Sergeant Abdullah exclaimed, "God and by God!"

"The constable heard footsteps in the upper room. Who drew his attention to them?" asked Inspector Chafik.

"Faris!—the complainant."

"And when blinded by the midday sun the constable entered the house and saw a shadow on the stair—*'I wish, I wish he'd go away'* —who?"

"Faris!"

"And who described the intruder? A small dark man, with a scar on his left cheek, pointed ears, prominent eyes?—and forgot to add that his nephew was deaf?"

"Faris!"

"And who had a book of poetry —this Hugh Mearns who wrote The Psychoed, all about a man who wasn't there, on a stair?"

"Faris! — I remember the book was pushed to the back of a shelf and had a dog-eared page. Did this give him the idea, sir?" Sergeant Abdullah looked down at the neat little man sitting at the tidy desk. "But—motive?"

"Oh, Father of Policemen, that I have, too!" Inspector Chafik took forms pasted with teletype from his in-tray. "My flying carpet is the telephone—and there is Interpol," he said, and then sat back and defiantly lit another cigarette.

The agent of the Cairo police had reported that Gamal Ahmed Faris had applied for permission to visit Baghdad to discuss family business, and had submitted pleading letters from his uncle, Zakir Faris, to support the application. Travel restrictions fixed the date of his departure. "So Mr. Faris had prior knowledge of his nephew's arrival," commented Abdullah.

"Conceivably—"

"Then he lied when he said the visit was unexpected! I smell a sulphurous devil!" shouted the sergeant.

"Abdullah, please. I have a headache—and you have yet to read the final enlightenment." He produced a flimsy with a conjurer's flourish.

"...Interpol, Cairo. Pers. Chafik CID Baghdad. Ref. estate Faris, deceased. Further ref. death nephew, Gamal Ahmed Faris. Uncle Zakir Faris inherits...

Sergeant Abdullah forgot himself and struck the Inspector's desk. He swore, then disciplined himself —he was a religious man, a Shia'a by persuasion. "May I be forgiven my oaths," he said, bowing over his folded hands. Then he shouted, "May that Father of Devils rot in the Pit! He tricked the constable —he made him his gun!—and there is no way to bring him to the scaffold!"

Inspector Chafik tidied the cigarette butts scattered by his assistant's hammering fists. "There is a way," he said softly.

"He will never confess!"

"When we sin, Abdullah, we confess to God. This man knows his guilt, and his earthly punishment is prescribed in the second chapter, verse one hundred and seventy-eight, of the Book. Recite it," he added sharply.

The tall dark sergeant bowed his head. *"'Retaliation is prescribed for you in the matter of the slain',"* he quoted in the sonorous voice of a prayer-caller. *"'Free for the free, slave for a slave, female for female... and whoever exceeds the limit—'"*

"My limit," interrupted Inspector Chafik, as he lit a cigarette, "is not excessive. That man on the stair who wasn't there, but caused Constable Abdul Rahim to kill the nephew of Zakir Faris, can do it again."

He outlined his plan...

"But it is not Law!" protested Abdullah.

"Law is a code of public order, a man-made deterrent demanding facts. Law is an ass," Chafik added in his precise English.

"Sir!—but what you suggest—I beg you to reconsider—sir!"

Inspector Chafik turned a face cast from bronze — in profile a plaque from the death-pits of Ur, the likeness of an ancestor who had lived before Noah. His drab eyes, cynical with the knowledge of centuries, stared down the Arab. "You will do what I command. God is Justice—and sometimes we of the

police are His instrument," he said.

He stood, a small man with high shoulders, and went to the window. The city was dark, but somewhere in the acres of flat-roofed houses and drab streets, there was awakening. Stars in the vaulted sky went out one by one; then, beginning far away in the direction of the shrine of Kademein, echoed the first wailing call to prayer, the muezzin's nightingale song. Chafik turned to his assistant.

"Morning," he said. "let us go and say *Fajr* together."

Sergeant Abdullah drove him from the mosque to the house on the Street of the Scatterer of Blessings where Chafik lived. The Inspector said to his assistant, "Tell the Director I am unwell—a virus is a suitable lie."

He went in and said to his dark-haired wife, Leila, "I am going to bed. Bring me a crying towel—I have much to weep about."

And he said to his son, Faisal, a boy with large eyes and faunlike ears, who came sleepily from his room to kiss his father's hand, "Do well at the lyceum, my son—you may have to support your mother."

Then he removed his clothes, tidily folded them, cleaned his teeth, and took sanctuary in the bed perfumed by his wife.

On the first day of Inspector Chafik's retirement a constable—not Abdul Rahim who had been removed from duty—hammered on the door of Zakir Faris' house and called, "Sir, did somebody enter? I thought I saw a man—"

"You have visions," Zakir said, and slammed shut the window.

On the second day the same officer disturbed the noon rest hour with his whistle. "Is your door secured, sir?" he asked urgently.

"Locked and barred—"

"Keep it so, sir—there are strangers about."

On the third day, near sunset, when the house-martins dived in the cooling air and fluted to their mates, another officer knocked and cried, "Open, sir!—I have seen a small, dark man—"

"Go away!" said Zakir Faris.

On the fourth day, near midnight, a police car roared to a halt and a sergeant flourishing a gun shouted, "Stop! Stop!" He then kicked the door. "Somebody entered your house, sir," he said to the gray-faced man at the window.

"Impossible," Zakir said.

"But we saw him! I must search the premises—I have orders to protect you."

"Go away!" screamed Zakir.

On the fifth day a mobile searchlight unit, stationed at the intersection of the Higidar and the New Bund road, blazed into action. Zakir Faris rushed out, slippers flapping, and yelled at the junior inspector in charge, "How can I sleep? Have I not enough trouble? Go away—go away!"

"But, sir, we have to make it safe for you to sleep," explained the officer. "A small man with a scarred face and pointed ears has been seen in the neighborhood—he might be in this house—"

Zakir Faris slammed the door.

On the sixth day, which had been exceptionally hot, when the predawn breeze from the Tigris gave breath to the city, the police hit with a commando raid, swarmed over rooftops, trampled through gardens, shot at shadows, dragged people from their beds. And Inspector Chafik, recovered from his virus, accompanied by Sergeant Abdullah, called on Zakir Faris.

"I do regret this intrusion, but it is for your safety—that man is about," the Inspector said unctuously.

"You are insane! I have already complained to your Director—" Faris had a fit of coughing.

"How rightly you complained!" Chafik salaamed. "All my efforts," he went on, "are to make amends. The constable shot the wrong man—your nephew—but the other one, that one on the stair who bowed to you, endangers you, sir."

Zakir Faris spat phlegm into his handkerchief.

"Bronchial. I trust you take medication?" commiserated the Inspector. When the man had recovered, he said, "Our protection is feeble, sir. That man with the pointed ears and scarred face comes and goes as he pleases. You must have means to defend yourself—I bring you a gun."

He put a Beretta automatic on the table, then went to the bookshelf and found the book by Hugh Mearns. "What an extraordinary poet!" he said in his precise English. "I wonder if he *did* meet that man on the stair who wasn't there?" The Inspector salaamed again and left Zakir Faris with the gun and the open book.

When he was in the car, sitting straightbacked to give himself stature, he said to Abdullah, who was at the wheel, "Sergeant, did you see me give Faris a gun?"

"No, sir," answered the sergeant, and drove off calmly and deliberately.

On the seventh day, which was Friday, the sabbath, Inspector Chafik attended the mosque, listened attentively to the imam's sermon, and returned to his office through a howling sandstorm. Dust filtered through the closed windows and the oppressive heat made him loosen his tie. "Does God will this discomfort?" he asked his assistant.

"All things have a purpose," Sergeant Abdullah said piously. "The storm grievously disturbs Mr. Faris, who, after the third visit by an officer today, is now ranting—"

"Then may I be forgiven for questioning the storm. Is our subject ripe?"

"A breath will shake him from the tree."

"Then I will go blow at him."

The sergeant was disturbed. He stood, a giant shadow on the yellow-green wall, and said in a voice choked with emotion, "Sir, this man is not a fruit, he is an unexploded bomb! Permit me to deal with him."

Inspector Chafik reached into the bottom drawer of the desk, took out a manicure set, and began to clean his nails.

"I am the trigger," he said softly.

The storm was an umbrella spread over the city; the sun, lowering on the horizon, gave it blood-red ribs. Date palms fringing the river swirled tousled heads to the mad drumbeat of the wind. Officer Abdul Rahim, reinstated by special request of Inspector Chafik, leaned against the blast as he crossed Rustan Higidar to the house of Zakir Faris.

"Open!" he shouted, hammering on the door. "we have him, sir—that one on the stair, sir! Open!"

The man who rushed out, leaving the door wide, was part of the storm. He screamed with the wind that whipped his thinning hair like the fronds of the palms and waved the gun which Chafik had given him. "Where?" he shouted. "Fools!" he yelled.

"Here! Up the road!" said the constable, and ran with the raving man at his heels.

Inspector Chafik left a discreetly parked car and entered the house. The dust on the stairs was refreshed by the storm and the Inspector, who was wearing new shoes, walked firmly to leave sharp impressions. When he reached the landing he turned and bowed, then went on to the upper floor; he broke the seal on the door of the unoccupied room and entered.

Hands folded, head lowered, he prayed—and waited.

He heard Zakir Faris come back. The high voice, fragmented by the wind, ranted, "You drag me out for nothing in such a storm! A man—a little man!—no man!—leave me! Go away! Go!" There was a soothing reply from Constable Rahim, another shout of "Get out!" from Zakir Faris, and then the flapping of his slippered feet, the stomp of his favored left leg, as he climbed the stairs.

And then the howl—

"Who is here? *What* is here?"

And the voice of Constable Rahim, "Sir—sir—do you see the footprints on the stairs? That man—"

"He isn't here!"

"That small dark man with the scar on his face—" persisted the constable.

Inspector Chafik found time to say to himself, "Oh, what an excellent policeman I have here!" Then he began to walk up and down the attic-smelling room, stamping like a guardsman at the gate of Buckingham Palace.

When Zakir Faris burst in, Chafik wheeled, halted, and looked up

at the yellow shell of a hornet's nest dangling from the rafters. "Poor creatures, they worked hard and then had to abandon their home. Why?" he asked, and fumbled for a cigarette.

Zakir Faris stood less than twelve feet away, a gray-faced man, his eyes staring, his nose an eagle's beak. The gun nestled confidently in his hand; he was no stranger to the weapon. "Who are you?" he asked quietly. Then he screamed, *"Who are you?"*

"The man on the stair who wasn't there," answered Inspector Chafik. "Not your nephew," he added. Then he said, "Please, Mr. Faris, try and understand. I know you worked on the susceptibility of a junior constable under my command. You made him your gun. He killed the man who stood between you and a fortune. An insane plan—the Law will take this into consideration. But please, Mr. Faris, confess!"

He extended his hands, palms upward, and offered them cupped with compassion.

Zakir Faris turned down the corners of his thin mouth.

The Inspector looked into the blue steel eye of the gun. He thought of his wife and his son; in that flashing second another level of mind registered the crumbling plaster on the wall near the hornet's nest, and he remembered such a patch on his son's room. Always tomorrow, Chafik, he said to himself. Tomorrow, you said, you'd fix it. And now there may be no tomorrow, he said as he watched Zakir Faris tighten his finger on the trigger.

Constable Abdul Rahim fired from the doorway and the corpse dropped at Chafik's feet. The bullet from Zakir Faris' gun made a star in the crumbling plaster an inch from the Inspector's head.

Drawing breath, Chafik said to the young officer, "You killed the right man this time."

He was still struggling with his cigarette when Sergeant Abdullah emerged and offered a match shielded in the cobra-hood of his hand. "It is apparent this individual tried to kill you," he said in an official voice as he looked from the corpse to the scarred wall.

"Yes, Abdullah."

"But was it necessary to provide him with a loaded gun?"

"Yes, Abdullah — for otherwise how would we have evidence to satisfy the Director that this policeman saved my life?"

Inspector Chafik patted Constable Rahim's arm and went home.

a *NEW* Father Crumlish story by

ALICE SCANLAN REACH

St. Brigid's parish—"huddled against Lake City's squalid waterfront, and caught in the pincers of dilapidated warehouses and smoke-belching steel mills"—was the slum-tenemented "meadow" where Father Francis Xavier Crumlish watched over his "flock," most of them good people but underprivileged or downright poverty-stricken. So there was always trouble—or as the good "shepherd" might have thought of it, there was always the Devil's own work a-brewing. Father Crumlish had "crossed swords with the Devil on more occasions than he cared to recall" in his forty years at St. Brigid's—and now another round in his battle with Satan had begun ...

FATHER CRUMLISH AND THE GOLDEN GLOVES WATCH

by ALICE SCANLAN REACH

IT WAS A WELL-KNOWN FACT IN Lake City that Father Francis Xavier Crumlish was an avid sports fan; as effortlessly as he might say his rosary, St. Brigid's snowy-haired pastor could rattle off Willie Mays's current lifetime home-run total, second in all baseball history only to that of the immortal Babe Ruth. What was not so well known was the fact that Father Crumlish also could become so engrossed in the sports pages of the *Lake City Times* that he lost all track of time.

Tonight was such an occasion. For the third time within the past thirty minutes Emma Catt, St. Brigid's indomitable housekeeper for more than twenty-two years, marched into the rectory living room, planted her large sensibly shod feet in front of the priest, and cleared her throat.

"Have you forgotten Slattery's wake?" she inquired frostily. "Flanagan's closes up in an hour and—"

"Slugger Slattery won't go to his grave without me saying a rosary for the repose of his soul,"

Father interrupted. Then, as he got to his feet a spasm of pain skipped across his lined face. All day long he'd become increasingly aware of the troublesome corn on the little toe of his left foot. And now it seemed as if Satan himself was probing the tender area with the sharpest pitchfork in his arsenal. Consequently some fifteen minutes later, when the priest limped up to the front door of Flanagan's Funeral Home and turned the knob, and when the door burst open and a man plunged past and a heavy heel descended on that corn, Father Crumlish could not refrain from exploding.

"Hellfire! Sure and it's the Devil himself must be after you, Willie, to put you in such an unholy hurry"

Willie "Wild Bill" Dawson, a heavy-set man in his mid-fifties, who, like Slugger Slattery, had tried his luck in the prize ring, began to stammer apologies. But he was interrupted by the sleek, forty-year-old proprietor of the establishment Phil Flanagan.

"You okay, Father?" Flanagan inquired in the subdued, solicitous tones befitting his profession. "Come on in my office and sit down a minute."

Father waved the undertaker away with an impatient hand. Ever since Flanagan had inherited the business from his uncle less than a year ago, the pastor had had strong suspicions that Flanagan had raised the prices for services rendered—prices that already strained the meager resources of St. Brigid's parishioners. Therefore, Father Crumlish had every intention of sitting down with Phil Flanagan in his office; but it wouldn't be for just a minute, and it wouldn't be now. Right now he had to thread his way through the throng of mourners in the dimly lit interior of the funeral parlor.

Virtually every face in the crowded room was familiar to Father Crumlish. And why not? As a youth, lanky, red-haired, freckle-faced Frankie Crumlish had left his native Tralee, County Kerry, to study for the priesthood in America. He'd been ordained now for more than forty years, and most of those years had been spent at St. Brigid's. His parish, huddled against Lake City's squalid waterfront, was caught in the pincers of dilapidated warehouses and smoke-belching steel mills. As a result, it was inevitable that Father Crumlish, from the very start, should find himself pitted against the criminal elements which thrive on the weak-willed and the poverty-stricken.

Never once in the long years, as his carrot thatch turned to its present snowy whiteness, had Father Crumlish failed to pause, clasp a hand, or listen to the folks in his parish, regardless of their religious denomination. The priest thought of all of them as "his people."

But on the present occasion Father tried to avoid any encounters which would delay him in reaching the side of the dead man's widow May and her son, Jack. He paused only twice on his way through the room—once when he took the time to shake hands with Joe Tierney, the venerable sports editor of the *Lake City Times,* who had held that esteemed post ever since Father could remember, and a second time, when he was unsuccessful in eluding the clammy handshake of Barney Buswell, a seedy-looking whiff of a man in his late forties who had spent almost as much of his life inside prison cells as he had outside.

"I'll be saying the rosary now," Father Crumlish told the Slatterys. Jack, a thin, pale, sulky-faced man, put his arm around his mother's black-shrouded shoulder and together they followed the priest into a small anteroom off the main parlor. Then Father knelt at the priedieu beside the casket containing the mortal remains of Slugger Slattery and waited until he knew that the mourners in the larger room were also kneeling, prepared to join him in the ancient, solemn ritual. As he began to intone the beads, the priest gazed at the composed features of his deceased parishioner. Poor fellow, he thought compassionately. Poor disappointed Slugger . . .

Like most youngsters growing up in St. Brigid's parish, John Slattery had discovered at an early age that life in his environment was difficult and almost hopeless. Young Slattery challenged the situation with what he considered to be his sole asset—his fists. Before he reached his teens he'd earned the nickname of Slugger and he spent most of his time dancing around the fighting ring of a neighborhood gym.

His efforts were rewarded. At eighteen Slattery won the welterweight championship in the Golden Gloves competition, which was sponsored locally by the *Lake City Times.* His prize was a handsome gold watch with a scarlet velvet wristband. And since that momentous occasion no one in Lake City could ever remember seeing Slugger Slattery without that precious trophy adorning his thick hairy wrist.

But despite the predictions of sports writers that he was headed for the big time, Slugger fared badly when he turned professional. Still he kept punching until his body was a mass of bruises, his once handsome face pounded to a misshapen pulp. Through it all he never lost his conviction that he was "champ material." Even in later years, when his closest contact with the ring was watching youngsters work out at the gym, Slattery never failed to button-hole even complete strangers, and relate in elaborate detail his Golden Gloves triumph. And then he

would remove his prized watch and proudly display the inscription on the back with his name and the date of his victory . . .

"Eternal rest grant unto him, O, Lord," Father Crumlish intoned.

"And let perpetual light shine upon him," responded the mourners.

Poor fellow, Father thought again as he gazed at the dead man laid out in what, the priest was sure, was the first new suit he'd had in years. Poor Slugger, who had taken all the punishing blows, culminating in the most crushing of all—the blow that had driven him to spend every idle moment in every sleazy saloon in the parish until it finally drove him to where he lay tonight.

"Eternal rest grant unto him, O, Lord," Father Crumlish repeated as he looked at Slattery's battered hands clasping a silver rosary. Suddenly the pastor gave a start and stared in astonishment. Slugger's wrist, where he'd always worn his prized gold watch, was bare!

"I'd have thought he'd be wearing his watch, May," Father said to the widow at the conclusion of the prayers. May gazed at him through tired, tear-drenched eyes. "He is, Father."

Father Crumlish shook his head. "See for yourself."

May took one look at her husband's bare wrist and burst into hysterical weeping.

"But it was there, Father!" she sobbed. "I saw it myself—not an hour before you came to say the rosary."

"There's some easy explanation," the priest comforted her. "I'm sure Flanagan can give it to you."

But, as it developed, instead of an "easy explanation," there was only a disturbing conclusion: someone had stolen the Golden Gloves watch from the dead man's wrist.

Shortly after midnight Father Crumlish was awakened by the sound of a siren. Rigid, he lay listening as the wails came increasingly closer. When he knew for certain that the trouble, whatever its nature, was in his parish, he got out of bed and began to dress, mentally tracing the orbit of the ominous sounds.

Now they were at Poleski Street, now crossing Broad, now turning into Commercial Alley, and now —the wails came to a whining halt. Canal Street, the pastor thought grimly as he hurried down the rectory steps and into his battered black Chevy. Canal Street, that Godless strip of land that lined the waterfront, with its greedy, unquenchable thirst; from it emanated most of the evil with which Lake City was burdened. Canal Street, where Father Crumlish had crossed swords with the Devil on more occasions than he cared to recall.

Some moments later the pastor edged through a curious crowd to

the side of his good friend, a man who stood inches above anyone else at the scene—Lieutenant Thomas Patrick "Big Tom" Madigan of Lake City's police force. Not too many years ago Madigan had been one of St. Brigid's worst hooligans. Indeed, if it hadn't been for the intervention of his pastor, Big Tom might have wound up in a reform school or worse—a circumstance that Father Crumlish sometimes had occasion to mention to Madigan.

"What's happened, Tom?" Father inquired anxiously.

"It's Phil Flanagan, the undertaker," Madigan replied in a grim voice. "The cop on this beat found him in the alley near the old steel mill."

"Tom—" Father began.

"He's dead."

"God help us!" The priest made the sign of the cross. "How, lad?"

"Somebody bashed his head in with that." Madigan pointed to a short length of bloodstained iron pipe.

The pastor closed his eyes for a moment. Then he straightened his shoulders. "Take me to him, Tom," he said sadly. "I'll anoint him."

The stars were just beginning to lose their brilliant luster when Father Crumlish returned to the rectory and wearily climbed the stairs to his bedroom. With a bit of Irish luck, he told himself, he could catch a few winks before he'd have to say Mass. As usual, he went about his customary routine; took off his Roman collar, hung up his drab clerical garb, and was about to take off his new wrist watch, a birthday present from his parishioners, to wind it and lay it on his night table, when he realized that his wrist was bare. In his haste he must have gone off without it, he reasoned. But after a few moments' search, it was obvious that the watch was not in the room.

Frowning, the priest sat on the edge of his bed. Could he have left it somewhere downstairs? But if so, why couldn't he remember? An irritating thought pervaded his mind as he climbed into bed: was he getting old? Father Crumlish closed his eyes and turned over on his right side, the better to ease his arthritic left shoulder.

But the matter of his missing watch churned in his mind. The strap had become frayed, he knew. So perhaps the answer was simple: sometime during the night's commotion the strap had given way, and the watch had fallen from his wrist. Well, better lost than stolen, like poor Slugger's—

Suddenly Father Crumlish's dark blue eyes opened wide and for a long time he lay staring sightlessly at the multiple cracks in his bedroom ceiling. His final thought before he fell into exhausted slumber was that, right after he said Mass, he would pay a call on Lieutenant Madigan.

Big Tom, his brown eyes heavy with fatigue, was poring over a sheaf of reports when Father Crumlish entered his office.

"Any news, Tom?" the priest said as he seated himself in a chair by the policeman's cluttered desk.

Madigan shook his head. "The blow from the pipe finished him, that we know. And we know that Flanagan wasn't in that crummy section of town by accident." Big Tom ran a hand through his already hopelessly rumpled curly brown hair. "We found his car parked a block away. So we can assume that he deliberately drove down there to meet someone—someone who wanted to make sure he wouldn't be doing any more driving." He yawned. "But something will turn up. It always does."

"Tom," Father said, running a finger around his Roman collar, "I've a notion."

Madigan gave him a quizzical glance and waited.

"Something peculiar happened at Slattery's wake."

Big Tom's eyes came to life. "Something to do with Flanagan's murder?"

"Well — it could be there's a connection."

"Tell me, Father."

The pastor's tongue worried his upper plate for a moment before he replied. "Somebody came to Slattery's wake and stole Slugger's Golden Gloves wrist watch."

"Stole!" The policeman stared at the priest in disbelief. "Are you telling me that somebody lifted a watch off a dead man?"

"I am."

Madigan sat silently for a moment. "Now that I think about it," he finally said, "it would be easy. That old red velvet band on Slattery's watch was badly worn. A fingernail clipper could snip through it easily enough." He leaned back in his chair. "My guess is the watch was worth about $200. It could be pawned—"

"Not around here," Father interrupted with a firm shake of his head.

"You're right," Big Tom agreed. "The inscription on the back would be a dead giveaway. But there are plenty of pawnbrokers beyond the city limits who never heard of Slugger Slattery." He paused, frowning. "I still can't see any connection between Slattery's stolen watch and Phil Flanagan's murder."

Father sighed. "It's as I said, lad. Just a notion."

Madigan shook his head. "Too far-fetched, Father. Forget it." The priest stood up and moved toward the door. Big Tom eyed him suspiciously. "Where are you headed now?"

"I've a mind to pay a call on May Slattery."

"Any special reason?"

"She told me she was sure Slugger had his watch on him about an hour before I came around to

say the rosary. And I've been thinking to myself that maybe the thief signed the register."

Father Crumlish was referring to the fact that it was customary for people, on entering a funeral home, to sign a register which was provided by the undertaker. This register was given to relatives of the deceased so that they would have a record of the mourners who had come to pay their respects.

"It might pay me to have a look at it and see who was on hand at the time," the priest said as he started out the door.

"I think I'll tag along," Madigan said, getting to his feet. "It might pay *me* to find out where Jack Slattery was when Flanagan got it with that pipe."

Father gave a start. "Surely, Tom, you don't think that Jack had anything to do with the murder?"

"Why not? Have you forgotten that Jack blamed Flanagan for his sister's death? That he threatened to kill him? Why, we even booked the guy for assault—"

"But that's water long over the dam, Tom," the pastor broke in.

"Maybe, Father. And maybe not."

Was it? Father Crumlish wondered to himself. Indeed he had not forgotten Slugger's apprehension when his eighteen-year-old daughter, Anna, had taken up with foot-loose, fancy-free Phil Flanagan. Nor had he forgotten Slugger's agony when Phil's reckless driving had resulted in Anna's tragic death. What the priest *had* forgotten was Jack Slattery's wild, murderous wrath—

"If Anna Slattery were alive today, you can bet your life her old man would be too," Big Tom continued. "So maybe Jack figured that his sister and his father both died unnecessarily because of Flanagan. Maybe he figured it was time Phil paid up."

Father Crumlish remained silent until the police car reached the Slattery house. "You take care of your pew and I'll take care of mine," he told the policeman as he rang the doorbell. "I'll meet you back at the car?"

Madigan nodded as May Slattery opened the door.

Thirty minutes later the priest and the policeman were together again. "Did you learn anything from Jack, Tom?" Father inquired.

"Oh, sure." Madigan snorted derisively. "Jack says that May and the house got too gloomy for him and he decided to cut out. He got in his car, he says, and took himself for a little drive." Again Madigan snorted. "Naturally he can't remember where."

"He could be telling the truth," Father said.

"Maybe." Big Tom did not sound convinced. He gave the pastor a sharp glance. "What about

you, Father? Any interesting signatures on the register?"

"I made a list of those who would have been at the wake at about the right time," Father replied, handing Madigan a sheet of paper. "See for yourself."

"Decent of Joe Tierney to show up," the policeman remarked as he scanned the list of names.

"Joe wrote a fine story when Slugger, God rest his soul, won the championship," Father said.

"—and Willie Dawson—"

"Ah, don't mention his name to me," Father interrupted with a wave of his hand. "Just as I was going into Flanagan's, the clumsy fellow came crashing out the door and laid a heavy heel on my corn." He gave a reminiscent wince. "I can still feel it."

Suddenly Madigan sat bolt upright. "Barney Buswell!" he exclaimed. "Now maybe we've got something. That bum would steal from anybody."

"Even from a corpse?"

"You think a seasoned thief like Buswell would let that bother him?" Madigan shook his head. "I'll get out a pickup order and let you know how I make out."

It was late in the afternoon when the rectory telephone rang and Emma Catt informed Father Crumlish that Lieutenant Madigan was on the wire.

"Yes, Tom?" Father said as he picked up the receiver.

"We nabbed Buswell as he hopped off a bus from Centerville," Big Tom said. "He had a ticket on him that shows a pawnshop there gave him fifty bucks for a watch—"

"Fifty dollars, was it!"

"—but he had something a lot hotter than that in his pocket," Madigan went on. "A handwritten note from Phil Flanagan that gives me enough evidence to hold Buswell on suspicion of murder."

The priest's reaction was delayed only by the second it took him to catch his breath. "I'll be around to headquarters in no time, Tom," he said, and hung up the phone.

Barney Buswell, looking scared and harassed, sprang to his feet when Father Crumlish entered Lieutenant Madigan's office. "Father!" he burst out, almost in tears. "They're trying to frame me for murder. I keep telling them I didn't do it, but they won't listen."

"Sit down, Buswell," Madigan commanded, "and spin your yarn again for Father Crumlish."

Buswell hitched himself to the edge of the chair and leaned eagerly toward the pastor. "This guy Flanagan was a real ba—" The man caught himself and settled for "bum." "One night I was going through the safe of his office—I admit it, so you know I'm telling the truth—and I was just packing up a bundle of green when the door opens and Flanagan is stand-

ing there holding a gun on me. He makes me sit down and count the take. Four hundred and sixty-three bucks. Would have been a nice haul. Well, then he tells me that if I don't write a confession that I'd tried to steal the dough he'd call the cops right then and there."

Buswell paused to swipe at his gray, damp jowls. "Now I ask you! Of course I signed the confession —I've done enough time. But after I signed, Flanagan says I needed some insurance; so I have to pay him twenty-five bucks every week or he turns me and my confession over to the cops."

"To wipe out a rap for safe-cracking and burglary is a pretty good reason for murder," Madigan observed dryly.

"See what I mean, Father?" Buswell cried excitedly. "Nobody listens."

"I'm listening, Barney," the priest said quietly.

The man pulled at his shirt collar with a dirty finger. "I pay up like he says, but times are tough. So I skip coughing up for a month —well, maybe two. Flanagan keeps putting the screws on me but I stall him along. And then I get a note telling me—"

"Hold it," Madigan broke in. He picked up a paper from his desk and handed it to the priest. "That's a photostat of the note. We've checked it out and it's definitely Flanagan's handwriting."

Father Crumlish saw at first glance that the message was undated and written on the stationery of Flanagan's Funeral Home. In bold strokes of black ink the murdered man had written:

Buswell—no more stalling! Meet me tonight or our deal is off.

Father returned the photostat to Madigan without comment and turned his gaze on Buswell. "When did you say you got this, Barney?" he asked.

"Just before I saw you at Slattery's wake, Father." He fidgeted uncomfortably in his chair. "That's why I was there. As soon as everybody cleared out, I handed Flanagan a hundred on what I owed him and that's the last I saw of the guy—I swear!"

"I've got another version," Big Tom said coldly. "You saw Flanagan after the wake, but it wasn't to give him any dough. You told him to meet you later in an alley off Canal Street—"

"I didn't!"

"—told him you'd pay up then," Madigan continued relentlessly. "And you sure did. With an iron pipe across his skull."

"I didn't, I tell you! I swear it!"

The policeman swiveled in his chair and stared out the window for a moment. Then abruptly he swung around. "We found Flanagan's car parked a block away from that alley. In the same block where your rooming house is located."

Buswell's mounting fright kept

him voiceless momentarily. "You —you got it all wrong," he finally managed to mumble.

"Have I?" Madigan pressed a buzzer on his desk. "We'll see."

As he was being escorted out the door by a police officer, Buswell clutched the priest's arm. "I'm telling the God's honest truth, Father. I'm innocent. I swear to God I am!"

"If that's true," Father said, "you've nothing to worry about."

"He's our man, all right," Big Tom said when Buswell had departed, "the hypocritical louse."

"Barney's a bad one, no doubt about that," Father Crumlish admitted, remembering the number of times, seated in the shrouded darkness of the Confessional, he had listened patiently while Barney had confessed his sins. "And I know more about him than most. But a murderer?" The priest shook his head. "I doubt it, Tom."

Big Tom grinned. "Want to bet the guy cracks wide-open before morning?"

When Father Crumlish returned to St. Brigid's rectory he saw that, as usual, Emma Catt had placed the *Lake City Times* on the table next to his sagging easy chair. Opening the newspaper to the sports pages, the pastor seated himself, removed his left shoe so that he could gently massage the tender area around his corn, and glanced at the banner headline.

It read: *Officials' Decision Disputed in Banks-Dunbar Bout.*

Father Crumlish stared at the words, a far-off look in his eyes. Finally, he allowed the paper to slip to the floor, rose from his chair, and got into his hat and coat. He was almost out of the rectory door before he realized he was minus his left shoe.

"What can I do for you, Father?" trim, silver-haired Joe Tierney inquired as the pastor entered the sports editor's office.

"It's a favor I'm after, Joe," Father replied.

"You've got it." Tierney gave him a broad friendly smile.

"There's a question in my mind."

"Ask it."

Father Crumlish asked — and got the answer.

The expression on Willie Dawson's face was a mixture of apprehension and surprise when he walked into Lieutenant Madigan's office an hour later and saw that Father Crumlish was also present. After greeting the priest, he accepted the policeman's invitation to be seated and nervously rubbed his beefy hands.

"What's this all about, Lieutenant?" he asked.

Madigan came straight to the point. "Slugger Slattery's watch."

Dawson's fleshy face grew crimson. He opened his mouth to speak but only managed to gulp.

"I know you stole it," Madigan said flatly.

"Stole!" Willie jumped to his feet, his fists clenched in a manner reminiscent of the long-ago Wild Bill Dawson. "I never stole nothing from Slattery," he cried vehemently. "That Golden Gloves championship was stolen from *me* —by the officials! Ask anyone who saw that fight—they'll tell you I won it easy—but that dumb referee and those stupid judges, they threw the decision to Slattery. So when I took that watch I was only taking something that was rightfully mine —*mine*!" Exhausted from his outburst, Willie sat down.

"As long as you've admitted about the watch," Big Tom said, "how about admitting that you murdered Phil Flanagan."

Dawson seemed dazed by the blunt accusation. "*Murdered?* You think *I*—?" Again he gulped.

Madigan planted his elbows on his desk and leaned forward. "Didn't you?" he demanded. "Flanagan must have seen you snipping the watch off Slugger's wrist. He blackmailed you, threatened to expose you unless you paid. You couldn't pay, so—"

Once again Willie jumped to his feet, his face now distorted with rage. "Do you blame me?" he burst out. "Twenty-five bucks a week, he wanted! Now where would I get that kind of dough? I tried to talk some sense to him, but he wouldn't listen. Said I'd have to raise the money somehow or he'd give the whole story to Joe Tierney—"

Suddenly Dawson's rage evaporated and, wordless, he collapsed in his chair. There was silence in the room for a few moments, then Madigan finally broke it.

"It's my guess it was Flanagan who suggested you meet him in the alley. Less chance you'd be seen together. Now, suppose you tell me the rest."

"When I told him I couldn't pay he started to leave," Willie said dully. "Said he was going to see Tierney first thing in the morning. There was this piece of pipe laying there in the gutter. I picked it up and—and—" The man's voice broke. Shoulders shaking, he covered his ashen face with his huge hands.

Father Crumlish got out of his chair and went to his distraught parishioner's side. "You're in sore trouble, Willie," he said sadly. "But no one knows more about trouble than the good Lord. Tell Him about yours. He'll understand." The priest laid a comforting hand on Willie Dawson's bowed head. "And so will I."

"How did you figure it, Father?" Big Tom asked a little later.

"I noticed the headline in the *Times* about Al Banks disputing the decision in favor of Dunbar," Father said. "All of a sudden I remembered that there had been

the same kind of trouble when Slugger Slattery won the Golden Gloves championship. For the life of me, though, I couldn't remember the name of Slugger's opponent. But I had a feeling—"

"It was Wild Bill Dawson?"

Father nodded. "And Joe Tierney confirmed it."

Madigan lounged back in his chair and lit a cigarette. "By the way," he said casually, "we picked up that watch Barney Buswell pawned in Centerville. Know whose it turned out to be?"

"Whose, lad?"

"You'd never guess." Then, as Father Crumlish gazed at him blankly, Big Tom grinned and said with a chuckle, "Yours, Father!"

a *NEW* short story by

ANTHONY GILBERT

Anthony Gilbert's newest short story has an unusual theme. To the best of our recollection, "The Mills of God" is the first crime short story to use this theme as a plot background—certainly the first to appear in EQMM ... A poignant, and at moments heart-breaking, story that few writers in the field would have dared to attempt ...

THE MILLS OF GOD

by ANTHONY GILBERT

IT WAS THE SILENCE THAT IMpressed her most. You'd expect a building that housed nearly a hundred families to ring with the noise of children playing, of radios blaring pop music, of voices calling; but here—nothing. Shepherd Houses might be a place of the dead. Even the narrow doors had a coffinlike appearance.

Melanie, knowing the shame and apprehension that racked her now, hurried up the narrow shabby stairs, thinking of all those other women who had come before her, with heads bent, on the same drab errand.

"It's all fixed." She could still hear Howard's voice over the telephone, ringing up from a phone booth in a voice she scarcely recognized, a stranger's voice; and that was how he seemed now, a stranger. "16 Shepherd Houses. Ashley's the name, but you don't use it. You're Mrs. Smith. Answer any questions as briefly as you can, put the money—banknotes, mind, no checks, nothing to tab you—on the table before you go into the surgery."

Those other women must have felt as she did: it can't be happening to me.

The woman who opened the door at Number 16 was rigid as a machine, with painted hair on a wooden face and eyes like glass. But she missed nothing—the perfectly fitting suit, the small fur hat, the hand-made shoes. Melanie went into a panic, and made her first mistake.

"Mrs. Ashley? I think you're ex-

pecting me. I'm Mrs. Smith," and she repeated, "You're expecting me."

The glass eyes raked her pitilessly. The hands, big for such a small woman, clenched on the door.

"You've made a mistake. No one here is expecting a Mrs. Smith."

And then the door shut before Melanie could protest.

She leaned against the wall, gasping—with relief? Perhaps. But that mood soon passed. Because all the way here she'd been thinking, "This time tomorrow it'll be over; someone who might have been born will cease to exist." Now she was back to Square One.

"What is it?" she wondered. "I'm sure that's what he said—Ashley, Number 16 Shepherd Houses." Then the penny dropped. He must have said 60, not 16. She turned quickly and once more started to climb.

Number 60 looked like all the rest, was enveloped in the same silence. She had another surprise when her bell was answered by a man—he looks respectable was her first thought, and then: why did I take for granted it would be a woman? There are lots of men—some of them doctors whose license had been revoked.

He was looking at her politely, incuriously, waiting for her to speak. This time she remembered Howard's warning.

"I'm Mrs. Smith," she said. "I think you're expecting me. I'm sorry if I'm late, I went to the wrong number—16. I got confused."

He stood back. "Come in, Mrs. Smith."

His manner was reassuring, and so was the room into which he led her. It displayed no particular taste, but there was a blessed ordinariness about it—big rather old-fashioned armchairs, table, bookcase; pictures on the walls—a seascape, horses in a field; and on the mantelpiece a photograph of a girl with a band round her curls, laughing out of a circular silver frame.

"You took those stairs too fast, Mrs. Smith. Don't hurry, take your time."

"My friend said you might be able to help me. He made the appointment."

"What did you think I could do?"

She stared. As if there could be more than one reason for her presence here! Then she realized he had to be on guard, too. It was she who must put her cards on the table.

"There's only one reason why I could be here. It isn't from choice, you must believe that." He seemed to invite confidences. "If I could have this child I would, but—it's impossible."

His glance strayed to her left hand; she had pulled off her gloves when she sat down.

"You're married, Mrs. Smith?"

"Yes. For fifteen years. Or I

wouldn't be here, I'd take the chance. I don't want to do a child out of its life, but it's not just me. I have to think of my husband, my other children."

"Then it's not your husband's child."

"If it were Derek's child I should have it, of course. Not that he'd be specially pleased—it's not that he doesn't like children; he was delighted when Philip was born—all men hope for a son, don't they? And Annette—well, a daughter, too. But after Honor was born two years later he said, 'Three children are a bit of a luxury, but any more would be an extravagance.'"

"And he wouldn't let you have this one? You don't have to tell me anything, Mrs. Smith, or answer any questions, I'd like to make that clear."

"It doesn't matter." How could it? A stranger—ships that pass in the night. "There hasn't been anyone to talk to," she burst out. "But as to having this child, you don't know Derek, my husband. He'd know it couldn't be his, and he'd never accept it."

"You could have it put out for adoption at birth."

"No. I can lose it now because I have to, but once it becomes a person, once I've seen it, I could never let it go. That's part of my punishment."

"Punishment?"

"For the wrong I did. You must see it isn't fair for Derek—or for my children—to pay for what I've done."

"You can't change the laws of nature, Mrs. Smith. You can run up a bill on your own, but when it comes to paying, it generally involves someone else."

"That's why I'm here." She flipped open her handbag so that he could see the packet of banknotes, neatly banded, just inside.

"How old are your other children?" He didn't seem to be in any hurry.

"Philip's fourteen, Annette's twelve and Honor came two years after that. They're all at school. I did think I might have kept the last one, but Derek said it was a mistake for sisters to be separated, and I owed a duty to him, too. He's quite an important man—he was important when I married him, and he's gone higher. He's a P.R.O.—Public Relations Officer, you know."

"Which means he hasn't much time for private relations."

"Quite a lot of the time he isn't here at all—he represents his firm all over the world. He's in Persia now. I'll bring you back a Persian cat, he said, but that was a joke—he hates cats."

"You look young to have a boy of fourteen, Mrs. Smith."

"I married young. Aunt Dora said, 'You'll never get a chance like this again.' She brought me up—my parents were killed in a road accident when I was three."

The words poured out. It was a relief in a way, like a dam breaking. All these years she'd repressed her memories; it was odd that she could talk so easily to this stranger, but she persisted, because he must realize the extent of her need; he mustn't refuse his help.

"I was working in a typing pool —Aunt Dora always said I wasn't University material—copying immense schedules about dyes, where a wrong figure might cost the firm hundreds of pounds. At first I was flattered that he should even notice me—he asked for someone to copy some manuscript, and I was the one they chose. Aunt Dora's friends were all her generation—retired Army and Navy men, keen gardeners, bridge players. It wasn't the sort of house where you could take a friend back without notice."

"You can't have enjoyed the typing pool much," he agreed.

"Oh, I wasn't unhappy, don't think that. I used to believe that one morning I'd turn a corner and there'll be the Rainbow Gates, leading to the new, the real life, that the pool was just marking time."

"And your husband opened the Rainbow Gates for you?"

"He offered me a new life. He was a lot older than I, twenty years, but Aunt Dora said some girls were happier with older men, and if I married someone nearer my age I might have to go on working to pay the rent, and she knew I wanted children."

"So you married him."

"It was all right at first. If I made mistakes no one minded—I was so new to it all and so anxious to learn. Derek used to laugh: Rome wasn't built in a day, he said, and I made several journeys with him. Of course, his friends were mostly his contemporaries, the wives the same, but nearly all of them were kind. The Little Witch, they called me. They didn't think anyone would ever lure Derek into marriage. I didn't lure him, I would say, he walked in of his own free will.

"Derek bought me lovely clothes —I don't need all these, I'd tell him, and he looked surprised and said, 'You're not just a member of the typing pool now, you're my wife.' Then Philip was born and everything changed. He was rather a delicate baby, and I wasn't prepared to leave him to nurses—I was his mother, wasn't I? Once when he was ill I canceled a trip I'd been going on with Derek—and then Annette came and I seemed to have moved into another world, I and the babies in one, Derek and his important job in another.

"Anyway I wouldn't accompany him round the country or out of it as I had been doing—I had the children to consider. For years now it's been like living with a ghost—or someone from another planet. And once the children went to school my life became more mo-

notonous than it had been when I was working in the typing pool."

"And then you met your baby's father?"

"I'd been ill—broncho-pneumonia—and the doctor said I should have a change of climate. Derek couldn't come, of course, he was up to his eyes in work; but he booked a tour for me—to Greece. Greece, he said, was educational as well as being an exciting country to visit—I'd soon make a friend among the other tourists. But it didn't work out that way. They were all so old—Aunt Dora's generation, really—and they looked at me so suspiciously. I hope when I'm an old woman I won't look at the young like that. Well." She hesitated. "I'm not young, of course; I'm thirty-four, but compared with them—"

"And this other man—where did he come in?"

"I met him in Rhodes. I had gone for a walk along the seafront and it started to pelt, so I dashed into the nearest bar, a little shabby place that Derek would never have gone in; and he came in and as we were the only customers we got to talking. After that everything changed: we went swimming when the others went to the museums, and when we moved on, he moved on with us.

"Looking back, it's amazing that it lasted such a short time; but during those two weeks I seemed to change my personality—no, I don't quite mean that; I seemed to revert to the girl I hadn't been, to recover the youth I'd never had. I lived for the day—Derek's wife, Derek's children, they were shadows on the horizon, nothing to do with the person I now was.

"The astonishing thing," she continued slowly, "is I never felt I was betraying Derek. It's not even as though I was wildly in love—more that I owed this strange girl something. We both knew it couldn't be permanent—it was just an interlude, something to remember. When I'm old? I said. You'll never be old, Melanie, he told me. It was the kind of thing Derek wouldn't have said in a hundred years. Oh, Dr. Ashley, I loved that girl I'd only known for a couple of weeks and had to leave behind when we started for home. I wanted her to have everything I'd missed. I suppose I sound crazy."

"The young usually sound a bit crazy to the middle-aged, and you were young, for the first time in almost fifteen years. And then of course you found out about the baby."

"Yes. I didn't believe it at first. Of course I knew I couldn't go through with it—It wouldn't be fair to Derek and the children. Howard never even thought I could have another child. I'll fix it, he said, and then he rang up and told me—Ashley, he said, and for some reason I expected it to be a woman—and the address."

"16 Shepherd Houses."

"That's what I thought he said; then when this woman said she didn't know anything about a Mrs. Smith I decided I must have heard him wrong. So you do see I must have help, I don't have any choice. Dr. Ashley, please, *please* will you help me?"

Incredulous, she heard him say, "I can't help you, Mrs. Smith, even if I wanted to. Don't show me your money—money doesn't enter into it. If you offered me a thousand pounds it would make no difference."

"You've helped others," she accused him. "That's why Howard sent me to you."

"He didn't send you to me. He sent you to Mrs. Ashley, who lives at Number 16."

The enormity of the admission made her dumb for a moment. Then she exploded. "I don't believe it! She said she wasn't expecting me, she shut the door in my face."

"I daresay that was true. She was expecting someone calling herself Mrs. Smith. A lot of these girls pretend to be married when they come to her, some even wear a wedding ring. But they're girls, defenseless, with no one behind them to make trouble if things go wrong, as they sometimes do. You're a married woman of mature years; you wore the ring your husband gave you in a church; you've known security—you don't need to be very clever to see that. You couldn't just disappear into some anonymous bed-sitting-room, be bundled away—another of these silly girls who got themselves into trouble. No, Mrs. Smith, you spelled danger to her; she knows she takes a chance every time she operates, but you were too big a risk."

Indignation rose in her like milk boiling up in a saucepan. "If your name isn't Ashley why did you let me in, why did you encourage me?"

"I told you that you didn't have to tell me anything. And I let you in because though I can't help you, you might be able to help me."

"How could I conceivably help you? Who are you anyway?"

And he said simply, "I'm Jennifer's father. Now do you understand?"

She looked at the picture on the mantelpiece. The girl laughed back at her. "Oh, no," she whispered. "You can't mean—"

"She was seventeen when that was taken, and within a year she was dead, and I could do nothing, nothing, because I didn't know who was responsible."

"You mean, she had an operation?"

"One of the back-street butchers. I knew nothing till it was all over, too late. We parents all make the same mistake. We expect our children to confide in us, and they don't, and do you know why? Because we ask them to see a situa-

tion, any situation, from *our* standpoint, and it isn't possible. The new generation can't be expected to take the older one's point of view. We're at different stages on life's road, and when we survey the landscape we don't see the same thing they see.

"If we could wear their shoes there might be some hope for us, but we expect the young to put on our shoes. And they don't fit—they just don't fit. Their mores are different, we agree, but we think that theirs are wrong, they should adopt ours. Oh, when a tragedy like this happens everyone's to blame—not just the couple concerned, or the parents, or the butcher responsible for a botched job—but the whole of society that insists a moral law has been broken, and so a penalty must be exacted. They ostracize the mother, they penalize the child. And the young can't take it, they're lost. And that's why this filthy trade continues. But it must be stamped out. If the Government can't do it the private individual must."

"I can't help you." she insisted. "I don't know—"

"Don't give me that," he said. His voice roughened suddenly, the surface veneer vanished. A man of strong and angry passions confronted her. "You were given her name for a specific purpose. I'm not asking you to do anything positive, just give me the full name of your contact."

"You can't expect me to do that," she cried out. "I told you—"

"He knew, didn't he? Doesn't that suggest something to you? That he'd been here before? I don't ask you to do anything but just give me his full name. You must know where to get in touch with him. I needn't even tell him it was you—"

"He'd realize—of course he would! And you wouldn't be able to keep my name out of it."

"I'd do my best," he promised.

She shook her head vehemently. "It's impossible."

"Do you read the newspapers, Mrs. Smith? There are little paragraphs—they don't usually rate more than three or four lines—a girl, aged seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, found in a dying condition in a cheap furnished room, and the autopsy shows she's had an illegal abortion. You have girls of your own."

"Children," she panted, "they're only children."

"They won't always be children. And five years goes pretty quickly."

"It would never happen to them" she insisted.

"All parents say that, and if these backstairs abortions weren't available it couldn't. Don't ask me to offer a solution—perhaps the virtuous women, the ones fortunate enough to marry those they love, will develop compassion instead of insisting that the children pay for

the sins of the fathers and the mothers. If you thought it could happen to your daughters you'd move heaven and earth to stop it. But you're like the rest, even some of the women in this house; they aren't ignorant of what goes on in Number 16, but start asking questions and you'll find they don't want to know. And in the meantime the butchery continues and girls die—they die, Mrs. Smith, in their teens, just as Jennifer did."

She stood up. "I can't listen to any more. I wish I could help you, Mr.—"

"Campbell," he said.

"Campbell." She picked up her bag. "You *must* see that I can't. It's impossible."

"Not impossible, but inconvenient, and your convenience is more important to you than these girls' lives."

"My children—"

"Can't you spare a thought for other people's children? No, you can't, can you? Don't go yet, Mrs. Smith, you can't go out in that state. I'll put a kettle on."

"I shall be all right."

"Another quarter of an hour and the storm may pass. In your condition you must think of your health."

Astonishingly, he really seemed to mean it.

"Storm?" She saw with amazement that rain was coming down in buckets.

"It began sometime ago. I'll put the kettle on."

He went away and she heard a tap running. "I can't stay," she called, but the water drowned the sound of her voice. Get out, whispered a secret counselor in her brain. It's a trick, he's got another ace up his sleeve; he's a man with a mission and they're all fanatics.

But her legs were weak and she was shivering. Campbell returned with a black teapot and two cups on a tray.

"You've nothing to fear," he assured her. "I don't know who you are or where you live, and I won't try to find out. It's always a mistake to hurry nature, but man's an impatient animal. We shall get Mrs. Ashley in the end, with or without your help."

"You don't think she's the one who—"

"Who killed my girl? No. That would be too much of a coincidence. But other men have daughters ... You remember what they say about the mills of God."

"They grind slowly but they grind exceeding small. You know who I wouldn't want to be? Mrs. Ashley." She smiled faintly.

"Just her ally," he agreed. "Drink your tea hot, Mrs. Smith."

When he finally opened the door for her he cautioned, "Don't run down the stairs—they're steeper than they look, and that's not the way to solve your problem."

Feeling her way because Campbell was right—and the stairs were dark—she had the strange illusion

she'd experienced at the very beginning, that it was all a bad dream, a nightmare, that there was no Shepherd Houses, no man named Campbell, no Mrs. Ashley. For some reason she began abruptly to laugh, a harsh sound like a crow's, and she half choked. She reeled against a door—the silence came down again like a sheet—listening to that silence.

Suddenly it was broken. Someone had come in from outside, and steps started to climb the stairs, young feet, tap-tapping in high-heeled shoes. She turned her head; she mustn't be seen here, though in the semidarkness it was improbable anyone would recognize her. The feet ascended, paused, then a soft voice whispered, "Number 16?"

She whipped round, taken off her guard, and saw the girl. An unforgettable face, thin and wan, with black hair done in the fashion the girls now affected. But it was the eyes that held her—deep, deep blue, like the Mediterranean or some of the waters off the Cornish coast. They seemed to light up the dark landing. Melanie looked over her shoulder. What quirk of fate had made her come to a stop and reel against Mrs. Ashley's door?

"Is it?" Melanie murmured. "Yes, so it is. I hadn't noticed."

"You're not—I mean, she's not expecting you too?"

There was no brassy assurance here. This was how Jennifer Campbell must have felt, and those other anonymous girls stealing out from rented furnished rooms, unprotected . . . "Of course not," Melanie heard herself say. "I was visiting higher up, but these stairs—" She pressed a hand against her heart.

As she moved away she heard the faint trilling of the electric bell, and as she turned the next corner she heard a voice like a ghost's say, "Mary Brown. I am expected." And a minute later the door closed behind her.

"I couldn't have stopped her," Melanie told herself defiantly, "and anyway by tomorrow her troubles will be over. As for me—I shall have to ring Lorna Baynes, she'll know of someone." Yes, but within days the whisper would go around: "My dear, who do you think came to consult me the other day—for a friend, naturally. But it can't be either of the girls, they're too young, and she did take that holiday on her own . . ."

Arriving in the lobby of Shepherd Houses she was surprised to see a taxi drawn up at the curb, and as she paused its driver came out of the shop of a tobacconist on the corner. Seeing her, his face brightened. A bit of luck, you could see him thinking.

"Cab, lady?" He hurried forward and twitched open the door. She had meant to return as she had come, by subway, but she was dead on her feet; besides the eve-

ning rush was due, and she might be seen. Gratefully she stepped into the cab. Its darkness and silence were heaven after the past hour during which she had felt pilloried under a bright light.

The driver wasn't one of the talkative kind, and she gave him a bigger tip than usual—it was a long way and a wet night—and went gratefully into the empty house. When Derek and the children were away she managed with a morning woman twice a week—there wasn't enough to engage a full-time maid. The house was quiet and dark and blessedly empty. It was early for a drink but she mixed one, feeling as though she'd struggled back on foot through a blinding storm.

She was sipping a second drink half an hour later when the front doorbell rang. For an appalled minute she thought: "Campbell?" — only he couldn't possibly have followed the taxi. She answered the second ring. Her taxi driver stood on the doorstep.

"Left your brolly," he said cheerfully. "Lucky my next fare was an honest woman—don't often get 'em back on a night like this. I knew it must be yours—a nice brolly, I thought, noticed it when you got in." It had been Derek's gift last Christmas; he liked his gifts to be handsome but useful. "And seeing I was going to call it a day anyhow, I thought I'd just pop back and hand it in myself."

"That was very kind of you."

He winked. "Tell you the truth it's no more trouble than taking it to the Lost Property Office. I live Fulham way myself. Nice, aren't they?" he added chattily, indicating the hothouse narcissi in a large copper bowl in the hall. "My wife, she's nuts about flowers—"

She found her purse and insisted on pushing a generous tip into his hand. "Buy your wife some flowers on the way home."

"I could do that, couldn't I? Well thanks a million."

It wasn't much to pay, she thought, to be rescued from Derek's grilling when he got back. You must remember where you lost it—didn't you go to the Lost Property Office? Just try and think.

Later she phoned Lorna, only to learn that Mrs. Baynes was out of town for a couple of days. She left her name and said she'd phone again. Anything can happen in a couple of days, she thought; I may get a better idea.

What did happen was another unexpected visitor. It was Friday morning and Mrs. Parrish, the day woman, was hard at work when the bell rang.

"Who can that be?" She always said that.

"Open the door and see," Melanie suggested, also as usual.

An instant later, Mrs. Parrish returned. "It's a man from the police," she confided.

"The *police*?"

"That's what he said. Well, it could be there was an accident."

"An accident?"

"They always put the police on to break the bad news. Mr. Hatton, I mean."

Her heart gave a great leap—apprehension, she told herself, but in fact it had been relief. The solid man waiting in the hall reminded her vaguely of Campbell.

"Mrs. Hatton? We're making certain inquiries and we thought you might be able to assist us."

"What sort of inquiries?"

"About a young lady named Iris Grant."

She shook her head. "I never heard of anyone of that name." But she led him into Derek's library, not wanting Mrs. Parrish to listen in. The detective, who had shown her his identification, now produced a photograph.

"Did you ever see this girl, Mrs. Hatton?"

She glanced down unthinkingly, and betrayed herself. For not she, not anyone, who had once seen that face could ever forget it. This was a black and white photograph, but still—the face was unforgettable.

Her voice shook as she answered, "I don't think—"

"I think you did recognize her. You saw her at Shepherd Houses on Tuesday. Don't answer right away. You see, the taxi driver who took her there saw this picture in the paper, just a postage-size picture, and a small paragraph, but he recognized her. And he remembers picking you up from the same address a minute or so later, so it seems probable you may have met her on the stairs. He brought back your umbrella on his way home, didn't he? That fixed the address in his mind."

She played for time. "I did pass a girl, but I couldn't swear—"

"Do you know who she was visiting?"

"She—she said something about Number 16."

"You don't know who lives at Number 16?"

"How should I? I've never been to the house before. I was visiting on another floor," she added panic-stricken, in a hopeless attempt to pick up the pieces. Because this was the end. A small paragraph that you'd hardly notice, Campbell had said. Oh, here indeed the chickens had come home to roost.

"What has she done? To get her picture in the paper, I mean?" she forced herself to say.

The officer was watching her keenly. "The name of Mrs. Ashley doesn't ring a bell, Mrs. Hatton?"

"Why should it?"

He let that pass. "You asked what Iris Grant had done. She's done the last thing she'll ever do. She's died."

"Because—?" Her lips wouldn't form the words.

"Because she had an illegal abortion, and we think we know who performed it. We've had our eye

on this Mrs. Ashley for some time, but we needed proof. Suspicion isn't enough, not for the police, who can't afford to put a foot wrong."

"I don't see why you come to me," she said in the same muted voice. She never thought of taking a chair or offering him one. "I can't help you."

"You have helped us, Mrs. Hatton. You said she asked for Number 16."

"If it was the same girl, but the stairs were dark, and the photograph—you couldn't expect me to identify her from a photograph."

"The body's in the mortuary."

"No," she cried in revulsion. "I can't get mixed up with it. I mean —mine was a confidential visit, I don't want any publicity—I didn't go inside Mrs. Ashley's flat, if that's what you're thinking."

"That's an uncalled-for remark, Mrs. Hatton. And anyway it would be easy to prove."

"Prove what?"

"Whom you did go to visit."

She had a vision of Campbell. He'd have no pity—the mills of God, he'd said, and now she was watching them grind.

"I thought a citizen's private life belonged to herself," she whispered.

"We're not interested in whom you went to see or why, we just need evidence, and we think you can help us. It's the duty of every citizen to assist the police. And you did say she asked for Number 16."

"I thought you were supposed to caution people before you started asking questions."

"That's if we suspect them of breaking the law. We've no case against you, Mrs. Hatton. As you told me, you've a perfect right to visit whomever you please. You could say it was a bit of luck for us you being there that afternoon."

The telephone rang abruptly, and he said, "Answer it if you like, Mrs. Hatton," and turned to stare out of the window.

Over the line came a gay, cloying voice. "Melanie? Lorna here, darling. I heard you'd rung me. Tell me, sweetie, what's cooking?"

"Oh—it's nothing really. I was going to ask about something, but my plans have been changed in a hurry . . . No, not Derek, he won't be back for about three weeks . . . Well, of course—everything will be smoothed out before then."

She hung up the receiver.

"I knew that cup of tea was a mistake," she said to herself. "If I hadn't waited, I wouldn't have met that girl on the stairs, wouldn't have taken the cab home, wouldn't have . . ."

The mills of God . . . Calmly now, quietly, Melanie turned to the detective.

Inspector Letchington Squid, C.I.D., made his detectival debut in print nearly a year ago—in the July 1968 issue of EQMM. If you made the Inspector's acquaintance, we seriously doubt if you could possibly have forgotten him—there's no getting around it, he's an unforgettable character. Well, here's the old boy hard at work on "a good clean British type of murder"—with a dying message yet!

INSPECTOR SQUID'S SECOND MOST FAMOUS CASE

by W. R. HOYT

ONE BRIGHT SPRING MORNING, several generations ago, Inspector Letchington Squid, C.I.D., arrived at the Mayfair home of Sir Henry Piddling, and was admitted by a butler who looked as if he had breakfasted on icicles. "Do you care to see Sir Henry, sir?"

Squid admitted he had that inclination.

"He's in the study." The butler led the way.

Squid said, "How does he look?"

"Not too bad, considering everything."

Squid had to grant that Sir Henry, dressed in robe and pajamas, looked no worse than any other blood-soaked corpse he had seen in a long and interesting career.

The financier lay on a purplish rug in the dark mahogany study, on his back, with his legs cocked in a jaunty way. The expression on his bony face was that of a man whose last conscious experience had been of a knife puncturing him multitudinously.

Wheezing, Squid bent over so that his huge red nose was close to the body. "It looks to me," he said, "as if these stab wounds were inflicted by a left-handed person."

Lean, loose-jointed Sergeant Wacker, who had been first detective on the scene, said, "How do you deduce that, Inspector?"

"Because most of them are on the right side of the body, and they seem to penetrate inward toward the center of the body. You will note that the wounds on the left side of the body seem to penetrate *away* from the center of the body."

Wacker said foggily, "I will?"

"I would also deduce that the murderer wore a size twelve shoe."

Squid nodded toward a quantity of footprints that showed in the blood around the body. "Measure those, Sergeant, and see if I'm right."

Sergeant Wacker cleared his throat. "Sorry, sir, you're half a size off; they're twelve and a half."

"You've already measured them?"

"They happen to be mine."

"Blast it, man, you're not supposed to go slogging through the blood when you come on a murder scene! What's the matter with you?"

"Sorry, sir. I didn't notice until it was too late."

Squid grunted, thrust a cigar into the orifice under his luxuriant brown-and-white mustache, and, striking a lucifer across the back of his lap, set fire to his coattails. Grinding his teeth on the cigar, he extinguished the flames by flinging himself down on a slender chair, which buckled, dropping him to the floor. The butler, watching him with an eye that was superbly chilled, commented, "That was an original Hefflefinger. The price was eighty pounds."

"Somebody got taken." Squid, the shredded cigar dangling from his lips, got up, brushing splinters from his prominent bottom. "I wouldn't give a tenner for a cheesy piece like that."

He returned to the corpse. "Well, we know one thing: whoever did it was thorough-going. I count at least thirty wounds. He can't plead accident when we catch him—this is as clear-cut an intentional homicide as you'll ever see."

He aimed a sausage-like finger toward a bloody pattern on the rug, near the corpse's left shoulder. "What do you make of that, Wacker?"

"It looks like initials, don't it?"

"Yes. I make it s b z."

"They're all small letters."

"Yes. As if Sir Henry didn't have enough strength left to write capitals. Dipped a finger in his own blood and wrote us a clue to his killer—s b z. If there's someone in the household with those initials we're home free."

The butler said, "There isn't."

Squid took out a notebook. "What's *your* name?"

"Bertram Eggle."

"How long have you been in the household?"

"I arrived six months ago."

"Were you happy here?"

"Ecstatic," the butler said woodenly.

"How do you spell that?"

"T-H-A-T."

"Another comedian. Everybody's doing it these days. The world's falling apart at the seams, and everyone wants to pull a last gag before things go belly-up." He glared at Eggle with his tiny crimson eyes. "Don't play the clown with me. This is serious business, and don't you forget it."

The cigar, which had been hanging from his lip by a shred, fell to the floor. Squid spat a remnant out; it struck his notebook with a tiny plop. He brushed it off irritatedly, smearing the sheet, and acquiring a blue stain on the side of his hand, which he rubbed off on his coat, stabbing himself in the hip with the pen that he was still holding. Eggle watched him with his chilled eye.

Muttering, Squid returned the pen to the notebook, applied pressure, and with a sullen look watched blue ink flow out on the pad as the pen proceeded to empty itself. He observed without pleasure his dripping hand and sleeve, then threw the pen across the room. "Why don't they make things like they used to?"

"Is that an official question, sir?" the butler asked.

"No, but here's one—where were you when the murder was committed?"

"What time was that?"

"How the devil should I know? I wasn't here." Squid stalked, his hands clasped behind his back, creating a large blue stain there. His miniscule eyes darted about, seeking clues. Sergeant Wacker observed him respectfully, the butler impassively. Squid barked, "Who discovered the body?"

"I did," said Eggle.

"When?"

"An hour ago, when I opened the door to the study."

"Why did you open the door?"

"I find that it's the most sensible way to gain access to a room."

"Were you in the habit of coming into the study at seven-thirty in the morning?"

"I was curious as to the whereabouts of Sir Henry, who was usually messing around in the garden by that time."

"You hadn't seen him all morning, eh?"

"No. He was in the study last night, when I retired; I knocked on the door to bid him good night. I hadn't seen him since."

"So perhaps he never went to bed."

"Perhaps."

"Did you get along well with him?"

"Well, we never let down our hair and had a good cry together, but I had no complaints about him."

"Are you left-handed?"

"I'm ambidextrous."

"I didn't ask about your sex habits—that's an area I have no wish to muck around in. I asked if you were left-handed."

"When it suits my fancy. I can go both ways."

"Do you write left-handed?"

"Do I write what?"

"How about when you eat—do you slice meat with your left hand?"

"That depends on which side of the plate the meat's on."

Squid regarded him levelly. "I

can't get a straight answer from you, can I? Very well; put it it down that you're a definite suspect, and comport yourself accordingly. Now, tell me who else is in the household."

"Well, there's Mrs. Piddling, the wife, and a ne'er-do-well nephew of Sir Henry's named Jack Crutley; also a cook named Mrs. Ork."

"Nobody with the initials s b z, eh?"

"No."

"What's Mrs. Ork like?"

"She's a drunk."

"Is she left-handed?"

"No, but she burned her right hand on the stove a week or so ago and has been using her left hand lately."

"That's interesting," Squid said to Wacker.

"I don't think it is," said the butler.

"I don't care what you think. Just go out and start sending people in here, one at a time, so I can start getting to the bottom of this." Squid took a turnip of a watch out of his vest pocket, and stared at it. "Eight forty-five. And I haven't had my breakfast yet."

The butler said, "Do you want me to have the cook run you up something?"

"Do you think she might have pig's feet?"

"No, she has normal feet."

"That wasn't funny the first time I heard it, which was about sixty years ago, and it hasn't got any better with age. Go send someone in."

"Whom do you want to see first?"

"The first one you find."

He said to Wacker, "Follow him and see that he doesn't try to cut out. I don't trust that cove."

Wacker nodded and hurried out, leaving a trail of bloody footprints across the purple rug.

Squid, left alone, frowned at the body, took out a fresh cigar, bit off the end of it, and absently tossed the cigar aside, keeping the end in his mouth. He struck a lucifer on his thumbnail, then grimaced in pain when sulfur ignited under the nail.

Biting down on the cigar end, Squid strode to a sideboard, and striking across it with another lucifer, brought the flame toward his mouth and fired up his mustache. Spitting out the cigar end, he beat at the flaming mustache with his hands, and was engaged in this when a dumpy little woman with a tiny purple nose entered the study.

She watched him a moment, then said respectfully, "If you're 'avin' a fit or somethin', I can come back later."

"No, stay where you are." Squid had discovered on the sideboard a decanter of wine; he swigged out of it, and quenched the fire. Setting it down, he peered at her closely. "I see you have your right hand in a bandage."

"Yes, I burned it on the stove."

"How did you come to do that?"

"I don't rightly remember. I thought I was puttin' a bit of 'alibut in the frying pan, and it turned out it was me 'and."

"What happened to the halibut?"

"I suspect the halligator got it, sir."

"The alligator?"

"Oh, yes. We 'ave a small halligator, I see it quite often, 'idin' under the sink, peerin' out at me with them cruel little eyes. *They* tell me I'm barmy, but I seen it a dozen times clear as day. It always 'ides when I try to show it to them, though."

"Hmm."

"That's the way with halligators. Clever, treacherous, and deceitful. You can't trust 'em—they don't make nice 'ouse pets at all. I've tried to make friends with it, because as long as it's 'ere you might as well be friendly. But it'll 'ave none of it. I don't really like a halligator, do you, sir?"

"Let's stay in the mainstream, Mrs. Ork, and keep our minds on the subject at hand. When did you find out that your employer was dead?"

"This morning, just after eight, when Fancypants told me."

"Fancypants?"

"The butler."

"And how did you get along with Sir Henry?"

"Oh, well enough, I guess. He used to tell me that I prepared the most hexecrable food in the Kingdom."

"He did, eh?"

"Yes, and he'd been to India and Malay and Paris and all them places, so he knew good cookin'. Yet he told me mine was the most hexecrable." She looked pleased.

Squid said, "Well, that's a high compliment. Where did you learn your art?"

"Oh, I didn't, exactly. I'm more a habstract cook—like a habstract painter, you know? I throw things in a pot and let 'em steam and swap around. Then I add sherry."

"You add sherry to everything you cook?"

"No, to me. I find when I've got a bottle of sherry in me everything tastes princely."

"Yes, sherry does sharpen the appetite. Myself, I prefer a tangy muscatel. A perfect breakfast, as far as I'm concerned, is a platter of sizzling pig's feet and a chilled bottle of muscatel."

"You 'ave a gentleman's taste, sir."

"I try to take care of the inner man, Mrs. Ork. It's a duty I owe myself, and I always try to do my duty. How do you get along with Mrs. Piddling, and her nephew by marriage, Jack Crutley?"

"Oh, she's got her good points. They're like gold—'ard to find.

She's social—goes out in 'igh society. I've never gone in for that much. More the real, simple pleasures, you know what I mean? Mister Jack's not a bad sort. Always a merry quip, and he's quite a pincher."

"He pinches you?"

"Yes. Says he does it to keep in practice for the chorus girls."

"He favors chorus girls, does he? And which hand does he pinch with?"

"Oh, he's hambidextrous."

Squid said seriously, "There are no sex angles to this murder, as I see it—it's a good clean British type of murder; so I'd just as soon leave the sexual practices of members of the household to one side. I'd hate to start grubbing around in *that* sewer."

"As you wish, sir."

"Do you have any opinions as to this tragedy, Mrs. Ork?"

She gazed at the body, and ventured, "I ahnt an expert, like you, sir, but it looks to me like someone done him in."

"Yes, I've come to that conclusion myself."

Mrs. Ork nodded, and backed out. Inspector Squid took out a cigar, slipped it under his mustache, and searched his pockets for a lucifer. He had apparently used his last one. He prowled around the sideboard, but found none. He eyed the body, then crouched by it, and started going through the pockets. His eye happened on the pattern of wavery letters by the victim's left shoulder. He stiffened, then said in a low voice, "Well, I'll be a horse's—"

A voice said, "Find anything good?"

Squid straightened quickly and stared at the young man who had entered. The young man wore a blue polo shirt, a yellow scarf, and white bell-bottom tennis togs. He had yellow hair and nonchalant ears. His teeth gleamed as he grinned.

"No use looking for money, Inspector. Uncle Henry never carried any. You'd be lucky to scrounge carfare."

"I was looking for a match."

"Allow me." The young man stepped forward, a glittering instrument in his hand, scraped a thumb across a sprocket, and flames shot up around Squid's face.

Squid leaped back. "What in Hades is that?"

"It's an Acme-Inferno. American-made. They claim it will light a cigarette in a hurricane, if you care for a cigarette in a hurricane. I see your mustache is on fire on the starboard side."

Squid hurried to the sideboard and extinguished the flame with wine from the decanter. Jack Crutley said, "Shall we try it again?"

"Keep that thing in your pocket." Squid, gnawing the unlit cigar, paced, his eyes snapping at the young man. "I observed that

you used your left hand on that infernal machine. What was your relationship with your uncle?"

"I was his nephew."

"I know that. I mean, how did you get along with him?"

"Not too badly. He considered me an ungrateful, sponging, useless, womanizing, lollygagging ne'er-do-well and blackguard, but apart from that he thought well of me."

"How long had you lived here?"

"Over a year."

"Do you have any occupation?"

"Apart from chasing chorus girls, you mean? No."

"How do you live?"

"Pleasurably."

"He footed your bills, eh?"

"Yes. And Auntie kept me in pocket money."

"And you're satisfied to spend your life this way?"

"Rah-ther!"

"Don't blame you. It sounds ideal." Squid chewed on his cigar. "Do you have any debts, Crutley?"

"Scads of them."

"Girls suing you, eh—breach of promise, paternity, that sort of thing?"

"Endlessly."

"They'll do that, I know." Squid nodded. "Ungrateful breed, chorus girls. You give them a meal and a bottle, get what you can in return, and they think they've found a meal ticket for life. Still, every hobby has its hazards, and it's probably better to get nicked with a lawsuit now and again than to freeze the back of your lap running around on some damn Alp, or raise Dobermans and have one of them take your throat out. What I'm wondering, though, is whether you got so badgered by these debts that you decided to carve up your uncle as a fast way to get his will read."

Jack Crutley said, "The only trouble with that thought is my uncle wouldn't have left me a farthing."

"What do you think of his murder?"

"Made quite a mess."

"I guess I'm through with you. Stay around the premises, though. You make a prime suspect."

"Thank you. If you want me I shall be out on the tennis court, practicing my backhand."

Two minutes passed, during which Squid scratched his ears and his stomach, and stroked his mustache. Then a willowy, brown-haired young thing in a pink negligee entered. Squid stared at her, his tiny eyes bright with surprise. "Are *you* Mrs. Piddling?"

"Yes."

"Why, you're not more than twenty-five."

"I know it."

"*He* looks at least sixty."

"I guess he does."

"I have to assume that you married him for his money."

"Is there a law that a poor young secretary can't fall in love with a rich old financier?"

"I don't know, but some rich old financier ought to make a test case; a lot of them might live longer, if there was. Are you left-handed?"

"I'm ambidextrous."

"Does that mean you were carrying on with your nephew-by-marriage, Jack Crutley?"

"No, it means that I'm both right- and left-handed."

"Oh, is *that* what it means! Well, I've patched up a gap in my general knowledge."

"Congratulations. Am I free to go now?"

"Not so you can notice it. It's after nine o'clock, and I'm starved. This case has got to be wrapped up in time for my breakfast. I've got a sound idea of the killer now, but there are a few loose ends. Do you *deny* that you were carrying on with Jack Crutley?"

"I love his ears, don't you?"

"Not particularly. How about your husband's will?"

"I inherit everything."

"What are your plans in regard to Crutley?"

"He's rather adorable, don't you think?"

"No. Are you aware of his penchant for chorus girls?"

"Yes, but that's all part of growing up. All young men go through that phase, if they can afford to."

"You gave him all the money he wanted?"

"Certainly."

"When did you last see your husband?"

"Well, let's see . . . it might have been a week ago, or a month ago. I don't notice him much."

"Did he come to bed last night?"

"Honestly, I don't know."

"Hmm. That'll be all. But hold yourself available."

"I always do. Doesn't Jack have the most fascinating smile?"

Alone again, Squid paced, his huge yellow shoes creaking musically. The glitter in his pinhole eyes indicated that he was harrying a thought. When Wacker came in, Squid barked, "Do you have your service revolver with you?"

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"My nipper—that's Thaddeus, don't you know—ran up this huge bill at the pizza shop, and I had to pawn the gun to pay the bill."

"That's dereliction of duty, damn it. That gun belongs to His Majesty, not to you. You could be cashiered for treason."

"I know, but Porfirio Cortez, who runs the pizza shop, told me he'd strangle me with my own legs if he didn't get his money."

"I can follow your reasoning in the matter, but it happens we could use that gun now. This is a dark and dirty business. We've got a killer to apprehend."

"Who is it, Inspector?"

"Oh, it's plain enough. These three initials give us all the clue we need."

"They don't mean a thing to me."

"They didn't to me until I crouched by the body, looking for a match, and got an upside-down view of them. Remember, they're not capitals. What does s b z look like upside-down, Sergeant?"

"Haven't the foggiest."

"Take a look. What does it look like?"

"Hmm. It looks like s b z, upside-down."

"Doesn't it look like a set of numbers?"

"Dash it, Inspector, you're right! It looks like—well, in a rough sort of a way it looks like 2 9 5."

"That's it. 2 9 5. What we took for letters were actually numbers, scrawled in his own blood by the dying Sir Henry, to point to his killer."

Wacker looked at him blankly. Then his face lit up. "I dig it! You're telling me that Sir Henry was in the numbers racket!"

"I am not! I'm telling you that Sir Henry, knowing he was about to cash in his chips and afraid that the killer might come back, spot the clue, and rub out what he had written, wrote the killer's initials in a simple cipher, hoping it would seem meaningless to the killer, which apparently it did. 2 9 5. What's the fifth letter of the alphabet, Wacker?"

"G?"

"No."

"L?"

"No!"

"Sorry, sir, I split from school the day they started on the alphabet, to watch the cricket match. It lasted a week and I never did find out which letters went where. What *is* the fifth letter of the alphabet?"

"E."

"Oh."

"Not O! E. And the second letter of the alphabet is B."

"B.E. Hmm. That might be—"

"It is—if his middle initial is I, which is the ninth letter of the alphabet. I wonder what the 'I' might stand for?"

A voice from the door said, "Call me Ishmael."

"Is that your middle name?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Bertram Ishmael Eggle, I arrest you for the murder of Sir Henry Piddling, and warn you that anything you say, et cetera, et cetera, and all that rot. Why did you do it?"

"He was bugging me, that's why. My household accounts were a bit out of joint. Nothing serious—couple of thousand pounds, give or take a guinea; but he was making noises about bringing in the law. All I did was arrange a kickback with a few tradesmen we deal with, pad some orders here and there—you know, the usual thing. After all, a butler has to live too, don't you know? But the fellow couldn't see it that way. Called me in last night, raised a row—

well, I saw red. Happened to have a South American dirk, known as a *picasso,* in my belt—I carry it to fend off the teddy boys when I'm out on the town. Then it suddenly came over me that it would be a capital idea to use it on him. So I did. Not sorry about it—I'm a chap that hates to be bugged."

"Was it the knife you're holding now?"

"Matter of fact, it was."

"What do you intend to do with it?"

"Stick *you* with it."

"I see . . . Wacker, suppose you close in on him on that side, and I'll take him from the front."

Eggle cried out sharply, "I'd advise against it."

Wacker said, "I'm not above taking a bit of advice."

"Oh, bosh," said Squid. "We're His Majesty's officers. Chap's not going to stab His Majesty's officers."

"He's not?" said Wacker.

"I'm not?" said Eggle.

"Of course not. It simply isn't done." Squid advanced, hand outstretched. "Put the *picasso* there, there's a good fellow."

"I'm not a good fellow," said Eggle, crouching by the closed door.

"I believe him," said Wacker.

"Stand off, Inspector," said Eggle. "I couldn't miss that huge pot of yours even if I tried."

"Hmm." Squid stood still, a look of doubt on his face. "I could be making a mistake, I suppose—but what the hell, duty's duty, and all that." He advanced. "Give me the *picasso,* Eggle."

Eggle's lips tightened in an ugly grin. The weapon flicked. Suddenly the door was flung open, smashing the butler in the back. He stumbled forward. Squid's heavy fist swung. The butler dropped like a stone, and lay stone-still.

Mrs. Ork said, "I'm sorry, sir."

"Quite all right. What was it you wanted?"

"It's the halligator, sir. He's back, under the sink. *They* think it's me imagination, what with the D.T.'s and all, but maybe you'd be so good as to take a look?"

Squid had picked up the wicked-looking knife, which had been so close to nipping at his entrails. He gazed at it. Then he gazed at Mrs. Ork, and there was a crimsony kindness in his eye.

"Watch this cove, Wacker; somehow I don't trust him. Now, lead on, Mrs. Ork."

He came back, stepped over the still-unconscious Eggle, went to the sideboard, and tipped the decanter to his lips.

After half a minute he set it down and turned to Wacker.

"You know what? She's right. There *is* an alligator under the sink."

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Lest from month to month I should seem to do little but gripe about the scarcity of outstanding new novels, permit me to qualify the complaint. Your correspondent is not rash enough categorically to assert that only one first-class new mystery has appeared during the time under consideration. Let caution prevail; I say merely that the book mentioned at the end of this column is the only first-class new mystery any publisher has seen fit to send me.

To provide additional reading which can be praised without reserve, then, for the second successive month we must delve into the past Fortunately three criminous classics, each a masterpiece—*Before the Fact, Trent's Last Case,* and *The House of the Arrow*—may be found in one Modern Library Giant, reasonably priced at $3.95.

It is true that this collection, under the omnibus title **Three Famous Murder Novels,** has been available since Mr. Cerf of Random House compiled it well over two decades ago. No matter; there it is. Whether you are a young devotee or an old hand at the game, let not your lip curl with scorn or pass uncaring by. Get this book at once; be born again in innocence as you watch the great craftsmen spin their webs.

"Some women give birth to murderers, some go to bed with them, and some marry them. Lina Ayrsgarth had lived with her husband for nearly eight years before she realized that she was married to a murderer."

So begins *Before the Fact,* which my old friend Anthony Berkeley Cox wrote under the pen name of Francis Iles. Through the enchanting world of pre-Socialist Britain moves Lina Ayrsgarth, born Lina McLaidlaw of old Scottish stock, intelligent and attractive though verging on spinsterhood; she is also an heiress. In the first chapter she falls hard for aristocratic but impoverished Johnnie Ayrsgarth, whose charm conceals his worthlessness and whose apparent generosity masks a callous heart. Once these two are safely married, can Lina ever again be safe?

With an insight sometimes compassionate, more often cruel, the author piles incident on incident to show passions aboil below the surface. Though Lina's eyes we watch incessant trickery, and we have been warned to anticipate her discovery of a tiger behind the bedroom cur-

tains. Will the tiger spring and rend her, or is it only an erratic house-cat with no real taste for blood? You will not know until the end, but you will very much want to know.

Trent's Last Case, by E.C. Bentley, was originally published in 1913. Though not the first fair-play detective novel, an honor belonging to *The Moonstone,* it was the first detective novel to employ all those fair-play methods at which every worthy practitioner now aims.

When American Millionaire Manderson is shot to death near his home in England, Philip Trent, our sympathetic special correspondent-detective, finds a situation so topsy-turvy that no feature of it seems to make sense. What of the dead man's two secretaries? What of his alluring widow, who disturbs Trent's judgment from the first? How far Trent's judgment has been disturbed he himself never realizes until that last shattering upset at the restaurant table, after an almost inescapable net has been drawn round the wrong man. Don't fail to read or reread; ingenuity, charm, and good writing remain completely undimmed.

About to call my third selection another straightforward murder mystery, I remembered that A.E.W. Mason's *The House of the Arrow,* praise be, is straightforward in nothing except its generosity with clues. After violence explodes amid 'proper' English residents in the French city of Dijon, few of them turn out to be so very proper after all. Jim Frobisher, the young lawyer arriving from London in response to a cry for help, lands between two beautiful girls with similar inclinations but strikingly different methods. He also encounters Inspector Hanaud of the *Surete,* the big French detective with the primitive sense of humor, who is always 'noticing' something beyond Jim's ken. We are not in Dijon alone; we are in the very heart of evil.

This book strikes straight at the emotions, involving the reader despite himself, with a central plot-device as fiendishly ingenious as it is absurdly simple when you learn the secret. *The House of the Arrow* was highly prized by (of all people) the late Havelock Ellis, and it is my own choice for the best detective novel ever written.

After a bevy of such dazzlers, how shall any current offering compare? **The Haunted Monastery,** by Robert van Gulik (Scribners, $3.95) will not match the skill or power of the preceding three. And yet Judge Dee, Chinese magistrate of the Tang Dynasty more than a thousand years ago, nevertheless can qualify as a sleuth of the true vintage. Storm-stayed with his three wives at a Taoist monastery where other women may have been done to death among the monks, he plucks a surprise solution out of chaos. Judge Dee deserves your attention; if he is not Trent or Hanaud, he is far from unworthy of their company.

a suspense *NOVELET* by

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

Young Dr. Blair was accustomed to middle-of-the-night emergency calls. But this one—from a high-school classmate, the gay, pretty girl he hadn't seen since the senior dance—would prove to be more than another "night call." This time young Dr. Blair found himself in the most dangerous crisis of his career. It was a matter of life and death—and not only for the patient...

NIGHT CALL

by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

THE PHONE RANG, LOUD IN THE dark. Young Dr. Blair summoned his faculties from sleep, as he had learned to do, picked the phone up on the fourth ring, and said his name crisply.

"Is this *David* Blair? I'm Connie Miller. Do you remember me?"

He cast back for remembrance, through internship, through college, all the way back to high school. Yes, the pretty one. The gay and popular one. Once upon a time a shy senior named David Blair had been permitted to take her to a dance. A painful and bewildering experience, for she had been a Queen in that vanished world, and he, a curiosity.

"Oh, yes, Connie," he said in his grown-up voice. Then, because it was 4:30 in the morning and the doctor knew this was trouble, he asked her what the trouble was.

"Its' Mike. Oh, he's so sick!" Now he could hear the wail and the choke of fear that so often came over the telephone in the night. "David, could you please come? Quickly? We are out at the old Benton farm, on the highway. Please?"

"What seems to be the matter with him?" he asked in the calm voice of the doctor who needed to know.

"He hurt his hand. It's infected He's feverish. He isn't even making sense. David, I'm scared. Please hurry."

"Be right there," he answered.

Dr. Blair put up the light and began to clothe himself, wasting no motion. Must be ten years, he reckoned it, since Connie Miller had married Michael March, the good-looking boy with the cleft in his chin, the restless pushing one with so much on the ball, the one who was going places. They had gone. Somewhere.

He hadn't heard anything about the Marches for a long time. Whatever they were doing now, back here, out at the old Benton farm, he couldn't imagine.

Well, he needn't imagine. He had been called. His gray eyes in the mirror caught his own gray eyes in his snub-nosed homely face with a grave reminding glance.

He left the apartment, went down, got his car out of the garage. His big powerful car. Very human David Blair, 29 years old knew that it was not altogether "for the sake of his patients" that the doctor kept a new, a mechanically perfect, a very powerful automobile. It took off, smooth as silk. Very good business for the doctor. If it pleased the young man, too so much the better.

He slid swiftly through the little sleepy, sleeping city, where only he was moving. Out in the country the fields were dark, the sky held only the daintiest hint of dawn. He passed a truck or two—predawn people going to work. To be one of the very few who were stirring this morning gave him a certain joy.

David sometimes told himself that he must have stumbled on a key, a secret—something. People supposed that a doctor found it difficult, found it a constant ordeal, to get up and go whenever, wherever, he was called. But this was not so.

When he had taken an oath when he had subjected himself to a dominant idea, he had made his life not difficult, but easy. To know exactly what he ought to do made everything simple. For instance, there were no questions to ask himself now, no doubt and no choice. No wondering whether he really wished to be responsible for the well-being of Michael March. He had been called. So, as a doctor, he went. What could be easier than that?

Couldn't, he thought fleetingly a doctor's wife, if he had one, accept the dominant idea, too, and find out that the burden really was easy? He had heard girls say that a doctor's wife let herself in for a terrible life. This had made him a bit cautious with girls. It would have to be the right girl. She would have to understand how simple it was. She would have to agree. He knew such a girl.

The big car ate up the highway. He soon came to the narrow side road that crossed some fields and led in to the old Benton place. The farmhouse was far off the

highway, tucked back against a low hill. He drew up to the door. He had been quick. It was only 25 minutes since the phone had rung. He got out into silence and darkness. No light showed in the house. It might have been as deserted as usual.

As he put his foot on the low porch the front door opened. "David? Oh, good. Oh, I'm glad!" She drew him inside. As the door closed behind him, he found he could see dimly. From somewhere, far back in this house, a little light seeped into the narrow hall.

She had her hand on his forearm, she was leading him. There was something frightening, furtive, a whispering quality, a tiptoeing, about her. They came to a place where light spilled through a doorway.

The ten years that had tightened and integrated David Blair had loosened and somehow scattered the forces of that neat, smart, pretty little high-school girl. Connie was now a woman subtly blowsy. Of course she was anxious, so her grooming had suffered. He made allowances.

Yet her brown eyes did not quite meet his directly. They shifted. He realized with a bit of a shock that they were by no means friendly. Her hand told him how tense she was.

She was trying to smile, but the smile was a performance. "I'm so glad to see you. How are you, David?" He was reminded of the Queen, throwing a scrap of her attention to the classs sad-sack so many years ago.

He didn't tell her how he was. "Where is the patient?" the doctor asked gently.

The patient was in a back bedroom, downstairs. Michael March. who had been going places, had come here.

This was no home, this farmhouse. The furnishings were old and shabby and not particularly clean. The whole atmosphere reflected the taste of another generation.

This was a temporary perch—so temporary that the patient, lying on the bed, was not even *in* the bed. He wore his clothes—a soiled shirt, wrinkled trousers.

Mike March was a man now and a sick man, disheveled, muttering with fever. The cleft was still there in his chin. His right hand was wound around with gauze.

David looked at it and was appalled.

"This should have had attention long ago," he said gravely. "When did this happen?"

"Oh, Monday," murmured Connie. "Oh, David, please fix it. The doctor's here," she said to the man on the bed. "You'll be all right now."

"How did it happen? What did this?" David demanded.

"It was an accident," she said vaguely. Her hand touched Mike's

forehead and David could see how the fingers trembled. "Oh, he is so sick. Can you do something quickly?" Her backbone, as he could see under the taut fabric of her rumpled dark dress, was absolutely rigid, as if it waited for a blow.

The doctor worked over the hand, which was a mess and outraged him. He cleaned it as best he could. He bound it. Shot in an antibiotic. Straightened from the task. Said quietly, "He'll have to go into the hospital, Connie."

"No," she said rather stupidly, "we are leaving this morning."

The patient's head moved. "Connie—"

As she bent over, David rose and walked into the next room. There was no light in this sitting room, but enough crept through to show him the telephone on a small table, among the jumble of dusty-looking sofas and chairs.

He found the light switch, flicked it on, plucked up the phone, and dialed the hospital. Staring at a picture of somebody's ancestor, he wondered sadly how the Marches came to be in this strange place. He had no doubt what *he* must do.

Maggie's jaunty voice said in his ear, "Memorial Hospital." Maggie Fowler was on the switchboard at the hospital from 9:30 in the evening to 5:30 A.M. She always said "Memorial Hospital" in that gay and lilting manner, as if to assure whoever called by night that the hospital was wide-awake and cheerfully ready for anything.

"Maggie? Dave Blair." He did not say, impersonally, "Dr. Blair" because he could so vividly imagine her nice square face bent into the light, the twist of the corner of her eyebrow. He had squired Maggie around, in the infrequent hours when they were both off duty. Maggie was a darling girl. Maybe she was the right girl. The trouble was, David knew, that Maggie herself wasn't sure. She saw many things from her post in the hospital. Maggie wasn't altogether sold on the idea of joining permanently the ranks of those to whom "night" was not private and inviolate. Maggie had once said, "Life's too short."

"I'm bringing in a patient," he told her now on the phone. "'May need surgery. Will you try to get hold of Dr. Wilson?"

"Sure thing. Don't want the ambulance?"

"No, I—"

Behind him Connie screamed, "No!" She flew through the door and flung herself on him. "No, no!"

David lowered the instrument and his right arm caught her shaking body around the shoulders.

"You can't telephone!" she said hoarse with fear. "You can't call anybody! Put it down!"

He did exactly that. He put the phone down on the table. But not into its cradle. It lay there, still alive.

He used both hands to hold Connie a little away so that he could look at her. "I'm afraid you don't understand," he said patiently. "That hand is a real mess, Connie."

"But you fixed it. He is better now. You've got to go."

"I haven't fixed it," he said quietly, shocked by this childishness, "I can't fix it. Not here. He is very sick, Connie. I'm sorry to have to tell you—but he may lose that hand."

"No." She didn't seem to take in his words at all.

"Or lose his life," the doctor said more sharply. "It's serious, Connie."

"You can't *be* here. Take your car. Go *away*. Hurry." She struggled in his hands.

Patiently he started all over again. "You don't understand—"

"You are the one who doesn't understand," she cried frantically "You don't know about John. He's gone into town but he's coming back. If he finds you here he'll kill you!" Her voice was almost a shriek. "He'll kill us all!"

He slapped her cheek lightly. His right arm held her shoulders with all his strength until their shuddering, under his hard physical support, began to lessen. "All right," he said. "Now tell me quietly. What is all this? Who is this John?"

"He is Mike's boss. He hired Mike. He's out of the house for only a little while. You mustn't be here when he comes back."

"Hired Mike to do what?"

"To make—to work with explosives. Mike was in demolitions work in the service. He—David, we don't have time to talk. You've got to go. And hurry." He was still as a rock and she began to push at him. "Now, please. If John finds out that I called you or that anyone was here—" She began to try to use a softness to appeal to him and it was a somewhat rotten softness. "I am thinking of you David," she said meltingly.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," the doctor said.

"Nothing to be afraid of?" Her head went back. The cords of her neck were ugly with strain. "Why do you think we couldn't call a doctor long ago?" she cried. "Because John wouldn't let us. John wouldn't have anybody here. Or let us go anywhere. This is the first—I took a terrible chance! Well, you came. You did what you could. Now go. Please. You just don't understand."

"Explosives injured that hand?" the doctor inquired.

"Yes. Yes, the first one. A part of it went off."

"The first what?" he said flatly.

"The first bomb," she said.

The doctor reached through confusion for his own steady guiding purpose that would tell him what he ought to do. "Mike is going to the hospital," he said sternly. "I'll

take him there. I'll take you, too. So, don't you see, Connie? What is there to fear?"

"We can't." Now her eyes looked sick. "We can't go into town."

"Why not?"

"No, no, we are only waiting for the money. Mike's pay. Then we have to go away."

"Mike isn't going anywhere you could call 'away' with that hand," said David. "Now stop this nonsense and get him ready."

Then she screamed at him. "You don't understand who John is! Mike can't go to town because—after this morning—" Her face broke. "Oh, David, help me? I don't know what to do."

The rigid spine had broken, too. If he had not held her she would have fallen.

"The only way you can help is to go away," she sobbed. "Right now. Before it's too late." Panic stiffened her and she pushed at him. "John won't be much longer—"

"Connie—"

She looked into his eyes with a false, a grotesque coquetry. "Why should you be killed, dear David?"

He felt a great pity for her, who lived by nothing but the same old petty power of being a female. "Why should anybody be killed?" he asked. "Who is this John, that he might kill? What is he doing in town?"

"I can't tell you."

"But you will."

"He's placing the bombs," she said in a high hard voice. "The booby traps."

"Placing—Where?"

"Oh, I don't know." Connie turned her head. "I wouldn't let them tell me. I didn't want to know. It has nothing to do with me. We had to have some money. We were in a kind of jam. But John won't pay until after—Then we are leaving."

David wasn't listening to the dreary voice. Bombs! In town? Where? Bombs set to go off? In a public place? For some reason he had a vision of mangled children. *He had to find out where.*

He said quietly, "Mike has been making bombs for this John to use? To hurt people? Is that what you are saying?"

She was breathing in long panting sighs.

"For pay?" he said.

Her face flushed. "It was just a job. Mike didn't know, at first—"

"But now you do know?"

"John would have killed us. We couldn't do anything. And he will kill us if you don't listen to me."

David made no more reproaches. There was too little to say and it was too late to say it. He felt great pity for Connie, and for Michael March. Sorry for all those who were lost, who had been going places, and taken short cuts, and had arrived here.

He said, "This is what we must do, Connie. I'll take you both into

town, right away. Mike to the hospital. You can go to the police. If you tell them quickly and they stop this John—what is the rest of his name?"

She shook her head.

He put her gently down on a chair. "One minute, then we'll go We'll get out of this. Don't be afraid."

She sat like dough, sinking into herself.

The girl on the switchboard had kept listening in on the open line as much as she could. Now and then, she had to deal with other calls. She had heard a woman screaming "No." Afterward she had heard voices but not the words At last she heard Dave's voice again. "Maggie?"

"Yes, Dave?"

"I'm out at the old Benton farm. Evidently with some criminals." Her heart jumped but she made no sound of alarm. She set herself to listen. "One of them is in town, right now, with a bomb or bombs. He is placing them somewhere. Like booby traps. I can't find out exactly where. But you call the Chief, Maggie. Right away. He may be able—the man's name is John. That's all I can give him." His voice changed. "What?"

Maggie could almost see his head turn, his high-held head that she longed to touch. Maggie Fowler knew quite well that she was falling in love with David Blair. She also knew, and she had known a long time, that there was a decision to be made. There was a commitment that she must make with all her heart, or not at all. And it was difficult. It wasn't easy.

She waited now. Her heart was beating slowly and steadily. Her ears seemed to grow on her head.

In the farmhouse Connie had lifted her drooping head. She was saying in a mourning voice, "It's too late. Don't you hear the car? He's come back. He's out there. He's seeing your car. So now it's too late. Oh, David, he'll kill us. Why not? He went into town to kill one man. What's going to stop him here? But I don't want to die."

"Be still," said David. "Don't speak. Leave it to me." Into the phone he said, "Keep listening, Maggie. I'll try to find out more."

"I'm here," Maggie said.

David let the phone hang loosely a little away from his ear and mouth, and poised his right hand over the dial. He listened. Yes, someone had come. The front door was opening. Now there were footfalls in the hall.

David did not look at the archway in which the maker of the sounds would appear. He looked down at the dial and began to make motions with his forefinger, as if only now he was trying to make a connection. This was deception, because the phone was open and Maggie Fowler was listening on the other end.

A man's voice said, "Better drop that."

David stiffened, as if he were startled, and lifted his head. He saw a tall thin man with too much white in his eyes, and a gun in his hand. The gun was ready. "Drop it, I said." The man had thin cruel lips.

"I am Dr. Blair," said David at his iciest. "Who are you?"

The wicked snout of the weapon kept steady. The man did not say who he was—for Maggie to find out. "Drop it," he snarled.

"Put that gun away."

"Drop the phone, I said. Now."

Maggie, in the hospital, heard the line close, as the phone went into the cradle. Until then she had heard this much.

"I am Dr. Blair. Who are you?"

Then, again, David's voice, saying, "Put that gun away."

Maggie Fowler's hands flew.

A phone screamed in the thinning dark. The Chief of Police was in his bed. He woke and with elephantine patience turned his big body. "Yes?"

"Dad," said Maggie, and her voice was clear, incisive. "Dad, I just had a call from David. He is out at the old Benton place. With criminals. He says one of them, a man named John, has been in town, planting a bomb. Or more than one. Booby traps. And somebody is holding a gun on David."

Chief of Police Fowler blinked and reached for the lamp chain. The clock said 5:10. "Benton place, out on the highway, east?"

"Yes, Dad. Can you send—?"

"Sure can. What's Dave doing there?" The Chief's feet were already feeling for his shoes.

"He has a patient. Dad, can you *get* there?"

"Pretty fast," the big man said. "Bombs, eh? Doesn't know where?" If Maggie had known where she would have told him. "John, eh?" said the Chief in some disgust. "Better get going. Go myself, Maggie. Take it easy."

"Oh, good." Then Maggie cut the connection, swiftly and sensibly.

She sat in her safe nook in the hospital, her nook that was, nevertheless, a clearing point for trouble. David stood where someone had a gun—someone who was a criminal. It was no time for nerves, no time for wailing or lamentation. It was time to be cool and steady. It was time to *stay,* to be where she was, on duty. For Maggie Fowler the world rolled toward the sun, slowly, slowly.

Chief Fowler rubbed the back of his head, dialed downtown, gave orders. "Squad car better nip out there to that farm. Take enough men and watch out. Somebody is armed. And they are holding a gun on the Doc. Get going. Meantime, put Nelson on this line. . .

"Nelson? There's some joker with a bomb or bombs loose in this town. Name of John. Big

help, eh? Don't know what he's after. He's planting them some place. Turn out everybody you got. Check the schools first. Yeah, we're going at it blind. Small chance we'll find anything, but watch it, do the best you can. I'm going out to that farm."

He rose from the edge of his bed, dismissing all thought of its comfort. Chief Fowler had a directing idea for his life, too. He reached for his clothing. A minimum of twenty minutes, he estimated, for the car to get out there. A lot of bullets could leave a gun in twenty minutes.

The Chief had been through some years and he did not get excited. What would be, he conceded, would be. Still he would go to the farm himself. Because it was David Blair out there, in a jam, and the Chief thought well of young Dr. Blair. Because the Chief also loved his daughter Maggie, very much, and he had a dream for her, in a careful, wise-parental sort of way.

But it was the bomb business that really worried him. Booby traps? Some unsuspecting souls would set off some bombs? It was his business to see that nobody set off any bombs and that nobody got hurt. But a bomb is a small object to find in a city, even a small city. If he went to the farm, it might be the best and quickest way to find out where the bombs were.

David Blair put the phone on the cradle. All the while he was taking the measure of the man with the gun. This man was one of the lost, a criminal. He was, David judged, in a vicious, reckless mood, on the verge of some triumph. He had just planted some bombs. Now, his objective would be, first, to make sure nobody found the bombs too soon, so that his triumph would be insured, and, second, to get away free. What was there to be done with a man in such a mood?

The first thing was to convince him that David knew nothing about any bombs. So David stood up very straight, very cold, very calm. "I am a doctor," he announced. "There is a sick man here. It's my business to see that he is taken care of. What is the matter with you?"

"Who you calling?" the man growled.

"The hospital," said David. "Naturally. This man must go to the hospital. I am taking him in myself. We may have to cut off that hand."

This was sharp and brutal. David was pulling his rank, his prestige, his authority. And projecting an idea of ignorance and indifference about anything but his patient.

"Too bad," said the man with the gun. His eyes turned suspiciously. "How did you get here?"

"The sick man called me, of course," said David. He didn't even

look at Connie. "As he should have done days ago. Whoever you are, put that gun away. Get it through your head. I'm not a burglar, I'm a doctor."

The gunman moistened his lip. His head turned. He looked at the woman. Connie was slumped in the chair. She had given up. She was leaving everything to David. Something about her utter passivity seemed to relax the man.

David saw that the gun was not quite so sure of itself now. *Something*—some second thought that weakened his resolution, worked in the mind behind the small sharp eyes in the long thin face.

The gunman said, "Look, Doc, I'm a friend. I mean, I'm staying here, too. I—"

"If you live here, why didn't *you* call me?" David cut in, attacking, keeping the advantage. "Do you know you've neglected that injured hand until it's very serious? Do you know the man may not live?"

"Pretty sick, is he?" the gunman murmured, and the gun was no longer the extension of a stiff and hostile hand, but slanted down.

"He's out of his head," snapped David. "That's how sick he is. Now, I'm taking him to the hospital where we can do something for him. I'll take the lady, too."

David swung on his heel. If the gun went off, why then it went off. But he thought that probably it would not. It didn't.

The man said, "Listen, I got a car. I'll take him in to the hospital." This was craft of some kind. Perhaps it was the second objective—to get away.

"My car," said David immediately. "Have some sense, man. My car's got the doctor's sign on it. I can get him there much faster than you could."

"You mean"—pale lids came down slyly—"the cops would let you go as fast as you want, eh? That your car, outside?"

"Certainly it's my car," David said impatiently. "This is an emergency. A life is at stake. Try to understand that. Go get a blanket," he barked at Connie, "and get your coat."

The gunman had lowered the gun entirely now. "Look," he said, smoothing his face to an expression of innocence, "I'm sorry, Doc. I didn't know, see? I mean, a man walks in and here is a stranger, this time of the morning. You can't blame me."

"I understand," said David. "I'm glad *you* do." He took two long strides toward the bedroom door. So far, so good. But perhaps he had put a wrong idea about his car into the gunman's head.

"Hold it a minute," the man said and David looked back. The man's face was all sly again, suspicious. The gun still hung off his hand, but it was ready to come up. Now where did I make a mistake? David wondered.

"Calling the hospital, you said you were. So how come, now you're *not* calling the hospital? Doctor?"

David snapped his fingers. "Right." He forced a quick smile a nod of thanks. "You put me off, waving that weapon around," he said rather crossly. "Excuse me."

There was no way out of it. He had to call the hospital. And now the gunman came sidling to stand very close. David could smell a sour evil purpose in him. The gunman was going to be listening in, going to be sure who was called and what was said on both ends of the line. An ounce in the balance would swing him back to the hostile side.

David dialed with a steady finger. The hospital. The only place he could call. Oh, Maggie, he thought, don't go all female, don't ask curious questions—not now Three lives could be hanging on the exact tone of Maggie Fowler's voice.

"Memorial Hospital," she sang out blithely.

"This is Dr. Blair," said David in his coldest, most staccato manner. "I am coming in with an emergency."

"Yes, Doctor," Maggie's voice was staccato, too.

Bands across David's chest relaxed. "This may be an amputation," he went on in the same cold quick way. "Notify the necessary people, will you?"

"Dr. Pater is on call, Doctor," Maggie said crisply.

And David's heart leaped up and danced in his breast. Oh, bless Maggie Fowler! There was no doctor named Pater. But "pater" means "father." Chief of Police Fowler was Maggie's father. So the Chief of Police had already been called, and Maggie—bless her—was telling him so!

Now David's mind worked like lightning. He had her on the wire. The gunman was listening and yet—if there were more that needed to be told, David knew the intelligence, the steady understanding, with which he was connected.

What more could David send into town? "He wanted to kill one man," Connie had said. One man. But that could mean that the bomb or bombs would not be in a public place, or a crowded place. Or, at least, that they were not destined for a building or a group. They would be waiting somewhere for an individual.

David said into the phone, "You might tell Dr. Pater to look up the operation performed on a man named Francis. Francis Ferdinand. Give him an idea what we may be up against in surgery."

"Francis," Maggie repeated flatly obediently, as if she were writing this down. "Ferdinand."

By David's side the gun twitched. "It's a moot question whether we can save it," he said. "But we can try."

"Yes, Doctor." Maggie's voice was crisp.

"Right." The doctor put the phone down safely. He wanted to grin. How many times had he and Maggie, when one friendly argument or another had come to an impasse, said to each other, "Well, it's a moot question." And how many times had he or Maggie said to the other, "Let's look it up in the moot." So for the big unabridged dictionary on the high table in Chief Fowler's den they had their private name. The dictionary was the "moot." Maggie would catch on. The thin man was watching him.

The impulse to grin was wiped away from David's mind. He had taken an enormous risk, trying to be so clever. What was he doing, playing word games? He had a mask handy and he pulled it on—the trained control of a doctor's face.

"I'll get the patient into my car," he said.

The man said, "I'll be going along with you, Doc. Maybe I can help, eh?"

"As you wish," said David. He walked past the thin man, past the gun, seemingly preoccupied, going toward his patient. He swung into the back bedroom. The thing to do now was to stall until the police came.

On the bed the patient lay with bright eyes. David marched to him. On the back of his neck rode the anticipation of the gunman's breath. But he sensed no such thing. He glanced behind. The gunman had not followed him. This was odd Yet it was something to be grateful for, and to be used.

David slipped the stethoscope around his neck. It was what the layman always sees a doctor do in the movies. He did not put the earpieces into his ears. He bent and said softly, "Buck up, Mike. We'll get you to the hospital pretty soon now."

"John's back." The patient was lucid.

"Right. I'll get you out of this somehow."

"Never make it."

David fussed with the stethoscope.

"Not if John goes," Mike March said. "I could hear. He wants your fast car that can get past the cops. He wants it to get away in."

"Maybe." David glanced behind. "But I'll stall. The police are on their way. The Chief's been notified."

"Chief Fowler?" Mike March's green eyes with the brown flecks in them showed a flicker of bitter amusement. "Chief Fowler won't get out of his house alive," Mike said.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a booby trap wired to his back door and another one to his front door. He won't get out alive through any door."

"Fowler!" David's heart took a

swing. He heard Mike's mutter going on.

"That's John Barca in there. Been in prison for armed robbery. What happened—while he was in prison his kid brother's gang robbed a tailor shop. The kid got shot, running away. Fowler did the shooting. The kid died. So Barca is after Fowler."

David stared into the green eyes.

"The kid's gang beat up the tailor so he's paralyzed for life. But John isn't worrying about that. He wants to revenge his brother. I guess he's crazy."

"You knew this!"

"I took a job," Mike said, "before I knew this. John's got money. Pay was fine. By the time I found out, I was a prisoner. Didn't have the guts to—to take a crack at getting out."

The bright green eyes made no excuses. The bright green eyes accepted guilt and folly. Knew what the score was. "Connie shouldn't have called you," Mike said. "Too bad. You're in it now—up to your neck."

"I've got to let them know," David said.

It was perfectly possible to think of two things at once. Part of his brain had continued to listen to Mike's low mutter. Another part considered what was happening in town.

Chief Fowler had been roused. Maggie had said so. What would he do? He'd dress. He'd start to leave. If he had already gone out his back door toward his car—

David looked at his wrist watch. Then he felt something hit him in a mental buffet that was staggering.

There was worse—if worse was possible.

It was 5:22 in the morning.

Maggie—good clever fine dear Maggie Fowler—got off the switchboard at 5:30. After work she always went directly home. Home was only a few blocks from the hospital. Maggie walked there.

Suppose she walked home this morning? She would be on her way in a matter of minutes. Or suppose her father had already met one bomb and disaster? Maggie would be called home *now*. Maggie might be running home, at this moment going in the front door.

The Chief couldn't get out alive. Maggie couldn't get in!

Maggie! Mangled and bleeding! No, he cried in his head.

"Got to get word," he said.

"How?" asked the sick man. In his eyes, brightly, ruin and tragedy and defeat were accepted.

But David thought furiously. Get to the phone, of course. Quickest. But how? Against a man with a gun who even now was in the very act of murder? Get to the phone and tell the police in *his* hearing? Not likely.

Overpower him? How?

Stall until the cops came, if indeed they were coming? No, not now. No good. No *time* to stall.

Go out on the highway with a sick man and a woman so frantic as to have been stricken stupid, and a gunman who wanted the doctor's car? Would David get to another telephone? Not likely. To town in time? No, never make it. Would he get to town at all?

If he could only make an excuse to call the hospital once more, save Maggie anyhow. Yes, try. *Must.*

The patient said in a whiny voice, "You think I got to lose my hand, Doc?"

David glanced behind him. The gunman was standing there. The gun was not in sight.

"We'll do our best to save it," said the doctor soothingly. He straightened up. "I'm going to bring him out," he said as casually as he could. "You came in a car, did you? Will you get it out of the way of mine, please?" Orders. Firm and polite. But doctor's orders.

"Guess I better do that," the gunman said meekly. He actually turned. He went around a part of the bedroom wall and into the long hall. David actually heard the front door.

Chance! Telephone!

He brushed past Connie who was standing in the way with a blanket on her arm, helpless, passive, dazed and dependent. The lights were off in the sitting room and he did not turn them on. He snatched up the phone. It came up with a strange lightness. David looked down and saw how the phone had been cut from its moorings.

Ah, yes, this was why the gunman had not followed David into the bedroom. The gunman had had something he wanted to do in here. He had done it. The phone was useless.

No way to send any warning from here.

Chief Fowler had his shoes laced and had started through the house toward the back door when his phone rang again. He turned in his tracks, put on the living-room light once more, and went to answer.

"Dad? Dave called again."

"What happened?"

"I don't know," said Maggie. "Somebody was listening. I could tell that by the way he spoke. I think he's managed to fool somebody. I told him you were on the job and he had a message."

"Go ahead."

"He said to tell you to look up Francis Ferdinand."

"Who?"

"A man named Francis. Ferdinand. That's what he said. Dad, it's got to mean something."

"*What* does it mean?" the Chief asked grumpily.

"Dave was there with some criminal. Dad, he wouldn't have said a single word that didn't mean something."

"Well, I don't get it. I got to move, Maggie, if I'm going to

make it out there in time."

"Wait. Dad, you better look it up in the dictionary."

"Dictionary?"

"Dave wants you to. I know that. David wants you to look it up in the dictionary."

"Look what up, for the love of Pete?"

"He meant something," she insisted. "I'm telling you what he said and everything he said must mean something. Dad, is anybody getting out there?"

"On their way, right now."

"Will they—?"

"If Dave's okay so far," the Chief said, "you don't need to worry too much, honey. You come along home."

Maggie said, "Yes." The Chief could almost hear her swallow her fear. She's a good kid, he thought proudly. "But the message," she said. "Francis. Ferdinand. Look it up, Dad. Please."

"Some message," the Chief grumbled. "Okay, Maggie." He hung up.

He started to put off the living-room lamp. Sounded ridiculous, that message. Was Dave trying to tip him to the identity of this criminal? Was there a case in the police files—somebody named Francis? Or Ferdinand? "Look it up in the dictionary." Now that *was* ridiculous.

In the corner of his den on its stand was the huge book. Chief Fowler chewed on his mouth. Then he walked into the den, put the light on in that corner. Take only a minute. Francis. Ferdinand. *Names.*

Names wouldn't be in the dictionary. Frowning, he turned away. Better get on out there, where the trouble was. Best thing for him to do. He started back through his house toward the kitchen door, to his car in the garage. He stopped. Wait a minute. Yes, there were names in the dictionary. A whole long list of them in the back. *A Pronouncing Biographical . . .*

He turned and went swiftly back. His thick forefinger turned pages.

Francis of Assisi . . . Francis I . . . Francis II . . . Francis Ferdinand. *Archduke of Austria. Nephew of Francis Jos. I.* Heir presumptive . . . Assassinated

Was this the message? Why? What did it mean? To assassinate meant to kill somebody, like maybe an Archduke or some big shot. The Chief of Police stood still pushing his lips in and out.

Pretty soon he moved to the phone and called Nelson at headquarters. "Listen, I got reason to believe this bomber is trying to assassinate somebody. A big shot. Better take a run out and cover the mayor. And how about Judge Fox? Who else, do you think?"

The Chief listened patiently while Nelson thought out loud about prominent men in town. He glanced at his watch. Wouldn't

catch up with the squad car any more. So they'd manage without him. He would simply go on down to headquarters in a minute. Take over there.

5:27.

Connie went numbly out of the farmhouse, carrying the blanket. After her came David, supporting most of the weight of a staggering man. It was getting light. The stubble in the fields made lines across the land. There was some traffic on the highway.

The gunman had moved his car, something dull and anonymous-looking, back against the side of the house. In the growing dawn Dave could see him leaning inside the doctor's car, studying the dashboard.

"What are you doing?" David said.

"Just seeing if you got gas."

Without the key turned in the ignition the gas gauge wasn't registering. David surmised that the man was actually figuring out how to drive this car, when eventually he took it over. David said, "Open the rear door."

The gunman did so. Waited. The gun, no doubt, was waiting in his pocket.

"Get around the other side and help me put him on the seat."

The gunman obeyed the doctor's orders. For now. But for how long?

David's brain, scrambling, touching and leaving a hundred wild ideas, had settled on one.

5:29.

Maggie's relief came sauntering along.

"Bad night?" she asked cheerfully.

Maggie said, "Kinda." She got up and unhooked herself from duty.

"Go on home and get some sleep," said Joan Dixon, yawning.

Maggie said, "Do something for me, Joan? Call this number?" It was the number of the old Benton place. "If anybody answers, just say you are calling to confirm Dr. Blair's call."

Joan looked up at her curiously but did as she was asked.

"The line is out of order," sang the operator. Maggie sighed.

"You look terrible," said Joan, disconnecting. "You won't catch me taking night duty. Nights are for sleeping. Why don't you join the human race?"

Maggie smiled feebly.

"Go on home, I said." Joan went to work.

Maggie looked at the clock. Her eyes were large in her face. She had done all she could. There was no connection any more. She put her jacket over her arms and walked away.

David heaved and struggled to get the sick man into the car and on his back on the rear seat. Mike

March was in pain and did not seem to care, one way or another, about place or time or anything. David, vividly aware of place and time, took the blanket from Connie and tucked it around her husband. "Now," he said to her, "I want you to help me."

She looked, in the faint light, as if all her brains were limp in her head. She went where she was told to go, did what she was told to do, and had no hope of anything.

"Can you sit on the floor?" asked David.

Connie got into the rear and sat on the floor.

"Put your back against the seat, that's it. Now—" He took her flaccid left hand and put it against Mike's hip. He put the lifeless right hand against Mike's shoulder. He said, "I want you to hold hard. I'm going to make time and I don't want him jounced off that seat. Brace yourself and hold hard. Can you do that?"

"Yes," she said listlessly. He was very sorry for her in a submerged part of himself. Connie was a pawn. Some people were pawns and some were not. He was not and he must help her. He did not judge her. He did not give her any hope, either. It was better if she stayed in that lethargy.

"Now," he said to the gunman, "you don't have to go."

"Oh, I want to go," the man said quickly. "Friends of mine. Listen, I'm going."

The man was transparent. Concern for a friend was so obviously the last, the least likely, thought that would enter his mind.

"Get in front with me then," said David. He was still giving the orders. But not for much longer.

David's mind had gone well ahead and made its prognosis. He knew that the gunman would bring out the gun before they got to the end of the narrow side road. By the time they got to the end, the gunman would be giving the orders. The gun would be rammed into David. David would obey or die.

If he obeyed, the big fast car would be sent turning to the right, not to the left. The left was the way along which the police might be coming, the way to town, to the hospital, among people. Oh, no, the gunman, who wanted to get away free, would make David turn to the right and they would fly off into deep country and if the sick man died, what did the gunman care? Nor would David, under the gun's threat, have any chance to stop for any telephoning. The bombs would go off. Nobody would have been warned.

Yet, if David defied the gun, it would simply go off. Then who would save the sick man's hand or life? Or try—if it were not already too late—to save the Chief? Or Maggie?

David had to stay alive, stay intelligent.

He had to think ahead and he had done that—thought ahead.

He had chosen a plan.

Now he had a few more minutes—a part of the length of this side road.

"Hold on," he said to his passengers, "because I'm not going to spare the horses."

"Nice car," the gunman said. His meekness was false. He exuded menace. He was biding his time, and his time was soon. He watched David touch buttons.

David reversed the car. Then the big beauty moved off, smooth as silk. David got her up to speed as if she had been a rocket. He was tearing down the narrow way. At this speed he could make no turn into the highway traffic. But the gunman hadn't thought of that yet.

Now? David wondered. He stepped her up, went even faster. *NOW!*

He pulled his elbows in across the wheel and made his two hands into a cup of flesh to receive his own skull.

Then he stepped hard on his power brakes.

The jolt was phenomenal. John Barca, the gunman, unwarned, unbraced, flew forward into the windshield. The windshield did not break but John's head possibly had. The gunman was out. The danger of him was suddenly gone.

David took in a breath. "You all right, Connie?" He turned to see. He had placed her where she would be hurt the least. The jolt had only rammed her back into the upholstery. His patient, he saw over his shoulder, had slid off the seat on top of her. But she had broken the fall for him, just as David had planned it.

So far, so good. He didn't even wait to reach back and unscramble them. Time. *Time.*

5:35.

Maggie would be on her way surely. Walking home. Going up the path. Feet on the porch.

There was nothing to do but ask his big beauty for speed again. The car responded. He skidded into the highway, turning left ahead of a truck's indignant hood. What now? What was quickest? Telephone? Where was the first telephone?

Then he saw the police car. It was humming along fast, without a siren, but he saw the red light on the roof.

He touched the brakes gingerly. He wrestled with the wheel. He swerved crossways into the path of the police car.

The police car screamed to a stop and men with cold angry faces tumbled out.

"I'm Dr. Blair. Here is your bomber." David wouldn't even let them speak. There wasn't the time. "You got communication? Get on it, quick. Two bombs are planted at Chief Fowler's house. Back door.

Front door. Hurry. And stop his daughter. She'll be just coming home. Right now!"

A man in uniform stared for the smallest fraction of a second, then ran back to his seat and picked up his communicator.

Two others stood beside David's car, looking a thousand questions.

"Take this man out and hold him," David said. "He's had his head bashed, but he is no patient of mine. His name is John Barca. Fowler, in the line of duty, shot his brother. He planted the bombs at Fowler's doors."

Strong hands pulled at John's body. David was just as glad the man was unconscious. He could see the officer in the police car talking, talking—sending out the warnings.

David got out and hauled Mike March's body back on the seat. The doctor's patient was in agony. "Doctor?" he said. It was a cry for mercy, help and mercy. It was the cry that David Blair could not ignore.

"Got to get him to the hospital," David said to the police, "right away."

"Okay, Doc," they said with a certain respect. "We'll take care of Barca. Be seeing you."

David backed, turned, and went ahead. He could hear behind him the sound of pain, the sound of weeping.

But had it been in time? Had the Chief met injury or death? Or not yet? Had Maggie gone running home? Into what? Oh, had he been in time?

Dr. Blair did not know and had not waited to be informed. Bitterly he knew what it was that he must do. *He* couldn't hang around out on the highway waiting for messages to return. He couldn't go haring to the Chief's house either, to see for himself what had happened to his girl. Other men, dedicated to other things, had their own directing ideas. He must trust to this. As other men must trust him.

This time it wasn't easy.

5:45.

He pulled into the receiving entrance for emergency patients at six in the morning. Attendants came and helped get Mike March out of the car. March was unconscious now. Connie was just a ghost, walking in a mist.

David helped her into the Emergency Room. Dr. Parker was there. He and David bent over the injured hand. Decisions were made. This was the work and it had to be done.

Oh, God, where was Maggie Fowler?

Whatever had happened, it was over. All that was left was to know.

Dr. Parker agreed they might give the hand another 24 hours. Perhaps the new drugs . . . the risk was indicated. The patient would be watched.

Connie lay back in a chair against the wall. Spent. David put his fingers on her wrist. "What now?" she asked him, gasping. Floating. A pawn. Nothing to direct her.

"Just rest," he said to her kindly. Her pulse was fine. It wasn't her body that was off the beam.

He went to a phone and called Connie's father. "Mr. Miller? David Blair. Connie is here at the hospital. In very bad trouble, I'm afraid."

"I'll be right down. Is she ill, Dave?"

"It's her husband who is ill and in bad trouble. Connie needs you, Mr. Miller."

"I'll be there. Thanks. Thanks very much, Dave." Connie's father seemed to have a direction.

David turned from the phone. A nurse was giving Connie a cup of coffee. David sent her the responsibility with a nod, and the nurse, with a nod, accepted it.

So David had now done all that he ought to do. He was free. He ran up the stairs to the hospital's first floor. Joan Dixon was at the switchboard.

"Where's Maggie?"

"Oh, she's gone home, Doctor. A long time ago."

David turned away. The foyer was dim; very little daylight could get in. The sounds of the working hospital clattered in the branching corridors. But there was nobody here in the dim and silent foyer. He started toward the front portal. He saw a big form coming through, blotting the light.

"Hey, Dave!" Then Chief Fowler was holding David's right hand hard. "You had me on the phone to every big shot in this town. Who'd have thought the big shot was me? But it worked out. The word got to headquarters, and I got out the window. Say, March is here, is he? And listen, where is Maggie?"

David swallowed in a dry throat. "Did they get the bombs?"

"They sure did. Two of them. Mean little gadgets."

"Then she's all right!" David felt a trembling begin.

"She mightn't have been," Chief Fowler said, and his big voice wasn't perfectly steady. "But she didn't come home."

"Dave!"

Maggie came running out of a dark corner. David opened his arms and Maggie, without any hesitation, burst into them. "I was in the phone booth—talking to headquarters. So I know what happened. Dad's all right! Dave, are you—"

"Sure I'm all right," the Chief said. Then he sent his big feet stepping around them. He had tact. He also had business—talking to March.

David held on to the girl in his arms. "It was you, Maggie, that had me crazy. I found out where

the bombs were—I knew you'd be going home."

"How could I go home?" she asked. Tears were in her eyes. "I happen—happen to need to be sure that *you're* all right."

"Me, too," he said. "Need you." And he did. "Maggie, why was it you didn't go home? You just stayed here?"

"That's simple!" Her square face was illuminated. "I knew where you'd be. If you could be."

"You knew—?" He choked.

Maggie curved her hand at the back of his head. "Ah, Dave, of course I knew. You had a patient for the hospital. Don't I know what you live by? Don't you think I understand?"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 327th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a haunting (and haunted) "first story" that spans nearly two centuries—an unusual and interesting first appearance . . .

The author, Katherine Rambeau, is married and has two teenage daughters—so her life is, in her own phrase, "busy, busy, busy." It always has been—she was once, in a minor way, in politics, and she has worked as a bookkeeper, a legal stenographer, an airlines clerk, a radio operator, and has had experience in banking, probate, real estate development, the loan business, wine importing, and the manufacture of "everything from tiny electric motors to four-engine bombers." With such a varied background Katherine Rambeau made a surprising choice of theme for her first story—as you will see; but surely we can look forward to a hundred and one "American Nights" in her future writing . . .

THE MAN IN THE BARN

by KATHERINE RAMBEAU

HE THOUGHT HE SAW KATJE waiting in the long shadows as he limped down the Pike. Faithful Katje would be looking for him, her anxious eyes searching the road, wispy curls around her face flattened in the chill wind of early November. He tried to shout, but the wind carried the sound away, and he thought he saw her shiver and turn to enter the old farmhouse.

Perhaps she doesn't recognize me, he thought. *Grimy, tattered, and stained.*

Katje was wearing a new dress, blue as always. Funny how Katje always managed to be beautiful, whatever the fashion. She had an eye for style, but she herself was always the same.

But I'm not the same. The exhilaration that had carried him through the fighting, the shock and the pain, the confusion—all these and much more were gone. Even after he fell on Chatterton Hill, Cornelius could for a while follow the progress of the battle; but gradually as his fever rose, real-

ity had receded, and he had seen only shadows passing by.

Sometime after the battle was over—hours or days, he couldn't be sure—he got to his feet and walked away, overlooked by the British. He walked north from White Plains. Toward home. To Katje.

It was best, he decided, not to stay too close to the river, for the enemy patrols were active. More than once he had ducked low or sought cover because of the sound of footsteps or of voices murmuring in caution as a patrol beat the brush looking for stragglers.

It was difficult in the daytime to identify friends, and impossible at night. Several times he heard the familiar rhythms of the speech of his own people, but he hesitated to come forward, for in these days even families were divided in loyalties.

Cornelius fought off the faintness, the mind-dimming weariness which had forced him to rest frequently, and tried to push forward to Katje as fast as he could without showing himself to the enemy. His first impulse on regaining consciousness had been to look for his brigade, but he could find none of his comrades still alive in the vicinity, and it had already become apparent that his condition would prevent his being of any further use as a soldier even if he should come upon them.

There was an urgency, almost a panic, in him to hurry to Katje.

"You must listen to me, Katje," he had insisted. "If I don't come back, you'll need—"

"You mustn't talk like that. You will come back."

"But if I don't, Katje—"

"Don't talk about it," she had said firmly.

"But the money, Katje. If the British—"

"If the British come and I don't know where it is, they won't get it." Katje was always calm. Reasonable. Frustrating.

Cornelius had kissed her warmly and gone away with the secret of the hiding place. Nor had he mentioned it in his letters, for Katje would have to ask Hendrik to read them to her, and as Cornelius knew so well. Hendrik was an old gossip and, some said, a Loyalist.

Now, however, the matter was vital, and he must hurry, for now that Brooklyn had been evacuated and the battle at White Plains had gone to the British, Cornelius feared that they might push north and so menace the van der Laan farm.

He did not, however, hear or see any signs of determined British pursuit to the north as he traveled toward Fishkill, and by the time he reached the village, late at night, he had regained enough confidence to walk along the road. He was not in uniform. He had never had a uniform, but he still retained his gun. He had no bullets, but the gun

was still useful, for he could lean on it. He had to lean on it or fall. The warm coat that clever Katje had made for him was torn and stained.

"But I don't need it, Katje," he had said.

"But you do. And anyway, take it to please me." Katje could do anything. She had woven the cloth, too, of yarn she had spun and dyed herself. "I tried to match the dishes."

"Why the dishes?" Silly question, of course. The yarn was blue for the same reason the dishes were blue. Katje adored blue. Cornelius had been to some trouble to obtain the dishes, and she had been delighted. She had cried, he remembered, when the first one shattered. She hadn't accepted it with her usual aplomb.

Katje would grieve, also, for the stains on his handsome coat, but even more for the wound, now reopened, which had caused them.

Along the main street in Fishkill were his friends, stacked, horrible. His good friends once—now the dead from White Plains. Churches stood at both ends of the monstrous catafalque, like two unlit candles. In the moonlight as he passed close by, Cornelius could recognize a contorted face here, a familiar garment there.

Weak, almost delirious from his own wound, Cornelius became sick from the stench; he almost fell there. But the horror of the thought that he would, in such event, inevitably become a part of this wall of the dead overcame all other considerations, and he struggled to hobble on. Would he never get to the end of this ghastly mortuary?

Soon the fresh air on the open road revived him, and he found travel easier the next day as the thought of Katje getting nearer and nearer drew him up the Pike toward home. His tenderness for her and the feeling, almost a compulsion, that he must make her listen to him, that he must reveal the hiding place of the money to her, that he must tell her how to escape danger, where to go for help—all this drove him the last few hundred feet up the lane from the Pike.

Cornelius hoped to spy Katje in the window, but he could not bear the thought of having her see him this way. He would slip into the barn, rest until dark, chip the ice off the wash basin by the lean-to, and wash away the stains of White Plains. Then he would knock at the door . . .

Katherine van der Laan had become chilled outside and now stood at the window gazing fearfully up the lane. She ignored the cold draft which blew through the shrunken window frame, stirring the loose chips of blistered paint. In the failing light she could see the glint of automobiles speeding along the highway at the other end of the lane.

For an instant Kathy thought she saw him again, the man on the highway. An indistinct figure with a halting gait, he paid no attention to the cars which came so near to him. Once more, for one of those breathless, frightened moments which she had never been able to explain, she thought she saw him turn into the lane, walk up it, and then vanish into the barn.

Kathy had long ago given up trying to find out who he was. She had mentioned him to Dad one evening as they sat on the stoop.

"Who is that man, Daddy?"

"What man, Kathy?"

"That man who comes down the road every afternoon. He goes into the barn . . . that is, I think he does."

"Where is he now?"

"I told you. He just went into the barn." And Dad had immediately gone to the barn and searched, but the door was still fastened on the outside, the old padlock protesting as his strong fingers forced the key to turn. He never found anyone, nor had Kathy even been able to catch his attention in time to point out the man before he disappeared.

"It's probably somebody's hired hand cutting through the orchard on his way home." Dad was unperturbed. But as the other farms hereabout had gradually been swallowed up into shopping centers, tracts of small houses, and here and there a large factory, and as the road had been paved, then widened and paved again, every reasonable explanation for such a man to pass that way every day had vanished. Kathy had long since given up seeking reasons.

Kathy had never been able to shake off her dread of him, however, and since her return from New York to take care of Dad, she had seen him more than once—or at least she thought she had seen him, and always with a chill of apprehension.

Forcing her thoughts to what was real and present in her life, Kathy resisted the impulse to run out to the barn to see if Dad was there. As for the mystery man, she was not sure, not *really* sure, she told herself, that there had been anyone at all.

She drew the curtains and turned on a lamp. It wasn't quite dark, but this small extravagance and the fire in the grate helped to shut out the bareness and the sadness Kathy had always felt there on the farm in the fall, once the cheerful maples had dropped their leaves.

She decided she would feel more secure if they had supper now. Dad would be in shortly. If she hurried, she could prepare a tray before dark and take in a small percolater to plug in later, so that they need not leave the warm little library until bedtime. *Such a dull supper. What for dessert?*

"Not instant pudding," Dad would say.

"You love it," she would reply, knowing it wasn't true. Dad hated everything symbolic of Kathy's necessary little economies of money and time.

Kathy spooned the pudding into small blue bowls as she glanced out the kitchen window toward the barn. It was dark now. The massive old barn no longer looked quaint and benevolent, as it did in the daytime when the sun deepened the soft yellow of the rough stone walls, tied securely to the earth with thick cords of vine.

Dad must be out there in the barn.

"All the Corneliuses have died in the barn," Grandmother had said, and the circle of small cousins stemming elderberries had shivered appropriately.

According to Grandmother, van der Laans had tended to marry van der Laans, distant cousins of what had once been a large family, now dispersed this last generation or so.

"What about the first Cornelius, Grandma? Did he die in the barn, too?"

"All the Corneliuses," she had repeated with impressive finality.

Kathy felt troubled. Dad was getting absent-minded and careless, and each day Kathy dreaded more and more to leave him and go to work.

"Promise me, Dad, you won't tear up the floorboards today?"

"Oh, Kathy, you know I have some sense."

"I know I caught you taking down the lean-to last week."

"Well, the money has to be somewhere."

And with a sigh Kathy would pull on her old blue coat and walk out the door to the foot of the lane, where her ride to work was waiting.

All these years Dad had persisted in looking for the money. It had been a joke when he was a boy—all the van der Laan children had, in their turn, searched for the legendary money. But as Dad had seen his pleasant world slipping away, as he watched Kathy leave him every morning for her tiresome job in Poughkeepise, to return much too tired at night, he had become obsessed with the idea of finding Cornelius' hoard of gold, thus retrieving the family fortune for Kathy's sake.

Cornelius' money had never been found. Although each generation had dutifully hunted for it, the loss of it had never been considered a serious inconvenience until now. The first Katherine had been young and lovely when Cornelius died. Placid and agreeable, she had been much sought after, and she married soon and well again, and yet a third time. Her children, however, were van der Laans. There had always been another capable Cornelius and a pretty Katherine, too, the variations on the pet name changing with the styles of the dresses they wore. Kathy's grand-

mother had been a Kate, and she, like all the Katherines, had had a fondness for blue.

Kathy stroked the old blue bowl. There were so many traditions, so many ties. *So many lies.* Kathy's mind returned inevitably to the legend of the money.

"Why are you so sure there *is* any money, Dad." It seemed they never talked about anything else these days. "Surely Katje would have known where it was," she would say. "Maybe she found it. Perhaps it wasn't very much after all."

Dad would wave the faded account book. "According to this," he would say, "the day before he left with the brigade, Cornelius sold a lot of cattle and grain to General Washington's army. The entry is blurred, but we can be almost sure they paid for them in coin."

"Maybe the cattle and grain were confiscated. Or maybe he gave it to them."

Dad would snort. "Cornelius van der Laan was a shrewd businessman, a prosperous farmer, and he had a family to support. He might very well have been persuaded to leave to fight for them, but nobody could ever have induced him to leave them in want. Not likely!"

Dad was always so sure that the early Cornelius had been just like himself before—before he had become so changed, so confused.

Together Kathy and Dad had once dug up the garden, and many times they had searched the chimney for secret compartments or loose stones—he in hope, she trying to temper his excitement to save his heart . . .

Kathy carried the tray into the parlor, the dishes rattling. *I'm unnerved. Truly, I am frightened. But why tonight?* After all, she had seen him many times, the mystery man. But why didn't her father come in? *I must know.*

She set the tray on the table before the fire and walked firmly to the closet. Pulling on her old blue coat, thrusting a flashlight into one pocket, Kathy walked out the door and pulled it shut behind her. Pausing on the stoop, she purposefully left the protection of Cornelius' old house and walked down the lane toward the barn.

The door was unlocked, and as she swung it aside and played the beam around the barn, looking for Dad, Kathy saw the man. He was kneeling, this stranger she had feared so long, kneeling in front of the first stall. She wanted to run, but could not.

But then the man lifted his head, and Kathy saw that it was Dad. In the glare of the flashlight he seemed so happy, so young. *Where did he find those awful clothes? I can't leave him alone a minute.* She was amused. Irritated. Relieved.

How confusing, she thought, *fear can be.* And she saw him start to rise . . .

Warmed by the thought that he

would very soon be in Katje's arms, Cornelius van der Laan crept into the cold stone barn. Still concerned, as he had been ever since he left his family so suddenly in early summer—oh, so very, very long ago—he went immediately to the first stall, where he had kept the sleek horse on which he had ridden away to the slaughter at White Plains.

There was someone there before him. Cornelius did not, however, find violent interference necessary this time, as he had so many times in the past. The old man in the stall had dropped the pick and collapsed beside the hole he had made in the earth.

Cornelius paused beside the body and took the bayonet which hung at his own waist. He stooped to push aside more debris to reassure himself that the iron kettle in which he had hidden his coins was still undisturbed. It would have been wise to move it long ago, but the pot was very large, very heavy, almost full of gold and silver, and firmly imbedded. It was, truly, easier to defend than to move.

Cornelius, probing in the earth, had just revealed the lid of the massive kettle when he heard the sound of the barn door swinging open. He turned, gripping the bayonet.

But it was Katje standing there in the doorway, the blue of her coat soft in the dim light from the lantern she held in her hand, its beam illuminating the hole in the ground before him. He smiled and tried to rise, but the bayonet fell from his grasp, and as he had done every night since that first gray dusk in November 1776, Cornelius van der Laan fell, but now for the last time, into the cold deep sleep of death . . .

. . .

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 328th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine ... a human interest story told with appealing simplicity and a fine sense of poetic justice ...

The author, Jane Perry, an elementary-school teacher, is married, childless, and at the time she wrote "Ransom in Unmarked Bills" she was 37 years old. She and her husband Charles, who is also a teacher, live on a farm "in a rapidly urbanizing area" near Atlanta, Georgia. Mr. and Mrs. Perry share interests in horses, gardening, fishing, and marine shells; Mrs. Perry also has an avid interest in murder and mayhem—in print ...

RANSOM IN UNMARKED BILLS

by JANE PERRY

I WAS SITTING IN TONY'S HAVING a cup of coffee and trying to decide what to do with an unexpected long week-end when John Graham walked in. I was surprised to see him; he had been out of town and his only child had died, and I had thought he would stay away for a while, nursing his grief. He had been crazy about the kid.

When he saw me I gestured for him to join me, which he did. Tony appeared with a smile and another cup of coffee, and John fixed it with cream and sugar as if it were a million-dollar formula. Then he smiled at me and said, "Tom, I was hunting for you. I need some information."

"What I have is yours," I replied stupidly. "About what?"

"There was a man who got bitten by a snake in the Magnolia Hotel. Do you know the details?"

"Nobody knows all the details. He came to the hotel from the airport and was carrying a small crumby attache case and an umbrella. He wouldn't let the bellhop touch the case. He went up to the room and pretty soon there was a scream and a commotion. The bellhop opened the door and saw the man and the snake lying on the floor, both dead. Apparently the man was careless when he opened the case, and the snake bit him on the hand. He grabbed the umbrella

and beat the snake to death, and then died himself of a heart attack. Why he had a snake nobody knows. It was a water moccasin, I believe."

"Can you tell me any more about the man—what kind of person he was, what he did for a living, if he had any family—that kind of thing."

"I don't really know. But I can find out. Does it matter a lot?"

"It does. I would appreciate your finding out what you can. There's an interesting story in it."

John knows I can't resist good stories. They fascinate me, and besides, I can sometimes twist the facts or circumstances about a bit and come up with something salable. So I told him to order a sandwich or something, and I would call a few people and see what I could dig up. Actually, I had to call only one person, but he was hard to get away from because he wanted to know why I wanted to know. It was an odd setup — venomous snakes are rare in a city of this size.

I went back to John and his bacon-lettuce-and-tomato sandwich and told him what I had learned. The dead man was known as Rick Dawson, alias Richard Dale, and he was well-known to the police. He had served time, and would probably have served more even though he was pretty good at covering his tracks. Small-time stuff really—always ready for a fast buck but too lazy to be a highly successful crook. His death was no loss at all to the community. They hadn't been able to trace his movements for a few days before his death—hadn't tried too hard; the police had bigger fish to fry.

John listened in silence. He looked almost pleased by my recital, which bothered me. He has always been self-contained, but this seemed out of character somehow.

"I know you'd like an explanation," he said. "Have you got some spare time?"

I nodded, and Tony didn't seem to mind our staying on, so he started his story.

"You know Jackie was pretty sick in the fall. The doctors had been very pessimistic all along and we really thought we were going to lose her before Christmas. Then in January she began to improve, and Sally and I were elated. But Dr. Sampson was very straightforward with us. He said her heart had had too much strain, and in the shape it was in it just couldn't last. He said to watch her and make her as happy as we could, and to pray. All of which we did. Then all her hair fell out because of one of the medicines, and she was one discouraged little girl. But Sally got her a couple of wigs, and they played she was a fairy princess or something like that, and we managed to get through the rest of the winter.

"But when it got warm Jackie

got a bee in her bonnet about visiting her grandmother. You know Sally's folks, the Martins—they run an inn in the mountains upstate, all fresh air and pine trees and a lake, and Jackie wanted to go there. So I talked to Dr. Sampson and he said, 'Why not, you can't keep her locked up in a safe.' And Dr. Marks, the head of my department, said go ahead. Then he inquired about the local flora and fauna and asked me to bring him a snake or two for venom research, which I usually do whenever I take a trip.

"So we went up to the inn and had a nice stay. The season hadn't really started, and very few people were around. There were ducks in the pond and some new puppies, and Jackie had a ball. She looked like a little boy, with her hair just beginning to grow in and wearing jeans. She even started to tan a little. Sally began to get rested again; her folks looked after Jackie every minute, and that took a load off Sally's shoulders.

"Then one day Adam, who did the mowing and was general handyman about the place, told me about a cottonmouth moccasin he'd seen down by the creek. He always got half the proceeds from these expeditions, and he was an eager hunter. And this time he'd spotted a real prize—a granddaddy of a snake about five feet long and as mean as they come. We stalked him for half a day, and both of us heaved sighs of relief when we finally got him into the snake box.

"But we didn't have much time to rejoice. When we returned to the inn Sally met us and she was frantic. Jackie was missing! Sally's last hope was that she had been with us. Sally had been napping, and her mother had sent Jackie to the garden behind the inn to take some bean seeds to her grandfather. After a while Mr. Martin had come asking for the seeds, and then they realized that Jackie must have made a detour, to play with the pups or the ducks. So they began looking and calling and so far hadn't found her.

"I put the snake box in the barn and went to help in the search. We called all the nearby neighbors, we combed the woods and checked the gullies, and did everything and went everywhere we could think of. People were wonderful. They showed up by the carload. The men searched and the women brought food and coffee. We hunted until it was too dark to move in the woods, and then we searched with lanterns and flashlights. I called Dr. Sampson, and he came right up. He didn't say so, but Sally and I knew that Jackie could never survive a cold night in the woods. Especially since it had begun to rain. The Martins were inconsolable. They felt they had been neglectful. It was a terrible night.

"The next day was no better. I guess three hundred people—po-

licemen, national guards, Boy Scouts—tramped the woods looking for her.

They even sent for some bloodhounds from the prison farm.

"About five o'clock in the afternoon Adam took me aside and I followed him to the barn. He handed me an old attache case which had a note pasted on it: *Give to Mr. Graham.* He said he had found it under the mailbox.

"I opened up the case and found another note inside which said: *Your Jackie is fine. If you want to see your little boy alive again, put $10,000 in small, unmarked bills in this case and leave it in Locker 28 at the airport. Don't call in the police if you value your boy's life.*

"I was stunned. You see, I knew Jackie was dead. If this kidnaper, whoever he was, had taken her alive, and heard her speak, he would have known she was not a boy. I decided, and I was proved right, that her heart must have given out while she was wandering in the woods, perhaps chasing a squirrel, and someone found her. He saw what looked like a chance to make some easy money, so he hid her body and sent this note. The fellow with the bloodhounds found her body the next day, in a hollow tree.

"Anyway, Adam and I decided to follow the instructions. We fixed up the attache case, and Adam left it in Locker 28 at the airport, which had no key and therefore couldn't be locked. We followed the instructions to the letter, except for one thing. Instead of $10,000 in unmarked bills we put the snake in the case."

HILDEGARDE WITHERS is back — *again!*

The original case happened umpteen years ago, and Inspector Oscar Piper wasn't directly involved in it. Now the heroine, if you can call her that, has turned up again, and again the Inspector is only indirectly involved. But not our old friend Hildegarde Withers, the schoolteacher-spinster-snoop. As Hildegarde herself was to say: "The things I get myself into!"

HILDEGARDE PLAYS IT CALM

by STUART PALMER

ALAS THERE WAS NO WELCOMING committee at the gates of the sprawling Los Angeles International Airport. Inspector Oscar Piper, feeling forlorn and also conspicuous in his too-Eastern dark suit, was forced to the conclusion that he had been stood up. He was just in the act of retrieving his suitcase from the dizzily revolving carousel in the baggage room when he was set upon from behind by a breathless female of uncertain years but of determined disposition.

"Oscar, you're late—" began Miss Hildegarde Withers.

"Well, I had to stay up there with the plane, didn't I? Your smog and fog socked us in for a while." The two old friends and sometime sparring partners stood back and surveyed one another, as people often do after a lapse of years.

"You're looking a little peaked, Oscar. If you ask me, it's high time you took this overdue vacation."

"And you've changed, Hildegarde. You're different, somehow."

"Well, for one thing, I happen to be wearing a scarf instead of a hat, so for once you can't make any of your invidious wisecracks. And I was going to say—your plane was late and I'm glad, because I'm late too. I almost didn't get to meet you at all because just as I was about to leave I had a most surprising phone call. I'll tell you about it as I drive you to your hotel. My car's right outside."

"Illegally parked, I see," said the Inspector as they came out onto the concourse.

"I was in a tearing hurry. Besides, if I'd received a parking ticket I'm sure you could have had it fixed for me."

"You flatter me. A New York cop hasn't much drag in L.A."

She whirled her ancient Chevro-

let coupe past a threatening truck, bluffing out two other drivers who hooted their horns at her in frustated fury, and then she nosed into a lane marked "San Diego Freeway."

"But I don't happen to want to go to San Diego!" Oscar Piper protested.

"Relax! The San Diego Freeway goes to Bakersfield, only we'll turn off at Santa Monica where I live. The Santa Monica Freeway goes to Los Angeles, and the Hollywood Freeway goes to Van Nuys. It's all very simple."

"I'll bet! What's this about the mysterious phone call?"

"You won't be able to guess who it was, not in a million years!"

"Look, I only have a week's vacation. So come to the point, if any."

"Very well. The call was from Eileen Travis. That name should ring a bell. Don't you remember the case up in Las Vegas umpteen years ago? You weren't directly involved in it, except for having to vouch for me over long-distance when the police were being difficult."

"Wait a minute!" His leprechaunish face brightened. "Wasn't that the one where the suspect's fingerprints didn't match those on the murder weapon, and you pulled one out of the hat and suggested that the Chief of Police make her take off her shoes?"

"That's right—the famous Toeprint case. It was *that* Eileen Travis who called me, out of the blue!"

"You mean she beat the murder rap, after all?" Oscar Piper threw his cigar butt out of the car window in deep disgust. "Another case of an all-male jury refusing to convict a pretty dame?"

"Wrong, Oscar. Eileen was found guilty on two counts of Homicide One, and she sat in Death Row at Nevada State Penitentiary for months on end. Then there was a commutation of sentence and she served ten years or so but now she is out and trying to make a new life for herself."

"Or looking for a new victim, maybe."

"Oscar, you think too much like a policeman. This woman has paid her debt to society, and we ought to give her the benefit of the doubt. I've often wondered what happens to the people I've helped to catch and convict during my meddling in affairs that really shouldn't have concerned me. This is the first time I have ever had a chance at firsthand to see what they're like when and if they get back into the world. Perhaps Eileen is a different person now. She may just want to thank me, for changing the course of her life."

"Sure, I'll just bet."

"Anyway, she called to ask if she could drop by this evening. I could hardly say no. So you and I will have to postpone our trip to Disneyland until tomorrow."

"Okay with me, my stomach is full of butterflies anyway. I'd just as

soon spend the rest of the evening reading a good book, curled up in my hotel room."

"What good book—*Fanny Hill?* And speaking of hotels, here we are."

The schoolteacher pulled up in front of the old Miramar, which now faced a wide expanse of wine-dark sea and a remarkable sunset full of technicolor clouds. The Inspector dragged out his suitcase, and then hesitated.

"I really wouldn't turn my back on that dame, if I were you," he said earnestly. "I know how the criminal mind works. She may have been brooding all those years in stir, nursing a grudge against you."

"I don't think so. Heavens, there was nothing personal in what I did! She just outsmarted herself."

"Then probably now she wants to play on your sympathies and borrow some money, or have you give her a character reference. Anyway, I bet you she wants *something* out of you!"

"You're on, Oscar. For a whole dollar. I'll phone and give you a full report when she leaves, if it isn't too late."

"Phone me anyway. And well—I hope I'm wrong!"

Miss Withers drove the six blocks back to her modest cottage, thinking that the dear Inspector must be getting mellow with the years. This was the first time she remembered his ever hoping he was wrong, about anything!

At precisely eight o'clock the doorbell rang. "We must give the lady an A for promptness, anyway," said the schoolteacher to Talley, her big Standard poodle. He was getting rheumatic in his autumn years, but he still lumbered up from his couch to answer the door and give his warm greeting to any human being. Talley, as somebody had said years ago, was a dog who would gladly have held the dark-lantern for Jack the Ripper.

"Come in, come in," said Miss Withers. The handsome, well-dressed woman looked a little apprehensive. "Talley doesn't bite, he just wants to sit in your lap, Miss Travis. Or is it Mrs.?"

"It was just a number until a couple of months ago." The tone was bitter.

"Let me say that I'm very glad things have turned out so well for you," offered the hostess tactfully. "You must have been a very model prisoner indeed. Or would you rather not talk about it?"

Eileen shrugged, and accepted a cup of coffee and a cookie. "As a matter of fact, I don't just want to talk about it, I want to do something about it. Penal reform, I mean. I'm not down here just for fun. I'm having conferences with some movie people at the Westwood-Hilton about the possibility of doing my life story on film— *The Doll in the Death House,* or something like that. I want the movie money, when and if, to go to

CALM. That's Citizens for the Abolishment of Legal Murder, you know."

"Yes, I do know. And a worthy cause it is."

"But you—you're practically a policewoman. And isn't the fuzz—I mean the police—always in favor of the death penalty?"

"Most of them, because they're under the impression it's a deterrent. I think it fails in that, and besides, it's inequitable. Few people with enough money to hire a good lawyer ever get the death penalty, and in the entire history of this country I believe that only fourteen women have been legally executed. But you didn't get in touch with me to argue that point, did you?"

"It said in the article I read about you that you usually work, or used to work, hand in glove with the New York police—"

"With one particular member of the force, anyway. But I'm a free agent."

"How about the Los Angeles police?"

"I have had certain contacts with them, but I'm afraid they still believe a woman's place is in the home, or in the schoolroom."

Eileen seemed to make up her mind about something. She ran her thin well-manicured fingers through her Italian-cut locks. "I suppose, Miss Withers, you're wondering why I looked you up in the phone book and came out to see you?"

"Something like that has crossed my mind."

"I guess it was partly a desire to show off a little, and prove to you that a convicted murderess could come out of stir smelling like a rose. But now that we know each other a little better, I want to tell you something and ask your advice. I'm not just down here in Los Angeles to talk to the movie moguls. There's a very delicate errand that I promised to do for a friend of mine up at the Place who still has six months of time to do on a felony hit-and-run is worried sick about her husband.

"He used to tend bar in Vegas and come up to Carson City every visiting day, but now he's moved down here and he doesn't come up to see her or even write any more. Bunny has got it into her head that maybe he's taken up with another woman, and she's got to know the truth. You can't imagine how girls worry about things like that when they're locked up Inside."

"And sometimes when they're on the outside too, or so I've heard tell."

"Before I got out I promised Bunny that I'd check up on her man. But I've never met him, never seen him except for the picture over her bunk. I'm getting cold feet about just walking in on him." Eileen sipped her cold coffee. "Do you suppose it would be a good idea to hire a private eye?"

"The phone book is full of them, but I imagine the costs would run high."

"I'm not hurting for money—George divorced me while I was in stir, but my father and mother didn't disown me. And Bunny was such a good pal to me in stir! Miss Withers, you're supposed to be an investigator. Would you look into it for me?"

"My dear young lady, I'm not a licensed private eye."

"I'll gladly pay for your time."

Miss Withers hesitated—and was lost. "Sometimes the best way is the simplest. Why don't you and I go pay a call on the man? Perhaps your friend Bunny is only imagining things. If he's up to tricks, or living with another woman, it should be perfectly evident."

"Tonight? But—"

"There is no time like the present. I broke another engagement to see you, and I have the rest of the evening free. Do you have his name and address?"

"It's Bert Haas—9877 Laurel Terrace Way."

The address, Miss Withers noted, would be somewhere in the hills above Laurel Canyon in Hollywood, no more than half an hour's drive from here. "Do you have your car?" she asked the visitor.

"Why, no, I came by taxi."

"Then we'll take mine."

It was no sooner said than done. Leaving the disconsolate Talleyrand behind, the retired schoolma'am and the rehabilitated murderess set forth on their errand of mercy—or whatever it was.

Had she but known . . . as dear Mary Roberts Rinehart used to write.

Eileen had little to say on the trip, either because she was apprehensive about the welcome she might receive on their arrival or because she was aghast at Miss Withers' individualistic way of handling a motor car. The schoolteacher, as usual, talked enough for two.

The address proved to be a lonely, somewhat bedraggled-looking frame house, innocent of paint or pretense, perched above the roadway on stilts and clinging precariously to the edge of the cliff, and far off by itself on the edge of nowhere. But there was a light inside, flickering through drawn Venetian blinds.

"I don't think I like the looks of the place," said Eileen, as the schoolteacher made a U-turn and came suddenly to a halt.

"Neither do I, but I'm not the type to turn now. Even if this Mr. Bert Haas is a very unpleasant character, he can hardly pull anything out of line, with the two of us there." But Miss Withers grabbed her heavy handbag and also her umbrella, both of which had proved excellent defensive weapons in the past.

"I guess you're right," admitted Eileen. "But better leave the engine running in case we have to make a fast getaway."

"Very well." Miss Withers hated to waste gas, but maybe Eileen had a point. They climbed a long flight

of wooden steps, and the schoolteacher banged firmly on the door with her umbrella handle. There was a deep silence within. But all the same, Miss Withers had a sixth sense that somebody was in there—perhaps more than just one somebody. She hammered again, more loudly.

"Who is it?" came a guarded masculine voice from inside.

Miss Withers had to nudge Eileen into answering. The younger woman gulped and said, "We're friends of Bunny's. We want to see Mr. Bert Haas."

Another pause—but there were vague sounds of scurrying within. "I'm not dressed," came the same voice. "Wait a couple of minutes, okay?"

"He could be whisking feminine garments and lipstick-stained cigarettes out of sight," whispered the schoolteacher. "But he may be telling the truth. We should know in a minute."

But it was closer to five minutes before the front door opened to disclose a handsome but weakish-faced, actorish-looking man in his middle thirties, wearing a dressing gown but showing no other signs of having had to make himself suddenly presentable. His delight in receiving visitors was well-concealed, but he let the ladies in and waved them toward overstuffed chairs facing a flickering television set.

Miss Withers noticed that the room was sparsely furnished, with no books and no magazines and no really intimate objects. However, the ashtrays were clean. The doors to what were presumably the kitchen and the bedroom were closed. But somehow, the place didn't really look lived-in.

Haas himself did not sit down, nor did he offer his visitors any refreshment. The situation was obviously strained. "Didn't Bunny ever mention my name?" asked Eileen. "Remember, I was her cellmate for a year."

"If she did, I don't remember," Bert Haas said bluntly. Then he turned to the retired schoolteacher. "Don't tell me you were a stir buddy of Bunny's too? You look too legit."

"Why—why, certainly!" The maiden schoolteacher had always fancied herself as an actress, and decided now that she might as well get into the act. "In certain select circles I am known as 'Light-Fingered Lil.' I did some time for shoplifting. Only the big stuff of course—like diamonds."

"Pleased to meetcha," said Mr. Haas. But the man seemed to be very much on edge, like an actor left on stage in the lurch and forced to ad lib. "You girls got a message for me from Bunny, or what?" he demanded.

Miss Withers looked at Eileen, who suddenly spoke up and said, "Mr. Haas, you just don't know how that girl is worrying! She doesn't know if she's got anybody

or anything to come out to, or not. You haven't been up to Carson City to see her since November, and the letters you used to write—what pitifully few there were—have just made her cry all the harder."

It occurred to Miss Withers that Eileen was being very dramatic about the whole thing, and the accompaniment of "Peyton Place" on the TV set was somehow completely in harmony. So she watched and listened.

"Bunny is still your wife!" cried Eileen. "You said your vows, and you can't let her down now, after all you've been to each other!"

Bert Haas was trying to shush her. "Take it easy! Yes, I know we were once married, but—"

Then he broke off, as the bedroom door was flung open. A small vivacious, curvaceous brunette in silky pink nothings burst into the room, preceded by an Army .45 automatic held in both hands.

"Wife?" she shrieked. "Did I hear somebody say 'wife'?" There was a torrent of angry Spanish, of which Miss Withers caught only a few words.

Bert Haas moved forward. "Conchita, I was going to tell you! I'll divorce Bunny as soon as she gets out —"

"Tell it in hell!" cried Conchita.

There was no time for anybody to do anything—Miss Withers could not even raise her umbrella or fling her handbag. The blast of the heavy gun seemed to make the entire house jump a foot in the air, with earthquake and thunder and lightning combined.

Bert Haas stood there in shocked surprise, as if he was unable to believe that this was actually happening to him. Then bright arterial blood spurted from his mouth. He grasped his shirt front and crumpled forward to his knees, then collapsed into a sodden mass.

The girl called Conchita just stood there, frozen and wide-eyed. Perhaps somebody screamed—it might have been the schoolteacher. Come to think of it, it must have been—because dear Eileen was already out of the door.

Instant departure seemed the better part of valor, at the moment. Miss Withers tried valiantly to act on that precept, but by the time she had gathered her handbag and umbrella and had backed out of the cordite-smelling room, it was a little too late. She heard the roar of a familiar motor in the street below, the howl of a tortured transmission.

"Wait, wait!" she cried.

But it seemed that Eileen had really panicked. She was now careening off down the canyon in the schoolteacher's beloved old Chevrolet, ricocheting first off one curb and then another. Just as she rounded the farther turn the tail-light came derisively on.

"The things I get myself into!" said Miss Withers to herself, as she plodded off down the darkened street in search of a telephone.

Sometime later that evening Inspector Oscar Piper, roused from his bed and from the good book he had been reading, found himself down in the hotel Tiki Room buying Miss Withers a much-needed glass of sherry. If she had expected any sympathy from him she was sadly disappointed. He seemed very amused at the whole story.

"And I'll take that dollar now," he grinned.

She paid it. "But anyway, Oscar, to make a long story short, I finally managed to wake up somebody in one of the big houses down the canyon and was permitted to use the phone and—"

"Just let me guess the rest of it," he cut in. "You yelled 'Bloody Murder' to the local law and you waited there until the cruise car arrived. And then you went back with them to the house on stilts where the killing took place and found the house dark and deserted. But at your frenzied insistence at being eyewitness to a murder the law broke in and found nobody and nothing. It's really a funny picture—"

"Go on, Mister Knowitall!"

"No dead body, no hysterical Conchita, no blood on the floor. Hildegarde, you were taken in by one of the oldest cons in the business—the one called the 'cackle bladder routine.' It's usually a blackmail gimmick. The supposed victim holds a chicken bladder filled with chicken blood in his mouth, and when he is supposed to be shot he bites the bladder and supposedly bleeds from the mouth and dies a horrible death right there in front of the 'mark.' Only in this case you were the mark.

"The rest is easy. The police naturally assumed that you are a little batty and they gave you a hard time and you probably had to talk fast to keep from being detained for psychiatric observation. You finally got home and found your ancient Chevy standing right in front of your front door, and so you called me to cry on my shoulder. Right?"

"Wrong, Oscar. I didn't know about the cackle bladder thing, but I did know the murder was phony. Because—"

"Wait a minute! You mean you *didn't* report the killing?"

"I did not. So all this beautiful scene you have been visualizing just didn't happen. Eileen and her friends were absolutely confident that I would be taken in; it wasn't blackmail but just a good try at making me look silly and ridiculous in the eyes of the local law."

"But that motive seems pretty mild for a girl like Eileen Travis. I'd have thought that she might want to take a pot shot at you, or something equally drastic."

"And risk going back to prison as a second offender? Not that clever wench! She just wanted to get even for that old business about the toeprints."

"Okay. But I'd like to know why you didn't fall for it."

"Oscar, that was an Army-issue .45 that the girl fired at Haas—even I could see that. She fired point-blank at the man—and he fell *forward!* A real live bullet of that caliber would have knocked him backside-over-applecart backwards across the room, if you will pardon the vulgar but forceful expression. So I just called a taxi and went home, and when I found my car waiting there I knew I was right."

The Inspector ordered himself another highball. "But look," he said. "She still took you for a sucker, or tried to. She and her friends are probably out somewhere laughing themselves sick over how they conned you. But how do you go about getting even? You could never get a charge of auto theft to stick, not when you drove out there together and when she brought your car straight home. You might have her picked up for violation of parole, because it just occurred to me that parolees are not supposed to leave the state—"

"And get her sent back to prison? Oscar, I just thought of it. Do you happen to know what today is?"

"Sunday, I guess. Last day of March. Why?"

"If it were still March it would be the thirty-second. Oscar, it's Monday—April Fool's Day! You think I could get the girl sent back to prison for trying to play an April Fool's joke that didn't even work? Not a chance!"

"Then what?"

"I know where she's staying—at the Westwood-Hilton. And I just think I'll send her a bill for services rendered, perhaps $100 plus my taxi fare from Hollywood to Santa Monica. She did offer to retain me, you know. If I get the money I'll donate it to CALM, the anti-capital punishment group. And I'll bet you another dollar that she very meekly pays me, especially after she and her friends read the morning papers and find out there was no report of a murder and that their whole scheme was a fiasco."

"The bet is on," said Oscar Piper. But he had a deep feeling inside that this was one bet he was going to lose.

FIRST PRIZE WINNER NUMBER 2

When H. F. Heard's *The President of the United States, Detective* was first published, in 1947, the story had a strange—and at the time, disturbing—reception. Almost without exception, readers and critics disapproved of the story, and editor-EQ, to put it mildly, was pilloried. But an even stranger thing has happened since the story's first appearance 22 years ago. More and more readers have heard about "that prophetic story," and have asked us to reprint it. Could it be that Messrs. Heard and Queen were too far ahead of the times? ... Read (or reread) the story for its imaginative thrust, in a figurative rather than a literal sense ...

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, DETECTIVE

by H. F. HEARD

"I'M PUZZLED BY SOME OF MY readings," Skelton volunteered.

No one in the clubroom was sufficiently interested to raise his eyes from the illustrated paper he was leafing through. Skelton was the tidal expert. The other specialists of this team at the newest marine laboratory agreed about few things, but Skelton's job was one of them and Skelton was another. "After all," they used to remark, "he's only a sort of lab. boy to us. The meteorologist has really more of value to give. Skelton's nothing but a timekeeper."

But Skelton was evidently puzzled enough not to take a snub. He cleared his throat with a certain defiance. "I've mentioned the possibility earlier to one or two of you. But now there's no doubt and what's more, no possible reason for it."

Still no one reacted.

"It'll really matter to all of you if it's true." A note of urgency made his voice strain. The tone more than the words irritated Bolder, one of the chemists. To stop the sound which he found made his reading difficult he looked over the edge of *Life* and asked, "What are they showing?"

"Well, it's slight of course but it's unmistakable—and there's no

doubt it's growing. The high tides for each corresponding month have each been gaining on the last. There's no doubt an increase in the maxima and what's incomprehensible, there's no reason."

That made Exon intervene. He was the large marine biologist. Someone said that he had taken to his subject because of all creation mollusks were the hardest of animals to pick quarrels with.

"You'll be saying next the moon's out of step or the sun's got a 'swelled head.'"

"Laws of Nature don't change" —this was from Simson. He was the Geneticist, one that had never quite recovered from the violent controversies with which the birth of his subject had been attended. He was an old man now and only a boy then. But his father—biology ran in the family—had been involved in the bitterness between the elder Darwinians and the Mendelians, as they were then called. Simson reacted into the strictest orthodoxy. He used to repeat his maxim like a mantram whenever anyone introduced findings which might be radical.

"Your instruments are wrong, young man—that's what it is."

Of course such a remark is a reflection. But it was clear that Simson had the room with him. Skelton could not command a single ear. He was upset, quite upset. Of course it was clear if that was the reception given by such men as his colleagues, he could hope for nothing better from anyone outside—at least, in the professional world. And how could he expect the lay world to pay attention if the experts disregarded?

He left the clubroom, but before going to his apartment went back to his division of the laboratories. He checked his tables again with worried care. He plotted his graph over again. The result stood. Of course it was slight but science had no right to ignore facts because they first emerged as small divergencies. It might well be—no, not the instruments or faulty observation—but some more or less local peculiarity, some current shift, surface wind pressure even, or perhaps a change of levels in the oceanic floor. His instruments were the best in the world—his new setup had been equipped with a plant better than any other marine Lab. in history. And though the rest might look down on his job as mere routine, yet he knew he had been picked as a first-class observer.

No one else in the tidal world had as yet reported any evidence of possible shift of maxima. But then why should they? These instruments were incomparable. Besides, the change, whatever it was, might have become evident here on this shoreline first. Well, he would be right in one thing—it would be peculiarly awkward for all those colleagues of his.

That was midsummer day 1977.

The world had been going on its increasingly odd way for a third of a century—since in '45, W.W.2.A. (World War Second Armistice) had begun. Tension for thirty years makes crisis turn into a kind of stasis. "Bomb! Bomb!" had gone the degenerative way of "Wolf!"

Besides, there had been changes—large political changes. All the old lot were gone. Of course the world was still stuck in that balance of power which was commonly called The Two Powers and The Hyphen. There was the U.S., the U.K., and the USSR. When someone once asked in Congress why The Hyphen was still called the United Kingdom, a wisecracker shot in that U.K. was really a contraction for "the Un-O.K." There was no doubt of it—the world had shrunk to two big balances with a diminishing rider-on-the-beam.

But there was bigger and less foreseen change than that. That which had been called the Russian Revolution had itself swayed uneasily on the beam. Should it go West or East? Finally the Russian tendency won—the deep racial tendency to go Tartar, to go East. The great Moscow ascendency passed very quickly after Stalin's death. The Greek Orthodox Church canonized him as St. Joseph of Moscow, and Moscow followed the fate of all Holy Cities. Actual administration had increasingly moved East.

Just as had happened to the earlier world empire—when Rome had to make a New Rome and then abdicate to it—so now the administrative center had shifted away, back to the site of Ghenghis' world capital, Karakorum. Once the assimilation of China took place, then the center of population, industry, and business lay there. China, as usual, had swallowed those who rashly tried to get her into their clutches. Finally that astute Commissar, Yang Chin, ruled that Moscow had become a place of too sacred memories to be defiled by business and the Russians were too mystically gifted a race to be involved in politics. Just as England used to get rid of individual politicians who were in the way by "kicking them upstairs"—making them peers—so, as became the new order that thought no longer in individuals but in classes, the New Commissar of Commissars, as he chose to be entitled, elevated the whole of the Russians to Ritual Rank—the highest rank, the one that performed all the ceremonies. The rank below, naturally, did all the hard work—the actual running of the machine.

It seemed that these internal shifts were going to keep the huge land-mass empire outwardly quiet. Most people wanted good auguries, so they claimed this change was one. "A Chinese," they told each other, "never likes war. We'll have

peace for a long while now, you mark my words." And their words appeared to have been accurate.

But Washington—or rather the tip of it—was not really easy. On that tip now sat President Place. He had many points that recommended him. Firstly, his name. It had given him the first three terms largely through the great success of three slogans—"Place the Irreplaceable," "Place him again," and that fine starter, "Make Place for the People, Give Place to the People." Secondly, there was his size. He was a mammoth of a man. His hands were bigger even than George Washington's, he was taller than Lincoln, he weighed more than Taft. "The biggest President ever." That told too.

Thirdly, behind the bulk and the bellow, the rampart and the roar—for he could shout down anyone—behind that vast build-up of eloquence and adiposity, in which it seemed so obvious there could be nothing more than a balloon of bluffness, there was a curiously observant mind. He certainly was not as simple as he looked—that was his first line of defense. His sudden assaults of frank man-to-man openness, which proved often so disconcerting to the clever, were uncommonly well-timed. After a while it was noted that he never let anyone else put over that kind of thing on him. It was he always who brought down that great sirloin of a hand and wrist on the shoulder of the other disputant, patted him almost to his knees, and bellowing that they really agreed, pushed him out of the room.

His fourth strong point—as one scaled this Gulliver Giant—lay in his throat. He had vocal cords to equal all his other outsize dimensions, and he certainly knew how to handle them. In his first campaign his voice had been called "The Diapason of Democracy." The title stuck. And he certainly could do such things with the diaphragms of every democrat throughout the world that he soon earned himself another title, "The Spokesman of the Western Hemisphere."

When you reached his head—if you got so far—you found the clue to these apparent contraries. It's hard to look a man square in the eyes who naturally looks clean over the top of your head and when he does look at you must look down. But if you did you were repaid. The head was huge—no tailing off at the top. The eyes were deepset, so you scarcely guessed how little they missed. But suddenly they would open and then they were more imperative than the voice. It used to be remarked, "If he roars, you obey. If he glares, you go."

But the real power lay back in that huge head. Everything interested him. That was why he had become the Head. Specialists found they could come to him and some-

how he'd understand—far better than their colleagues. He wasn't a specialist but better than any of them he could always see what they were driving at. And so he could link them up. Further, he'd see where their high-magnification finds would be tending.

Yes, the people had once again shown their profound horse sense. They had chosen a mountain of a mount whose head saw much farther than either the specialist or the man in the street would ever see. And crowning all these inner advantages was the fact that in spite of his high scoring, no one could believe that it wasn't after all just luck. People couldn't help feeling that a man as large as that couldn't be as shrewd as he was big.

Yes, he certainly didn't look like a vigilant man. That no doubt was the reason why he had so seldom been caught napping. Naturally, then, his adversaries, all around the globe, were seldom out of his mind.

Some three months after Skelton's failure to interest his marine colleagues, Place the Irreplaceable was waiting in his White House room for the Chief of Staff. He had been away on a courtesy mission which covered inevitably a secret inquiry. The mission was to carry congratulations to the Commissar of Commissars on his unanimous election to preside for another Five Years of Plan. The inquiry was to find out if there could be any truth in one of those maddeningly ambiguous reports that secret service agents of the highest standing delight in sending to their superiors. Such reports are like the pronouncements of the Delphic oracle: they may be just to fill the time and show that you are worth your fee; or they may be ways of tying up a message so that only your own chiefs can see the point.

If Place and Chief of Staff Chase were right, this message was the latter. But if so, it was unusually urgent, and confirmation must be had as quickly as possible. The only way—and it seemed providential—was for the Chief of Staff, since he must go with the congratulations, to go himself as a secret service agent.

The C. of S. was late. It was no use trying to learn what a plane was doing once it was over the territories of the USSR, an empire that now stretched from Bangkok to the Rhine Basin. While Place waited, his secretary came in. "There's no news of the plane yet," she reported. "You have a few minutes?"

"What do you want me to do?" He questioned as he slowly spun his huge bulk in its special revolving chair.

"Well, he's a relation of my sister's—a tidal expert—and he's worried me. I've looked him up and he evidently is a good man at his job. Seems to me that it's just because he may have found out some-

thing a little too startling that maybe his colleagues won't listen to him. And he's quite certain now that nobody but you would, and that you'd understand if he could see you for only five minutes, and that now you and you alone should know."

Irreplaceable Place who had replaced quite enough experts and specialists by others who proved to be just as good, had a particular respect for the breed who gets alarmed at apparent trifles. For the moment too he had nothing to do. He had to wait and he hated waiting. Also, his secretary wanted it.

"You say he's a tidal expert?"

"Yes, he's from that biggest and newest setup on the Atlantic Coast."

"All right, but only five minutes to the tick. If he can't interest me by then, out he goes."

As Skelton entered, he was met with, "You've got exactly three hundred seconds. Can you make it?"

"I've got it all in three charts." Skelton had been a teacher before he took up pure research. He knew how to catch attention, if given a chance. On the table in front of the President he dealt his papers like a card dealer, saying as he spread the sequence, "The Tables of coordinate tidal records." "The sequences of maxima," "The graph curve plotted to show the angle of acceleration."

Place was used to complicated documents. He grunted at Number One, said "Um" to Number Two. At Number Three he began to tap his lower teeth with his thumbnail—an infallible sign that he was interested.

"Why haven't we all heard of this before?"

Skelton was ready for that. "I was puzzled too. The effect is showing most down at our place where we have better instruments. But before trying to see you I visited a number of other marine Labs. The effect can be traced in their tables—not so clearly, but it's already appearing. But, as there's no explanation, no one wants to take notice of it till they know the cause."

Place threw himself back in his chair. "I could, of course, hand you over to another expert who'd completely discredit you. But I won't. What you show here may fit in with something else. I wonder . . . there—the three-hundredth second's gone. Off you go—no, not out that way—into that small room over there. Shut the door and wait. I think I'll be wanting you after all."

As the door closed behind Skelton, Place heard the handle of the room's principal door turn. Quickly, for a man of his size, he turned the charts over on their faces and turned his own to the main door. His secretary entered.

"He's in," she said. "And he'll be over in a few minutes. What

have you done with Dr. Skelton?"

"I've told him to wait. Now give me all the papers I'll need for General Chase."

They went through them together and he spread them on top of the charts. Five minutes later the secretary ushered in a tall man with the appearance of a rather kindly attorney. He took the chair beside Place's desk.

"Was there anything in it?"

"I've already had the microphotos developed and enlarged."

"You got some shots? But do they show anything?"

For answer the Chief of Staff took an envelope from his wallet pocket and picked out some strips of serial photos. The President looked at them.

"Yes, you've certainly got something there. That's pretty big building. But surely it wasn't building that you were snooping for. The USSR's always building. Mongolian, I call it—Big Wall and all that nonsense."

"We used to be fond of a bit of building ourselves once." Chase smiled.

"Adolescent ambition: now we want not big dumps but big men. How did you get them and why did you choose just these?"

"The first answer will tell you the second. Everything went according to plan. There was the prepared breakdown of the stratoplane. Even the pilot didn't know we'd arranged that. There was the planned providentialism that a little old three-hundred-and-fifty-an-hour plane was waiting for repairs at Cologne. I cabled I could just make it if I flew in that little old plane directly to Karakorum where His Mongolian Majesty was about to be inaugurated.

"Of course I was met at the Rhine by the high-up spy whom Yang had specially sent to me for my outward honor and my inner inspection. He came, as his rank required, with two attendants. So he had me and my two aides under constant surveillance. We went straight ahead and nothing was done to distract our attention from the outlook—scenery's very pleasant from seven thousand feet—we hardly ever see it now.

"But when we were approaching the Urals I noticed my host was getting ready for something. He and his attendants unpacked not only some light refreshments but also were laying out some kind of show for us. He then came over to my seat and asked if I and my aides would not like to look at the actual models of the big inaugural pageant which he had brought with him to beguile the tedium of the ride. He told us that no one had seen them outside his office save, of course, the Supreme Commissar.

"He got out a folding table from his baggage, gathered us round, and he and his two assistants set up the models—pretty little things, they certainly have a gift

for that sort of thing—and made this miniature marionette show go through all its dance steps. He explained that lighting would play a great part and fussed about to get it just right, finally saying that the daylight spoiled the effect. So he pulled down the shades on the plane windows and rigged up miniature flood-lighting.

"Oh, he took a lot of trouble to please us, so much that the moment he called us into that little huddle I knew he wanted us away from the windows. So, as I had welcomed his offer to display his ingenious little preview, I hung up the fountain pen with which I had been writing till that moment on the little sling that is by each window in that type of plane for one's book, paper, or what-have you. Of course, these photos come from that pen. It's a neat little gadget and it was quite easy to hang it so that it was able to go on taking microfilm every five minutes all the time that our obliging escort was keeping us away from the windows. The pen hung very neatly, so it could squint at the landscape through the fine line between the shade and the window jamb."

"Excellent, Chase. But granted these are things they didn't want us to see, do you know what they mean?"

"No. But I agree with you that they may possibly link up with the S.S. report. First, look at these."

Chase brought out some maps.

"This is the district of Russia we were then flying over. These green crosses show where each photo was taken. Notice this fairly straight red line—it wavers but goes across country fairly well—linking up the green crosses. Notice also that a couple of big rivers flow down and cut across the red line. The red line is the hundred-foot contour line. Where those two big rivers cross the red contour line are two of the largest building projects shown in all the photos."

Place scratched his head. "And at first I thought they were some big power development! Now I get it!"

"Mr. President, here's the only link I see. The secret report merely said—because Spy L55 B2 holds a chair at Karakorum he naturally can't report in person or send obvious messages—coastline, contour, changes; and those clues had to be spread through many messages so it took us some time to be sure."

"Yes, yes, I know all that," the President said impatiently. There was silence for about a minute, broken only by the sound of the President's thumbnail tapping his teeth. Then his mouth opened wide and from it came quietly, but with the greatest conviction, the single word, "Gosh!"

President Place heaved himself up and ambled over to the small door.

"Yes," he said. "It's worthy of Yang. A very neat use of giant

power. There's no doubt he's nearly ready for his grand slam."

He threw open the small door and beckoned.

"Dr. Skelton, I want you to meet General Chase."

While the two were shaking hands the President unearthed the charts, arranged them neatly with the map sections, and under them he put the photo strips.

"Now, gentlemen, I have my exhibit ready. Dr. Skelton, I'm sure these will click in your mind. When you have grasped their full significance, as I now understand it, please explain to the General."

Skelton was almost as quick as the President, for here was the cause of his puzzling phenomenon. After all three had been bent over the papers for some minutes, the scientist and the soldier straightened up and looked at the politician. The huge executive was back in his chair.

"I see now," said Chase, his features taut. "But what are you going to do about it?"

"There's only one thing to do. At least, until I've done that I can't do anything else, and it might work. I believe, you know, in frontal attacks of frankness."

"What do you mean?" both men asked.

"Send for the Secretary of State, Chase. No, get him on the phone for me. Dr. Skelton, you stay here. Frankness begins at home. I'm going to call this—this bluff—if it is a bluff. But we can at least find out and then—well, we'll see."

As soon as the Secretary of State was on the line, the President told him to come over, but added, "Before you do, leave instructions that a television long-distance conference setup be sent along here at once. At once. It must get here as soon as you do."

The urgency in his voice told. The Secretary of State and the specialists who geared the plant for T.1-d.C's turned up almost together. The Secretary of State sent through his diplomatic code beam-message requesting a conference immediately with the Commissar of Foreign Affairs. In five minutes they were talking.

"Would it be possible for the Supreme Commissar to speak with the President of the United States?"

Another five minutes brought the answer: Yes.

The screens were set, the President with the Secretary of State standing behind him, were grouped in their little apse of beams. It was rather like the staging of an old family photograph a century earlier. The two men faced a little semicircular alcove of gray-gleaming, glasslike metal exactly similar to that in which they themselves stood. This curved dull mirror as they watched it—it looked like a half section of a giant tube—began to gradually became as bright as the niche in which they stood.

Through its vibrating glow fig-

ures began to glimmer and waver; then they became steady, colored, stereoscopic. They were as though alive and moving in the room and their voices as clear. Yes, it was Yang in his plain blue silk robe, and beside him his Commissar of Foreign Affairs.

Place bowed. The Secretary of State made the formal introduction. Yang bowed and in perfect English, though with something of that archaic accent once called Oxford, remarked on the pleasure it gave him to see the President in such good health.

Place countered by hoping that the Commissar of Commissars was in equal health and that the strain of the continued duties to which he had again been called would not tax his energy. Yang smiled and bowed again. Then, without a moment's warning, Place showed his hand.

"I am appealing to you as the world's most powerful man." Yang did not smile; he inclined his head a little and showed he would listen. "I am not going to say anything about what I don't know," continued the President. "I'm not interested in theories and surely I don't want suspicions."

Again Yang bowed but as he bent his head he kept his eyes on the face of the fat man who from the other side of the earth was trying to get at him. "But," the President went on, "there are some big world facts, facts of climate, that concern us all—desperately, if they go wrong. I'm asking for cooperation in fact finding. We're all on this globe together."

Yang's eyelids drooped for a minute. He looked then like those photos which showed him seated receiving the congratulations of the endless Committees of Soviets on St. Joseph's Day. Place realized that he must cut to the center at once.

"We fear—that is, our tidal experts fear—that something on a vast scale may have shifted, gone wrong, and the center of the disturbance may be in your districts."

The President stopped. Yang raised his head. "Did you want to ask anything further?"

"Yes, we want to ask that we get together on this thing and help each other. As I've said, we're on one planet which is more than three-fifths covered by sea. It's our common concern if we are going to lose much more land to the sea—it's our common concern because we are all land-dwelling animals."

Place smiled. Yang's mongolian features palely reflected a shadow of humor or perhaps of courtesy. Then he was grave, obviously grave. He paused and remarked slowly, "It is kind of you to come so quickly to our assistance, on what must have been no more than a rumor. But I will repay generosity with frankness. Yes, we have met with—not a disaster but a reverse—a miscalculation which may exact a greater cost for ulti-

mate gain than we had estimated. One of our most hopeful experiments, undertaken for mankind at large—a global enterprise—has had consequences that some of our experts did not anticipate. On us will fall the weight of the cost.

"This great discovery was to have been given to the world at the next Inaugural—at which I have once more the honor to preside—instead of which it will have to be another challenge to face crisis. But we are brave. We will face our losses and as the old literature used to say, 'Casting our bread upon the waters and sowing in tears we shall reap in joy, for after many days we shall find a new harvest.' We do not therefore ask you to help. We ask only for your sympathy. And your ready inquiry at the first breath of rumor shows that we have that."

Yang rose, bowed, gave a signal with his hand, and the images of himself and his Commissar wavered, became iridescent round the edges, and suddenly on the coving of gray glass there was nothing.

"Can you beat it?" It was the President's voice. "Switch us off," he called. "But can you beat it? Glad of our sympathy; touched by our rushing to his aid. Chase, we're out-of-date. This is the new war. This makes war obsolete."

"Mr. President," it was the Secretary of State speaking, "please understand that I don't understand all of this. What has happened? The Secret Service report and the return of the Chief of Staff—surely there is no need of such precipitancy! If war is obsolete, diplomacy becomes even more essential."

"Did y'ever hear, 'Time and tide wait for no man'?" Place cut in, "That's what we're up against. Did y'ever hear another old wisecrack, 'Between the Devil and the deep sea'—well, that again describes just where we've been put. Chase, show'm those maps and charts. I must think and think fast. The frontal attack of frankness has failed, been jiujitsued by that mealy-mouthed Mongolian."

The silence was disturbed only by the shuffling sound of the charts and maps as Chase and the Secretary of State handled them. Staccato on this whisper came the tapping of the President's thumbnail on his teeth.

"But, Mr. President," the Secretary of State had turned to the large man filling the chair, "if this preposterous evidence and these three reports mean the same thing—the tidal records, the building preparations on the one-hundred-foot contour line, and the Supreme Commissar's statement—even then we must be circumspect. Why rush to such wild conclusions?

"Granted there has been an unparalleled miscalculation by the USSR experts; that may only mean a vast dislocation, perhaps a disaster for *them*. Don't you see, they will be the first to suffer? Diplomacy

doesn't make a man an idealist but it does teach him that men act in the light of their own obvious interests! Why should this master of half the world cut off his nose in the hopes that we shall have an attack of sneezing?"

"That's stuff for the papers. Look at those maps again."

"Well, it's clear he'll lose first and lose more heavily."

"Surely you know your Yang by now? Do I have to remind you that our dear yellow brother doesn't like Russians any more than he likes Americans? Don't you see that he's going to kill a whole covey of birds, drown a whole flock of geese with one flush? Of course he'll inundate a great deal of Russia, and holy Leningrad will go under the sea where he's long wanted it, and the Moscow river will swallow up the corpses of the two Founding Fathers he's so anxious to have forgotten. And the USSR will be turned permanently East—by literally sinking the West! Cortez burned his ships and so conquered Mexico. Yang drowns his bridge to the West and so Orientalizes Communism."

"You mean—"

"Do I have to cross the t and dot the i in 'Inundation'? Sure, its got a large but neat inevitability about it! Armies, Chase? Why, Pharaoh found himself up against this when he chased Moses into the Red Sea. Armies! Why, they're now no more use than Lewis Carroll's 'Seven Maids with Seven Mops' trying to sweep out the tide. That's exactly it! Can't you get the hang of it? Why, everyone heard of the possibility thirty years and more ago. Don't you see, *he's succeeded in using atomic energy to melt all the frozen tundra and he's well across the Arctic Ocean by now!* Isn't he, Skelton?"

Skelton nodded.

"And as gently as a mother rocking her child to sleep, he'll drown Leningrad—good for him—London, better—New York, best—yes, and swamp this little burg. Perhaps the Capital Dome will stick out like the Ark on Ararat, but more likely than not, fishes will be breeding in the cornices of this very room. Oh, it won't be the sudden rush of a monster tidal wave"—again he looked across to Skelton who nodded—"it will be quiet as a summer dawn. We'll have time—*time to do nothing!* For nothing can be done to stop it. All we can do is to get ready to bear Yang's brotherly 'Be brave, how I sympathize, I've been through it myself!'

"Where's Diplomacy now? Sunk—with Chivalry. What's the use of sending an army and bombing the USSR cities? Will that stop the tide coming in and continuing to rise? Now that it's started it goes on by itself, this giant melt, like a house once it's well lit continues to burn after the firebug has cleared off."

To the Secretary of State's pro-

test Skelton added, "The President's right. Everyone interested in geophysics has known that. If you once start the melt—and once you had the atom open you could—then you'd upset the cold balance at the Poles. It's simply a hangover of the last Ice Age. Once those packs of ice, and the snow that throws the heat back into the sky, are both melted they won't reform. Yes, we are headed for a warmer and damper place than ever we thought we'd see this side of the grave."

"And we've just got to wait"—it was the President again. "That's what gets me! Oh, yes, we can spend our time becoming the most unpopular President that ever was, in telling people that nothing can be done. Nowadays that damns an Executive. He's got to say he could do something about a total eclipse if the people say they wish it put off. I'm in a tighter jam than even the last Depression President. We can spend our remaining spell of office moving population to higher land. Go west, young man, go and sit above the one-hundred-foot contour line and then the one-hundred-and-fifty perhaps, and always be ready to move up still a little higher. Hitch your wagon to a star or at least your pants up to your neck! But I can't guarantee when you'll ever be able to sit down again!

"We'll end like one of those pictures of the Deluge out of the old illustrated Bibles, all that remains of us huddled along the foothills of mountains, looking across the new ocean that once was the plains of the United States. And the USSR will be sitting comfortably on the bracing heights of the tablelands of Tibet and China. That's precisely right, isn't it, Skelton?"

"Yes, sir."

"But. Mr. President"—it was the Secretary of State still holding onto his Mid-Twentieth Century common sense. "I still can't see that on such a wild gamble Yang could really hope to win—"

"Well, if you will live in the past, go read history. In the dear old days revolutionaries never minded sinking *half* their own lot if they could drown *all* the other side."

That, though, brought up the Chief of Staff in support of the Chief Diplomat. "It's a matter of terrain, Mr. President, and as a soldier I don't see that the one-hundred-foot or even the one-hundred-and-fifty-foot depth need sink us so deep as to make all that difference. At the worst we'll stabilize there. And then we'll be able to talk turkey — trained free men against a flock of frightened and driven slaves. Human nature hasn't changed—the old laws of war won't melt just because the ground is a bit wetter. We'll win!"

The President wheeled on him, but the slam was a kindly one. "You soldiers! Of course you can't surrender. Well, I guess you wouldn't to any man—I give you

that. But try to be a modern for a moment. You're no longer up against Yang. You're up against a power that no one has yet beaten —Nature. Nature knocked off its balance and determined to sit down again. Except that now we are in its way! That's all. Yang doesn't count. Get him out of your mind. He was simply the trigger, the blind rat that bored the dike. Only a fool wastes his last precious moments trying to bludgeon the vermin once the water's coming through."

"But it will reach its level, and then—"

"That's what people were saying when the first shower fell after Noah had closed the Ark! You think a President is simply a man who has the first ringside seat at the political circus to watch the interminable act called, 'Which way will the cat jump?' That was, maybe, but now it isn't. President now means the man who sits in front. D'you suppose I'd have tumbled to this ahead of all of you if the bare notion hadn't ever crossed my mind before? Do you suppose a man who has to, and likes"—he shot a sudden grin across to Skelton—"to listen to experts, never puts all their twos and twos together and never gets some very odd and big answers in consequence!

"Well, I'll tell you what this has confirmed for me—it's the confirmation of two big beliefs that have been forming in my mind for some time. But now they're no longer beliefs, they're facts. First: armies are gone! Oh, yes, we still have terrain, we still can maneuver on it. But," and his voice rose, "now we march, wheel, and deal in the vastest game of strategy man has ever played—and we play it with entirely mobilized peoples. And we play it against—Nature itself! We, a land animal, and incurable air breather, play it against wholesale drowning. No wonder history begins with the story of man's fight with a world-drowning flood! This is the real ordeal, not by battle—that was a mere interlude—but the early first form, by water.

"Yang, like an old wizard—see how the last science and the first myth have at last met—has challenged us to a trial of skills, of magics, and the loser is to be swept off the face of the land, sunk for good and all. You're still hoping that the Deluge will be only a demi-deluge. I'm not. I know better. No, I'm not going to be deluded by a vain hope. I've told you, I've seen two of my most secret and awkward beliefs come true. I've told you one—that armies are gone. They're no more use than human sacrifice so far as changing events are concerned.

"Now I'll tell you the second—why armies will never have a chance again, why we'll never get a chance to get our second breath —why, in fact, Yang chose to do this, to put us at this hour on this

spot. Why, because he's calculated that *he's* got the terrain! He'll lose, of course—prodigiously. And you'll concede that he won't care so long as we lose *more*. And here I'm on his side, so far as reckoning goes. He's right. A President, if he's a real one, spends quite as much time with maps as with men. Maps, proper maps, are just the other side of the man problem. Here, look at these, here in my desk drawer—"

And he whisked open a wide, shallow drawer and drew out a layer of colored maps. "These show heights. That great span of brown is the huge area of Tibet stretching away to the Pamirs and the Samarkand region and out over to the Gobi and Central China and upper Burma. That's the one great tableland of the world. The Pivot of the world, don't geologists and geophysicists call it?"

"Yes, sir," confirmed Skelton.

"Incidentally, it holds up no-one-knows-how-much water locked as ice, and when melted off it will be one of the richest areas in the whole earth. So you see, Yang has huge areas to move onto and fresh waters to release, waters that will flow of themselves as the temperature rises when the Arctic is thawed—he won't even have to waste another atom bomb on his own highlands.

"Secondly, not only has he the highland of the world and we the low, but I've studied what happens when water really gets going. Of course, if the water alone had to mount, perhaps it wouldn't go above the one-hundred-and-fifty-foot line. But that's not the way things actually work in this delicately balanced world of ours, that seems so solid. Why, there's situations in which even my featherweight might make a difference! When I was looking after some big coastal reclamation jobs — in my first Cabinet post — I saw the readings. When quite a shallow tide comes into a channel, the sea floor actually sinks under the weight—isn't that so?"

"Yes, the effect was first measured on the floor of the English Channel," the expert confirmed.

"When the tide comes in for good, the ground cooperates—for good. It founders, just like a ship. Mark me, we're in for a real subsidence, to match the actual inundation. The two'll play into each others' hands. The Ministers'll say: the Earth is washing her hands of us. Perhaps they're right. We're certainly none too clean a lot." Then he roused himself. "Well, here's my message—decode it if you can: I'm Bulling the Ocean and Bearing the Land, in this biggest gamble in all history!"

There was a grim silence. Then General Chase pointed to one of the maps. "But if you're right and the seas' appetite will grow with land eating, won't Yang's new harbors, as shown on these photos of mine, go under too?"

"He has probably calculated on that too! Cold-blooded brute, he wouldn't care! For all we can see, these may be simply sham buildings to make Yang's people feel safe, until they too founder with everyone else under the two-hundred, three-hundred, or four-hundred-foot line, while himself and his hordes enjoy the increasingly salubrious uplands of Tibet and its wide outskirts. For one thing is plain: every inch that the water mounts over us leaves *him* ten miles or more of ice and snowfield nicely thawed out and henceforward blossoming under a mild and friendly sky!"

They turned to Skelton.

"True enough," Skelton nodded, "there'll probably be no more snow in the world's middle regions for good. Every glacier will gush down floods, every snowpeak shoot down its ice sheet into the puddle *we'll* be in. Yes, the climate for those who can keep their heads above water is most promising!"

The Secretary of State was no longer protesting. He mopped his forehead, saying over and over, "And *no* way out!"

"We're driven in, wings and center!" echoed the General.

But that last phrase somehow roused the Big Man.

"What are you saying?" he questioned in an almost absent-minded way. Evidently something had been started in his mind. They waited but all they could hear him saying, and evidently to himself, was: "Wings Center." Then suddenly he lit up. "You said Wings and Center, didn't you?"

He had turned to Chase who had nodded puzzled.

"Doesn't that make you recall something? Don't you remember hearing of that as a boy? Don't you know that because of that, when we all had our backs to the wall in the first world war, we decided to make one man have one chance to pull us out? And it was because he had said just that!"

"I remember what you're recalling," said Chase. "It's the phrase, isn't it, 'My left wing is driven in, my right wing is driven back, my center can't hold—I advance!' "

"That's it. Don't you see?"

The other three, Skelton included, looked blank, even dismayed. Had optimism made this big man incapable even of acknowledging defeat by Nature itself? But his next remark was cool enough. "True, it came to me in a flash. I'm not saying there is a way out. But I am saying that there could be a way *on*—If we have the nerve. If the people will follow a really daring lead. I mean something can be done and by all the Founding Fathers, I'm not going to stand on this sinking land and just let the people founder! Something *can* be done and I'll do it!"

He was speaking with command. They gathered round. He was now quite the coolest of the foursome.

He took a large sheet of blank paper and spread it on the desk. He picked up two pencils—one with red lead, the second with green. The other three gathered round the huge man, who quickly sketched a rough-outline map of the world. Then he drew in heavy, wavy lines of color. The silence showed the degree of attention he had aroused.

Then the President spoke. "The green lines show the coastline as it will be when the present melt has all flowed out into the oceans; and the red lines show—well, the other possibility. Am I correct, Dr. Skelton?"

"Mr. President, I couldn't chart a more accurate prognosis myself."

The other two turned to the big man in the chair. "But you can't! You mustn't! It's absolutely out of the question!"

"Can't! That from a soldier! Mustn't! From a diplomat!" The President was in full bellow. "I tell you, there's just one thing I can't and won't do, and that's to tell the people I can't do anything! I'm Irreplaceable because in every jam I have done *something!* Gosh, don't any of you yet know the ABC of politics? I've got a chance to do something—to put the initiative back into the hands of the U.S. And by hell and high water I'm going to do it! And my last word is this—my p.s. to the code message I gave you a moment back: by and large I'm still Bearing the Land, but now I'm betting Yang will get a new ocean and I'll get a new land!"

He gave them a moment, sitting back in his chair glaring up at them. Yes, he was right, he knew; the man who has something to suggest, a line to take, however wild that line, always wins against those who say you can only knuckle down under it.

"Skelton," he called. "sit down on the other side of this desk and figure out what force it would need. You can, can't you?"

"Yes, that's pretty simple. The rough figure's been known for quite a long time both for the power needed and the mass to be reduced. Just give me a few minutes."

Place handed him all the charts. The others waited, standing on each side of Place's chair. The tap of Skelton's pencil on one side of the desk and of the President's thumbnail on the other made a pair of miniature tattoos.

In a few minutes Skelton handed a sheet of paper over the desk. Place looked at it and then passed it over to the Chief of Staff, saying, "There're your instructions. Figure out at once how many you'll need—and don't spare the planes. Have 'em posted with sealed orders and a Zero hour for taking off when I give the signal."

His ascendency was now complete. General Chase bowed.

"Ring me up as soon as you are

ready," and the President nodded him toward the door, then turning to the Secretary of State, said, "Get the Ambassadors together at once —here. I'm going to give 'em a conference—one for the books, the history books. Be as quick as Chase."

When the Secretary of State was gone, Place disposed of his third guest. "Thanks," he said. "Your visit was worth three hundred seconds. Now all you have to do is to keep your mouth shut and forget you were ever here. My secretary will get you out." He buzzed for her, and handed over Skelton.

"So that's the great man," thought the bewildered researcher as the private elevator sank him to ground-floor level. "As long as he can do something, he's just as gay as a bird."

Left alone, the President yawned, looked down on his huge bulk, remarked in a whisper, "Weight must be still going up," then with a chuckle, "Well, the fatter you are the better you float." Then he swung himself forward, took a pencil, and began to jot down notes. A few moments later, with his head on one side, he spoke over a passage or two, nodded, again muttering to himself, "Can't see it's worse than the Gettysburg Address. Place, my boy, you may sink physically but you're up for a high place in history—Time's ever-rolling tide will have to roll quite a bit before it'll drown you!" He smiled and when the desk phone buzzed, he said in high spirits, "Let 'em all come!"

Shortly after, the Secretary of State appeared, the first of their Excellencies began to report. Place had chairs ready for them. It would be quite a meeting. Evidently they had sensed something big was afoot. All the chairs filled rapidly. Place had told the Secretary of State to make an urgent appeal for their presence.

Now the Secretary of State rose and told the meeting that the President had called them because he wished to confide information which concerned them as much as himself. It was regrettable that the Ambassador of the USSR could not be present—he had just been called home. "But we have a quorum," the Secretary smiled, and sat down.

Certainly the President's address interested them. So much so that probably the peroration, which to him was the part he prized most, they hardly remembered when they got outside. Even their own phrases, in which they had tried with diplomatic correctitude to hide their reactions, now seemed hardly worth putting in their diaries-for-memoirs, But they were quite good in their way and characteristic. The British Ambassador was, of course, called on first, since he was the Hyphen leading to the rest. Lord Blasket at the moment thought he was doing pretty well with, "Well, Britannia's always

ruled the waves and by George, now she'll do it in earnest."

The Italian confessed that he wished he had someone more worthy to speak on such a theme: "Ah," he said, "if only now we could hear Savonarola himself! What a sermon the dread Fratre of San Marco would give us on his favorite text, then directed only against the French." He looked lightly at his Gallic colleague, " 'Behold I bring a flood of waters on the earth!' "

It was a good enough *bon mot.* But the *mot juste* belonged, of right, to the Frenchman. "Gentlemen, we have lived to surpass the Bourbons. After all, the famous phrase of Louis Quinze was mainly a phrase of inflation. But now we shall put real water into *Apres moi, le deluge.*"

When the Secretary of State had ushered them out to make their reports to their Governments he came back for a moment with his Chief.

"They took it quietly."

"Well, there's time. People'll get used to anything, if you give 'em time and something to do in the spell between. I've given them the time-table for the upper line I drew on the map. Europeans are getting used to being milled this way and dumped that way. It'll only be one more population shift."

Place, though, was restless and when his desk phone buzzed again, he took it hastily. "Yes, Chase? . . . Yes, everything's set here. Now give the Zero hour at nine P.M. tonight. Weather's all right at the farther objective? Good, good, just my luck again. And good enough in the other direction? Good, good—that's all." He hung up and turned to the Secretary of State. "Now get me a world-wide hookup and full network. I'll have what I want to say ready in twenty minutes. Isn't much to say. Just want to polish a period or two—this won't be forgotten readily. Better leave something worth writing into the record!"

If he had felt misgivings the cloud had gone, and already he was jotting down some fresh phrases as the Secretary of State left the room. He only stopped when the microphones and their attendants entered. The full TAV—Tel. Aud. Vis.—setup was deployed around him. The flashes had been going out for twenty minutes, calling to the world to *Listen, urgent! Listen, urgent! Washington has a key message. The President's going to speak to the world!*

Place's speech began: "Peoples of the earth, this is an earth proposition. I'm speaking not for one people but for all—for mankind. This isn't a time for comments. It's for information — not for rumor or recrimination, but for facts. I'm speaking to you right across frontiers, not because I'm President of the United States but because I know what you've got to know—

and right now. I'm speaking over all frontiers because the frontiers are going, are melting, are being sunk. The very geography you've known, that mankind's always known, is at this very moment being wiped off like old lines on a slate. We can't try to put things back—that's impossible. All that's gone for good. We can't look back—we've got to go on."

He then told the world briefly that the Arctic Sea icefield was melting, the huge Tundra of the Obi subarctic land mass had already been thawed. The tides would gradually inundate all the Atlantic seaboards for a depth of at least eighty feet and probably one hundred, and this would then spread into the Pacific. These new sea-level heights would remain, be permanent. Every country therefore would shrink and men must move gradually onto the higher land. Their present ports would all be submerged.

"The USSR," he went on, "has pointed the way. They have prepared against a rainy day. They have built fine harbors in what till now was far inland. We must do the same."

Up to this point he had spoken with the quietness of a man demonstrating a proposition about which there is no controversy. Now his tone changed.

"I have to report to you that, although we have been slow, now we have followed suit and I can assure you that we have made"—he paused—"a reply which puts us ahead once more. When I have ceased speaking, look at your maps. You are now involved in a world proposition and must think as Mankind, Unlimited—unlimited at least, in a common liability."

His voice became strident. "Look at your maps!" He picked up his own hand-drawn one, held it against him so that the world could see it on his chest. "Look: the USSR will have now a vast tableland on which to rest while you of the coastlines must flee and shelter on mere spines of countryside, standing out above interminable lagoons. I am determined, I have determined that this shall *not* happen. We will adjust, we have already adjusted, the balance of the old world in the new. *Our planes are already blasting the Greenland Ice Cap.*

"What does that mean? Why have I done that? It is the first phase of our answer. We have been challenged — challenged to see whether we, the free peoples, could stand the test, could endure the ordeal of facing the unleashed powers of nature. We were said to be soft. We were told that if we were really cornered, we would drown tamely like sunk rats.

"Well, we have taken up the challenge. We will not only go as far as we have been dared, we will go farther. The Greenland Ice Cap is six thousand feet thick and has

stored in it enough water to raise the sea level again, even beyond our challenger's calculations, and inundate even more of their lands and ours. For not only will all that subcontinent pile of ice come out into the seas in a new deluge—I am not using rhetoric, I am stating immediate fact—Greenland itself will rise. At present—but for only a little more—it lies bent, buckled, and sunk under its load of gargantuan iceberg. Lift that weight and inevitably it will rear itself up as the coast of Norway rose and is still rising from its ancient ice load, and as the Canadian ports on our own Great Lakes are getting shallower while Canada is still rising from the same cause and"—his voice deepened—"mark well the corollary: from the very same cause our American ports on the south shores of the Great Lakes are getting deeper.

"You see, my friends, not only is Greenland pouring a deluge to raise the ocean flood still higher, but as Greenland rears itself up, all these lands of ours to the south of Greenland will sink! Every plain of the world will be awash —but ours will founder deepest.

"So much for my first stroke. Have I not proved that we, the free peoples, when dared to show if we have courage, can snatch the initiative?"

He changed tone for an even deeper emphasis. "For, have no doubt of what I'm saying to you, we shall win because we know what we are doing; because we know, better than those who called for this showdown, what we are facing. *This is the end of man against man!* I know you are surprised at my saying that, but I know what I am saying.

"Our challenger has, I give him that, changed the whole story of man. We thought we were done with Nature and henceforward it —or He—would sit back and do no more than give us obediently the tools and arms we called for to beat each other down. Well, our materialistic friend has decided to call back Nature and to make the test, for us and for his side, which of us dares face that Power which he believes to be dead or blind and which I believe to be alive and all-seeing.

"Yes, the story has been changed, and it has been changed, I have a sure belief, in favor of those who have faith. Natural Selection is back again and that branch of the species shall survive which responds most creatively to the new conditions. That means, in short: which branch will now have the greater daring?—which branch has more faith that Nature, the Creative Power, offers a new vision to those who have the eye of faith. Crisis is the code word for opportunity. And on your behalf I have seized it."

He swung back into his swift narrative style. "I have bombed

Greenland and at this moment it is pouring out its piled-up frozen waters and is itself rising like new bread. But that is only a beginning —the first phase of my reply, just an earnest of our full intention."

All this while he had spoken so that his huge figure appeared to the hundreds of millions in their television sets framed on a square screen of pale gray. It made a fine background on which his every gesture told. But now, suddenly, he stood aside. He had put himself alongside the screen and like a huge caryatid, he framed one side of it while his huge arm and hand ran along the screen's top. With his fingers he pointed down at the empty area and called out, "Look!"

The screen began to darken but the room in which he stood darkened even more swiftly, until he stood in a twilight, a vast portal figure pointing them to attend. A moment later and the voice out of the still thicker dusk boomed, "Watch!"

At the top of the screen, now deeply twilit, appeared a small constellation of bright points which rapidly spread into a line. "That line," went on the voice, "is really a vast circle seen sideways. You are being shown by relayed television one of the greatest maneuvers ever executed. Now wait!"

There was a space of silence in which the moan of distant airplane motors could faintly be heard. Then for a moment sight made the hundreds of millions cease to listen. For they saw that the base of the screen had suddenly taken fire. A score of huge fountains of flame leaped up, bursting into great blossoms of incandescence. At the top of the screen the small dots of light rocked, whirled, and spun like sparks above a bonfire. The field of vision on the screen itself heaved and swung. A modulated roar came through all the sets and riding on that ground bass could be heard the President's voice as if giving speech to the thunder.

"You have just witnessed the greatest human act in history. You have seen the unveiling of a new continent, one that slept in ice until, for your sake and need, I have been permitted to call it to awake. You have been present visually at the baptism of fire whereby this new continent has become a living land. At this moment and in your presence I christen it the Homeland of all the Earth's Free Peoples, the cradle of a new and greater democracy, the capital of a civilization of Liberty and Brotherhood."

The apocalyptic vision on the screen rocked, whirled, and vanished. The lights rose again and his familiar friendly figure stood as before in front of the empty lit field. His tone was as friendly. "That mysterious land, the true Dark Continent, which you just saw coming to light—it has been awaiting this moment.

"Hidden under its vast load of ice it has been kept by Nature until at this hour He offers it, a new land, a new world, more new than America was to our Pilgrim Fathers. Today it is granted to those who are most free to dare, to believe—to us. At this moment I stand with you on a Pisgah, greater than that on which Moses stood, and you and I are looking out over a promised land infinitely richer, more promised and promising, than that he saw when he glimpsed Canaan.

"Our Jordan is the Ocean and the Ice, and already the Ark of Atomic Energy has gone forward in front of you and the ice flood that barred you from your new home of promise is rushing away from before your feet. Go up and possess it! There I shall move your capital. Already there are emerging mountains and noble valleys, fiords and tablelands. There are volcanic ranges pouring rich fertilizers on that already rich and unexploited soil. There lie minerals of all sorts and numberless radioactive lodes. And Heaven itself has cast upon it a blessing from above. For the mysterious cosmic radiation pours in most fully at the Poles and so on this, the one great polar land mass, now freed of ice, will come in that invisible light which alone can make plants and animals mutate and so give rise to endless new varieties, more fertile, more productive.

"There living will be far richer, and once the price has been paid and the great trek made, there life will be far happier and easier than man has ever known. That is your land, your home. That is the prize which I bring to you from this supercontest to which we have been called, to which we have replied, to which we have risen."

He paused for he knew the exact time to let such stunning news sink into men's minds, for them to see the way he was pointing. And when he judged, with his perfect sense of timing, that they were reacting and rising to the query point, he struck again.

"You say too-good-to-be-true. What about the Polar night? I promise you the ice will never reform. I promise you I would never have begun this thing. You now know, you now can judge, on whose shoulders that responsibility lies. This proud man, Yang—prouder than Xerxes, for Xerxes only strove to bind a small arm of the sea—this Super Shah has bid the Ocean itself rise from its bed, pass those shores where, as Scripture says, 'its proud waves shall be stayed, and inundate all the coasts of Earth, the ancient habitations of mankind.'

"But I have taken his bid, I have doubled the bid, I have outbid him! In this final auction of the continents I have made the winning bid, and to Yang is given only an Ocean, the Arctic ocean, which

he has made ravenous and which will gnaw at his coasts. While to us is given a new continent. His central uplands on which he counted for his own security are lost to him already. For now that the vast masses of Ice from Antarctica will add vastly to the Flood, the whole climate of this planet will change. Snow will become a myth. Instead there will be warm rains and fabulous fogs. Not, though, with us at our safe retreat. But for him his temperate zone areas—look at your maps—will be wrapped in perpetual fog and enervating steam.

"For there is going to rise round his earth's middle a tropic belt beyond anything the world has ever seen since the Age of the Saurians. It will girdle the world from Capricorn to Cancer. It will be an impenetrable jungle, a final wall between our paradise and his choice."

He counted ten slowly to himself in silence and then his amazing voice hit an even deeper register. "Therefore I now claim for you this New Land and lead you to this, the Path of Peace—you the free peoples for whom I, the President of the United States, stand as Trustee. And I now name this New Land the Territory of the United States—the central homeland of the democratic peoples of the Earth."

He paused to let his last statement achieve its full reaction, watching the small fluctuating green line in the liquid-filled disk-dial that showed, with its climbing miniature staircase, the piling up number of sets that were listening to him. Yes, he had the ear of half the world—his half of the world. So he swung vibrantly into his peroration.

"In the name of the Pilgrim Fathers I call upon you to rise and harness yourselves, to go forth on this new and greater pilgrimage. In the immortal words which henceforward will have a still higher overtone of triumph, I say —*Let us go forward in our great task that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*"

EDITORIAL NOTE: One of the objections to Mr. Heard's story when it first appeared was that it wasn't a detective story at all. We had anticipated the possibility of such a reaction and on the story's publication had tried to nip the criticism in the bud (unsuccessfully, we might say). Here are parts of what we wrote, half defense, half explanation, as long ago as 1947, and a few thoughts 22 years after:

If you are a purist who believes unalterably that a detective

story, to warrant that classification, must follow an inviolable pattern (crime, investigation, suspicion, and final denouement), if you measure a detective story only by strict formula, then Mr. Heard's story may not *seem* to qualify. But there is no reason why the detective story should be shackled by tradition or by the mere mechanics of technique: a fine craftsman should be privileged, even encouraged, to break *any* rule if by so doing he builds a better murder-trap. And that is what we thought (and still think) Mr. Heard did in 1947.

Mr. Heard placed his story 30 years in the future (1977). He asked readers to imagine that the people of this country will have matured sufficiently to elect as the President of the United States a man who is not only a politician but a trained scientist as well. Surely, in this technological age, that is not too much to ask of the imagination.

Once you have accepted this premise, the detective story is no longer the slave of arbitrary rules or even of established principles; it has wings; it soars; it is jet-propelled. Now we can see more clearly that Mr. Heard's story merely *extended* the old concepts. Is there a crime? Yes. True, it is no longer murder of an individual, or even mass murder on a small scale; it is the premeditated murder of—literally—millions of people. Even more than that, it is the murder of a nation—of a continent—of a civilization.

In the classic pattern the commission of a crime (or the threat of it) is followed by investigation. Does Mr. Heard's detective investigate? Again—yes. President Place uses his executive office as a superdetective agency. His operatives are not mere gumshoemen, circa 1947: they are highly placed, responsible officials of the government—the Chief of Staff, the Secretary of State, and other Cabinet members. The President himself is the active head of the agency: he senses the danger, mobilizes his forces, assigns investigations to his operatives, gathers the evidence, interprets the clues, deduces the nature of the crime, tightens the net of suspicion, pins the guilt on the "concealed" culprit, and finally takes those steps necessary to thwart the criminal.

Has a single element of pure detective-story technique been vio-

lated? Isn't the President of the United States a detective in an expanded sense of the original concept, a larger realization of that concept?

You say the story is still, after more than 20 years, science fiction rather than detective fiction? *Fiction!* The way the world is going? Who knows what the detective story will be 30 years from now? The credibility gap between science-fiction and science-reality has narrowed extraordinarily since 1947. Won't the criminological gap between detective-fiction and detective-reality narrow just as phenomenally? Could it be, as we said in the beginning, that Messrs. Heard and Queen were too far ahead of the times? Perhaps we'll know in 1977 ...

'Q'

NEXT MONTH . . .

Another INTERNATIONAL Issue

We plan to bring you stories from
the United States, England, Canada, France,
Italy, Austria, Russia, the Netherlands,
Africa, and South America
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Jerome L. Johnson's first story, "Start from Scratch," appeared in our November 1968 issue; it was the 324th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine—a remarkable record (if we say so ourselves) even for 28 years of uninterrupted publication.

Now we give you Mr. Johnson's "follow-through," his second story—about a hired assassin who loved baseball.

So, batter up—and hit Willie Shaw!

THE MAN WHO LOVED BASEBALL

by JEROME L. JOHNSON

THEY CALLED HIM ARM, THIS big ugly man who sat in the Florida sunshine and watched a dead man pitch baseball. He sat motionless, except to reach occasionally into a box of popcorn and shove with his broad hairy hand a morsel or two into a slit that occasionally opened to become a mouth. His small pale-blue eyes, wide-set above a nose that seemed to wander aimlessly over his pock-marked face, stared unblinkingly at the dead man.

For Willie Shaw, that lithe whip-armed young hero, was indeed a dead man, no matter from which angle Arm looked at it—and Arm, in his slow-witted, methodical way, had already given more than a week of his time to studying those angles.

The pitcher, working the middle innings of an exhibition game, was nearly in mid-season form. His motion was beautifully fluent, his fastball whistled, and his curve was snappy and sudden, dropping as if it rolled off the edge of a table. Arm, whose slow mind and empty eyes belied an astonishing expertise in two such diverse and exacting specialties as baseball and murder, could both appreciate and regret the athlete's obvious talents. It was, Arm decided, a damn shame.

Slowly—in Arm's mind there was no other way—he thought back through the two-week-old scene in Barney Schuller's thickly carpeted, teak-veneered office. He saw Barney—The Boss—half sitting on his gleaming desk, examining, of all things, the *Sporting News*. Cal Cramer, the heir apparent, was present, leaning against

his favorite wall with his arms folded. Both men wore neat, conservative business suits, and both had faces that were hard and impassive. Cramer, however, could not nearly match the chilling, inscrutable penetration of the narrow gray eyes that Barney raised from the sports tabloid.

"Cal laughed," he said, his tone crisp and his enunciation precise, "when I said I was going to bring you in for advice, Arm." A spark — amusement, perhaps — flicked briefly across those metallic eyes, but otherwise his wax-colored face remained immobile. "He thinks you're dumb, Arm. He thinks you got brains for nothing but putting holes in people. Right, Cal? Ain't that what you said?"

"That ain't what I said," muttered Cramer, whose dark young face was capable of producing a rather handsome sneer. "But I thought it."

"That's right," Barney said. "You thought it. But I'm going to show you something, Cal. I'm going to show you that this big stupid animal—no offense, Arm—has got a brain. True, it ain't *much* of a brain, and you'd have to saw that thick skull of his into about a million little pieces in order to find it. But it's there, Cal. I'll show you."

He leafed through the paper. "This thing here," he said, "predicts that a certain team will run away with the pennant this year. Which team, Arm?"

Arm, a little surprised at suddenly being included in the conversation, blinked once. "The Sox," he rasped in his husky voice.

"Very good," Barney said. He shot a glance at Cramer, who shrugged. "Now, Arm, another question. If you had to name a player—just one player, understand—that the Sox couldn't win the pennant without, who would it be?"

"Easy," said Arm. "Willie Shaw. Right-hander."

"Right-hander, eh? Very good." Another glance at Cramer. "See, Cal? That's where his brain is. Baseball. He lives it, Cal. He can't read much, but he gets through this thing every week, summer and winter." His forefinger thumped the copy of *Sporting News*. "How many times have you complained about that damn radio he carries around with him during the baseball season? Take a tip, Cal. You want an expert opinion, you call in an expert."

Cramer shrugged again.

"Arm," Barney said, turning back to the big man, "you can now rest your brain and get back to *your* kind of action. Hit Willie Shaw."

Those were the words. *Hit Willie Shaw.* Arm sat now in the tidy little ballpark on the Gulf coast, staring at Shaw across an expanse of green. Vaguely—and slowly, of course—it crossed his mind that, in another sense of the word, to

"hit" Willie Shaw was an ambition shared by many and succeeded in by few. In the area of his left armpit, however, Arm carried a weapon far more efficient than a Louisville Slugger. And he had the further advantage of being able to choose his own time and place, Barney having given him until the opening day of the season to carry out his assignment. Still, Arm had a problem: he did not *want* to hit Willie Shaw.

The dilemma was entirely new to him. After all his many years in the profession it was the first time that he had experienced either a liking or a disliking for an assignment. His life had been so simple, so lacking in drudgery and decision-making, as to be the envy of any disgruntled laborer or harassed businessman. Nowhere in Barney's organization was there a more loyal, more contented employee. After all, he did not have to work hard or often—even *his* limited arithmetical powers were sufficient to compute the number of hits he had made since 1953, when Barney first discovered that his huge muscleman was remarkably efficient with a gun.

Sad to say, Arm always performed his task without the slightest compunction. He was almost like a machine built expressly for the purpose of execution—a machine with a kind of memory bank for storing data essential for carrying out its function, and with an infallible sense of time and place. And, of course, with a heavy automatic that rarely missed its mark. He did not kill out of hate or anger, but only because it was his job. Barney wanted a hit? Okay, what's the victim's name and where does he hang out?

In one respect, however, Arm was disgracefully unmachinelike: he loved baseball, a game that can captivate certain selected hearts and souls as nothing else can. In his case the captivation had begun more than twenty years before, when he first came to the city and began to spend his idle hours watching the Sox play. By now, of course, he not only loved the game itself, with its grace and precision and orderly inning - by - inning mounting of tension, but he loved in particular *his* team, the Sox. And after all these years of fruitless pennant chasing this appeared to be *their* year. The key, as everyone knew, was Willie Shaw, whose September injury last year had kept the Sox from winning the flag the season before.

Hit Willie Shaw. Arm would much rather have slain his own mother—whoever and wherever she was.

"Strike three!"

The inning over, Arm put his binoculars on Shaw as the young pitcher came toward the dugout. Lean, broad-shouldered, and muscular; high-cheekboned face, with bright intelligent eyes that appeared

to be both good-humored and wary. To Arm the picture communicated a single message: kill him quickly and suddenly, for this man could be a dangerous prey.

Yes, kill him. He was, after all, a dead man from the moment Barney had given Arm the contract. Somewhere, in some high and influential place, there were great stakes — money, no doubt — riding against the Sox; and Barney Schuller's organization had the role of enforcer. Arm, in puzzling out the possibilities of Shaw's escaping his doom, had ultimately come to the conclusion that had really been obvious from the start: there was no escape.

His first notion, on leaving Barney's office that day, had been to refuse the assignment. But it would have been a futile gesture: Barney would certainly assign the contract to someone else; and Arm, despite his long and faithful tenure in the organization, could feel no certainty that his own name would not be on the contract.

He shook off his second thought —the idea of killing Barney Schuller—before he had driven half the distance to Florida. For one thing, killing The Boss struck him as a most unnatural act. For another, he knew very well that there was more to the organization than its chief, no matter how powerful that particular chief happened to be. It would be an act of suicide for Arm, and probably would not help Shaw.

There remained, he had decided, only one possible salvation for the pitcher: a tip to the police. They could not absolutely guarantee Shaw's life, but they would surely make it extremely hazardous for the organization to make an attempt on it. Unfortunately, that would spell Arm's own doom. There was not a place on earth, in or out of prison, where he would be safe from Barney Schuller. Furthermore, he would defeat his own purpose. He wanted to save Willie Shaw because he wanted the Sox to win a world championship, a wish that could hardly be gratified if Arm were hidden away in a cell or a grave . . .

The sparse but enthusiastic crowd was applauding. Arm, realizing that he had daydreamed through the home team's turn at bat, swung around to watch the new pitcher come in from the bullpen. Number 23. That would be Dave Simmons, who had shown considerable promise the year before. A little wild, maybe, but he had excellent stuff. Digging out his scorecard, Arm checked through the roster. There were, he noted, several young pitchers with impressive minor league credentials. Give them another year or two and—well, who knows?

Cheered somewhat by this speculation, Arm rose and went forth to plan a murder.

He had been observing Shaw's

living habits, of course, and had discovered that such a celebrity could not often be found alone. Lacking a better plan, therefore, he decided to lurk around the team's hotel for a few nights, watching for an opportunity. Surprisingly, this big ominous man could lurk with the best of them, usually preferring to park his car a considerable distance from his objective and observe the scene from beneath a broad-brimmed hat that did not shield his eyes quite as completely as it seemed to. He was in just such an unobtrusive pose when, after several fruitless nights, he suddenly saw his victim emerge from the hotel.

It was nearly curfew hour for the players. Arm, from his vantage point on a side street about a half block from the hotel entrance, watched attentively as Shaw, dressed in gray slacks and a powder-blue sports jacket, chatted amiably with several teammates who were sitting on the front steps. Arm could not pick up the conversation, but frequent roars of laughter told him that the players were probably chiding one another for their various misplays.

Shaw, who had not sat down, finally glanced at the watch on his left wrist, said something to the others, skipped down the steps, and began walking briskly down the street. Directly toward Arm. The other players, hollering something about the curfew, disappeared into the hotel.

Shaw, wearing soft-soled shoes, was approaching silently and rapidly. His face blended into the night as he left the day-bright lights of the hotel entrance behind him, but the blue sports jacket had a kind of phosphorescence that momentarily, while Shaw was between street lights, gave the appearance of a disembodied garment floating swiftly through space. A neon-lighted sign could not have been a better target.

Arm, guessing that the pitcher was out for a last turn around the block and would therefore make a right at the next corner, got out of his car and crossed the street. His right hand was buried in the side pocket of his jacket, and in his hand he clutched the heavy automatic.

Shaw was at the corner now, clearly visible under the street light. Now he was turning, walking quickly toward Arm, who stood in the mid-block shadows, on the grass between the curb and the sidewalk. Arm slid the weapon about halfway out of his pocket. Now was the time. Kill him quickly and suddenly. Now, damn it, *now!*

"Hi, Willie." Arm could hardly believe he had spoken.

Shaw spun around, startled. He saw the shadow of a big man standing motionless before him, his right hand buried in his pocket, his hulking shoulders slouched in a kind of hangdog attitude.

"Yes? What do you want?"

Arm, head down, scraped at the turf with his toe.

"I seen you pitch the other day, Willie," he said. "You was great."

Shaw, his bright eyes alert, took a long careful look at Arm.

"Thank you," he said.

One week later there was another memorable scene in Barney Schuller's office. Arm stood just inside the door, staring dumbly into the gray eyes of his boss, who this time was seated behind his highly polished desk. A watchful Cal Cramer stood against the wall.

"I don't get it, Arm," Barney was saying, his tone deceptively flat. "You never let me down before. How come you got to screw up *this* one?"

Arm did not reply.

"Baseball!" Cramer snorted. "He's so hung up on that damn baseball, that's why."

Barney studied Cramer a moment, then returned his gaze to Arm. "That right?" he asked. "Didn't have the heart to knock off one of your precious tin gods?"

"Yeah," Arm said, "I guess so."

There was a long tense silence in which neither man dropped his eyes nor even blinked them once.

"I still don't get it," Barney said finally. "Why did you come back, Arm? Or how come you didn't plug Cal and me as soon as you came into this office? Are you so dumb you thought you could cross me and get away with it?"

Arm said nothing.

"It was a dumb stunt," Barney went on, his voice taking on a sharper edge now. "What good did it do you? Shaw's a dead man. Even *you* ought to have brains enough to see that."

"No, he ain't," Arm rasped, reaching into his jacket pocket.

"Hold it!" Cramer snapped, leaping forward with a snub-nosed revolver in his hand.

Arm looked at him. "Okay," he said, "get it yourself."

Cramer, pointing the weapon at Arm with one hand, fished cautiously into the pocket with the other. The hand came out grasping a fat envelope.

"What the hell?" he muttered.

"Let's see it," Barney said, and Cramer tossed the envelope to him. "'To be opened in the event of my death,'" he read, casting a puzzled glance at Arm. After checking quickly through the contents of the envelope, Barney laid the papers on the desk and looked up again.

"There's enough here," he said, in a very low voice, "to send us all to the gas chamber." An actual hint of color came over his lean cheeks. "It's a regular catalogue, Cal. Arm has listed all the jobs he ever did for us."

"No," Arm corrected. "I couldn't remember *all* of 'em."

Cramer, still holding the revolver on Arm, reached back toward Barney. "Let me see it," he said.

"Put that damn thing away,"

Barney said, handing Cramer the papers. "Arm doesn't figure he *has* to kill us. Do you, Arm?"

Arm was silent again.

"Hey!" said Cramer, looking up from the documents. "These are carbon copies!"

Barney nodded. "Where's the original, Arm?"

No reply.

"Some place where the cops can get 'em?"

"Only," said Arm, "if I'm hit."

Another long pause, punctuated by the occasional rapping of Barney's fingers on the desk.

"So," he said, his crisp tones breaking the silence at last, "if we hit Shaw we've got to hit Arm. And we don't dare hit Arm." He looked up. "You've cost us a hell of a lot of money."

"Is that *it?*" Cramer almost screamed. "You mean we just let this big dumb—!"

"That's it," Barney cut him off. "One thing, though. You got to die *some* day, Arm. How long you going to let that envelope lay around where the cops can get to it?"

"Not too long, Boss."

"Okay, then let's make a deal. Give it to me at the end of the baseball season, and I'll forget the whole thing ever happened. Okay?"

"Okay, Boss."

The big man put on his hat and turned to leave.

"Wait a minute, Arm. One question."

Arm, looking back, noticed something like a smile playing on Barney's lips.

"Who helped you, Arm? You don't have the brains to work out this kind of thing by yourself."

Arm blinked. "I can't tell you."

Cramer snorted. "'Experts!'" he quoted.

"Shut up, Cal!"

Arm was at the ballpark on opening day, of course, seated directly behind the first-base dugout, from which point his expert eye could appraise the warmup pitches of Willie Shaw. It was not long before the expert eye was satisfied: Shaw definitely had his stuff.

"Hey, Willie! Throw me a ball!"

The young man, recognizing that husky voice, turned around with a grin. He ducked into the dugout, emerged a moment later with a pen, scribbled something on the baseball, and tossed it to Arm. Both big hands closed around it, then opened to reveal the message:

ALL OK?

As the home team took the field amid great partisan cheering, Willie Shaw paused on the dugout steps and peered at Arm. When he saw the big man raise his hand, make a circle of his thumb and forefinger, extend the other three fingers, making the okay sign, and vigorously nod his ugly head up and down, the pitcher turned and strode to the mound to begin what promised to be a pennant-winning season.

the *NEWEST* spy-and-counterspy story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

This is the 12th story about Rand of the Department of Concealed Communications—the Double-C man—a comparatively long and consistently interesting series ... The Lavender was the latest American refinement in cipher machines. It was a highly sophisticated development of the Japanese Purple Machine of World War II, and it combined the best features of the earlier American SIGABA, *the German* ENIGMA, *and the British* TYPEX. *Now, what would happen if a Lavender Machine fell into enemy hands? ...*

THE SPY WHO PURCHASED A LAVENDER

by EDWARD D. HOCH

His name was Peter Smith, and he was a spy. Or at least he had been in his younger days. Now, past 50 and with an ulcer that occasionally acted up, he found himself confined to the less exciting but nonetheless necessary phases of intelligence work. He didn't complain, because that was not his nature. He did the job that needed to be done.

Peter Smith had made the flight from London to New York a good many times in the past, but never on such a mission as this. He was coming to America for the purpose of purchasing a Lavender Machine, a task he couldn't have imagined a few years back.

Smith was tall and gray-haired, and carried himself like a diplomat. He had a wife and two children somewhere, but she'd divorced him long ago, when he returned to the intelligence service after his first retirement. He couldn't really say he blamed her, but intelligence work was the only life he knew.

His plane landed at Kennedy Airport, and he cleared customs in a few moments, striding quickly to the taxi stands in front of the International Arrivals Building. It was a sunny December day, more like early autumn than the begin-

ning of winter, and he breathed deeply of the exhilarating air. Heathrow Airport had been almost fogbound when he left London. This was a pleasant change.

His first night in America was spent in Manhattan, but he was up early the next morning for the trip by rented car to the sprawling machine-tool plant deep in central New Jersey. Here, in this strange smoky countryside of factories and marshlands, he found the home of the Lavender Machine. He met a great many people, smiling and shaking hands, and signed for delivery of one machine while a government representative looked on.

"If you approve," said Mr. Sine, the project manager, "we will pack the Lavender Machine in three safes for transportation to London. You may accompany them in our truck to the airport."

Peter Smith nodded, watching Sine's graying head as it bent over the complex assortment of forms and export licenses. The Lavender was the latest American refinement in cipher machines, and as such its manufacture was closely controlled by the Federal government. This one, being carefully packed for shipment, was only the second the British government had been allowed to purchase.

Sine pulled out a sheet of used carbon paper, crumpled it, and dropped it in the wastebasket. "That about does it," he said.

"Yes." Peter started to follow him out of the office, but then he hung back to light a cigarette. His years in the more undercover fields of espionage were hard to shake off, and that piece of carbon paper was almost shouting at him. Instinctively and as a professional he bent and snatched it from the basket.

Back in London two days later, Peter Smith sat lounging in the comfortable office chair opposite Rand's cluttered desk in the Department of Concealed Communications. "Well, I brought back the Lavender Machine for you. But something's been bothering me."

Rand lit one of the American cigarettes he was partial to and turned from the window. "What would that be? I've approved your travel expenses."

"It's the American project manager, a fellow named Sine. There's something peculiar about his entire operation."

"Peculiar?" Rand was interested now. He'd always respected Peter Smith's judgment.

"Well, I guess I'd have to know a bit about the machine—that is, if it's not classified, sir." Rand frowned at the "sir." He was twelve years younger than Smith and had never got used to all that respect from a man who should have been above him on the ladder.

"Exactly what do you need to know, Peter?" he asked.

"If the other side had a Lavender Machine, what it would mean to us."

Rand went back to the window, staring out at the exposed banks of the Thames at low tide. "You know most of it already. The Lavender Machine could be described as an outgrowth of the famous Japanese Purple Machine of World War II, but actually it is much closer in concept to the American SIGABA, the German ENIGMA, and our own TYPEX. In fact, the Lavender is said by its inventors to combine the best features of all these previous machines. The Japanese Purple—like their earlier Orange and Red Machines—was basically an alphabetical typewriter using coding wheels of a fairly simple sort. The Americans had actually solved the Purple system more than a year before Pearl Harbor, but they failed to realize the full significance of those vital pre-attack messages."

"I know that part of it," Peter Smith said. "I was more interested in the other side's operation of the machine, sir, and how that would affect us."

Rand nodded and continued. "The Lavender is a rotor machine. With a knowledge of the Lavender rotors—of their wiring, specifically—and with an actual working machine to guide them, enemy cryptanalysts could determine which rotors in the set were being used for any given message, and what the initial setting was. It would be trial-and-error, a bit plodding, but it could be done if they had a machine."

"Couldn't the manufacturer issue new rotors for all outstanding machines?" Peter Smith asked.

"Certainly and that's what would be done. But all past messages would be compromised, but the future ones would be safe only if immediate action was taken."

"Suppose we didn't know the enemy had a machine?"

Rand lit another cigarette. "You're trying to tell me something, Peter, get to the point."

Peter smoothed the crumpled piece of carbon paper on the desk between them. "Since the sale and export of Lavender Machines is strictly controlled by the United States government, an export permit must be signed for each one. The permit for the machine we just purchased was signed in the presence of Mr. Sine and myself. But after the government man left, I noticed Sine disposing of a piece of carbon paper. I picked it out of the wastebasket, and found the government man's signature on it."

"So?"

"There was only one export document to be signed, without copies, so what was the duplicate signature needed for?"

"I see what you mean," Rand said, speaking slowly. "You believe Sine is using the duplicate signature to forge an export document

for a Lavender Machine—a machine which would find its way into enemy hands."

"Exactly. I assume there are a number of routes for getting it out of the country." He paused dramatically. "In view of this, I suggest that we contact the people in Washington at once."

"There's so little to go on," Rand mused. "A crumpled piece of carbon paper. The machine is a matter for the National Security Agency people, and I'd hate to bother NSA with something this nebulous. It could make us look bad."

Rand rarely worried about appearances, but the relations between America and Britain had been strained by a spy case earlier in the winter. The Americans had uncovered a Russian spy in the British Embassy in Washington. Would this be viewed as a retaliatory move by British Intelligence to discredit the Americans—especially if nothing came of it?

"But, sir, we already have a machine in Hong Kong. Our messages, and those of the Americans, could be compromised."

Rand had to agree it was true. "Tell you what—I'm due for a trip to Washington next week. I'll leave a few days early and look into the matter of Mr. Sine—unofficially, of course. You might come along if you can arrange for another trip to the States this soon."

Peter Smith smiled. "I haven't even unpacked, sir."

George Sine was as Peter had described him—a bespeckled man with graying hair whose hands seemed constantly in motion. He smiled as he shook hands with Rand, but one could almost sense the calculations ticking away in his mind. "Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Rand," he said. "I trust the Lavender arrived safely."

"Yes, it did." Rand had been in the country only a day, but he had to admit he was enjoying it. New York had been even more opulent than he remembered, and even the ride across New Jersey in a rented car had been pleasant.

"Is Peter Smith here with you?" asked Sine.

"He's checking some matters in Washington." Rand cleared his throat. It was time to get down to business. "Of course we check quite carefully on the security of our own people, and I know you must do the same over here."

"Certainly."

"I'm especially interested in security on the machine itself. You shipped ours to us in three small safes?"

George Sine seemed to relax a bit and nodded. "Correct. One contains the basic mechanism, a second contains rotors for additional key changes, and a third contains key lists. I explained it all to Smith."

"And I gather there are tight security measures to prevent a machine from falling into the wrong hands?"

"Every Lavender Machine manufactured by us must be accounted for. By law we must keep a signed license in our files, and of course there are export documents if it is leaving the country, as in your case."

They talked for a time longer, and Sine took him on a brief tour of the plant, past assembly lines where dungareed girls operating wire-wrap machines worked on computer circuits, the company's major product.

When Rand left the plant after a cafeteria lunch, he was just about convinced that Peter Smith's misgivings were unfounded. Perhaps Smith had been in the business too long, building a complex fantasy in his own mind from a discarded piece of carbon paper. Perhaps they'd all been in the business too long.

He was to meet Peter at a neoned motel off the Jersey Turnpike, a garish affair where bored workmen were hanging up tinseled Christmas decorations for the coming holiday. He parked the car and took a room for the night, suddenly aware that he wasn't yet accustomed to the previous day's five-hour time change in flying the Atlantic. He'd never learned the trick of sleeping on planes.

Peter Smith knocked on his door a half hour later. "You dozing? I didn't expect you back from the plant so soon, sir."

"He gave me the tour," Rand said. "That's enough to tire anybody. Frankly, Peter, I don't think there's much to it. Sine seemed straightforward, and the way he explained it, even a forged signature wouldn't be enough to get a Lavender Machine out of the country illegally."

"Well, sir, I've been checking a bit on Sine's background. He's divorced, playing around with a much younger girl, and has a couple of odd friends."

"I'm sure that information could apply to any one of a thousand men without their being spies of criminals."

"There's something else. Sine has an interest in a small private air line that flies charter flights through the southern states. It might be a way for the machine to be taken out of the country."

Rand was doubtful. "The customs people are pretty thorough, especially on private flights like that."

"We could talk to this girl, and some of the others."

"And have Washington on our neck?" Rand shook his head. "Lay off, Peter. There's nothing here."

He thought that settled it, and after a bit more conversation he agreed to meet Peter for dinner and went back to bed. Just a couple of hours' sleep would freshen him for the Washington trip the following day.

The house phone awakened him

a few minutes past six. It was Peter, down in the dining room, ready for dinner. "I'll be right there," Rand told him, brushing the cobwebs from his eyes.

But when he joined Peter, the older man was not alone. A tall blonde girl with long hair and a short skirt sat with him at the bar. She wore heavy eye makeup and pale lipstick, and she held out her hand as he approached. "Hi! You're Mr. Rand?"

"Yes . . . ?"

Peter Smith cleared his throat. "This is Echo Rogers, sir. She's a friend of George Sine."

Rand cursed under his breath. What was this fool up to? "Pleased to meet you."

"I thought we might ask her a few questions over dinner."

Rand grunted. They found a table, and as the meal progressed the blonde girl proved quite willing to talk. She showed obvious intelligence and not a little charm. "They talked to me from Washington, you know, when they did the first security investigation on George. But he got a clean bill. He's not a bad man."

Peter sipped his wine. "The divorce?"

"His wife drank, had other problems. She lives in California now. I met George about a year ago at a party in East Orange. He's a nice guy, a really nice guy."

"Do you work around here?"

She nodded and brushed the hair from her face with a gesture that Rand found completely feminine. "I'm a copywriter for a small ad agency in Jersey City."

Peter Smith pushed on. "Miss Rogers—"

"Call me Echo. Everyone does."

Peter cleared his throat. "There are a couple of other names we have—friends of Mr. Sine. I was wondering if you knew them. There's a Tom Parker and someone named Craig. Waldo Craig."

"Tom Parker used to work for George at the plant. He's got a little electrical repair business of his own now. I don't know any Waldo Craig."

"Craig is apparently a third-rate nightclub comedian who appears in this area. He's been linked to some suspicious groups."

"I may have heard the name, but I've never met him."

"Miss Rogers," Rand interrupted, "I trust you realize the confidential nature of our questions. It would be best not to tell Mr. Sine of our interest right now. The whole thing is merely routine, you understand."

"Sure," she replied. "Confidential *and* routine."

Dinner went reasonably well, and afterward they saw her to her car, a bright sporty job that was parked next to Peter's drab rented one.

"What's that?" Rand asked, seeing a little blue and red flag painted at the top of the door on the driver's side.

"Signal flag," she told them. "E

for Echo, like at sea. You know, Alfa, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo . . . ? That's the new version."

"Very clever."

"I'm a clever gal." She waved and pulled away, leaving them standing there. Rand had little doubt that she was on her way to report the whole conversation to George Sine.

"Let's go in for a drink," Peter said. "Damn cold out here."

"Peter, I think we'd better have a serious talk about your activities."

The older man fumbled for a cigarette. "That little flag on her car gave me a great idea, sir. The International Code of Signals uses combinations of three flags for its messages."

"Peter—"

"Listen. The flags stand for words and phrases, and they're all printed in a code book which every ship carries. But even without the flags, the letters themselves have meaning—they run all the way from AAA to ZZZ—or almost, anyway. I think they stop in the W's somewhere. Some of them form words — nearly every three-letter word there is, in fact! For example, the combination FEZ means *document,* in addition to being the simple word *fez.* Perhaps we could use that in a cipher sometime."

Rand's patience was evaporating. "We'll talk about it back in London. Right now I want to know why you disobeyed my instructions and went after the girl."

"I was sorry about that, sir, but I just have a feeling about this one. Waldo Craig was once a Communist, and the other one, Parker, has a long arrest record. I want to check further on that airline, too."

"I can't let you, Peter," Rand said firmly. "You may already have gotten us into hot water. This isn't London, you know."

"You're not going to do anything, sir?"

Rand sighed. "I'll mention it to NSA tomorrow. That's all I can do. It's their baby. Now let's go in and get that drink."

The National Security Agency occupied a three-story structure of concrete, glass, and steel, roughly in the shape of a squared-off A. It was located at Fort Meade, Maryland, halfway between Washington and Baltimore. Rand had visited the building just once before, in 1965, and now he was startled at the changes just a few years had brought. For one thing, a nine-story Operations Building Annex, under construction during his previous visit, was in full use now, dwarfing the original structure and bringing the total of NSA employees to about 14,000.

"We're bigger than CIA now," the deputy director told Rand as he ushered him into a plush office with large tinted windows. "And with not half the headaches. The best publicity is no publicity, as our CIA friends are finding out."

Rand accepted a cigarette and lowered himself into an easy chair, wishing he had something like it back in London. "I'm most impressed," he said truthfully.

"And how is your Lavender Machine functioning? Is it operational yet?"

"Not quite, sir. It only arrived a few days ago. My people are working on it, though."

"You over here for long?"

"Just a couple of days," Rand said. "I want to be back for Christmas."

"Family over there?"

"Of a sort."

The deputy director cleared his throat. "I don't mind telling you that your name carries a lot of weight in the field. Some say Concealed Communications is the best organization of its sort in the world today. I understand you've even achieved a sort of contact with Taz in Moscow."

"We've met."

He shuffled some papers on his desk. "I know you understand my position, Mr. Rand. Before we get on to the official reason for your visit, I feel I must touch on a somewhat unpleasant subject. A report that reached me this morning seems to indicate that you've been conducting some sort of investigation in New Jersey."

"Hardly an investigation," Rand said, silently cursing Peter Smith. "One of my men was concerned about security on the Lavender Machine. You understand."

"Well, frankly, I don't. Your man Peter Smith was down here asking questions about George Sine, the Lavender project manager. Do you have reason to suspect Sine of something?"

Rand told him of Peter's suspicions and the crumpled carbon paper. "In itself it's nothing, of course."

The deputy director stroked his chin. "Sine himself seems clean, but I will admit his file shows he has some odd associations. One is a nightclub comic named Waldo Craig who's been everything from a Communist to a Bircher—he seems to change parties annually. Still, you fellows are overstepping yourselves, you know."

"I realize that, sir."

"Just a friendly word. Keep your man in line. We don't want any bad publicity."

Rand nodded and they went on to other matters. It hadn't been half so bad as he'd expected.

Peter Smith was on the telephone to Rand's Washington hotel room that evening even before Rand had had a chance to eat. "I know what you're going to say, sir, but this time I have evidence. I'm with this man Parker who used to work for Sine. There were *two* Lavender Machines signed out for shipment this week."

Rand was remembering the warning words of the deputy di-

rector. "Where are you, Peter?"

"Just outside a city called Wilmington, in Delaware. We're at a restaurant near the Delaware Memorial Bridge."

Rand jotted down the directions. "I'll find it. Stay there, Peter, and don't talk to anyone."

He'd driven the route to Washington early that morning via the Jersey Turnpike and the Kennedy Memorial Highway, and now, heading back in the early evening, he made good time. In less than an hour he was sitting opposite Peter and a large hairy man who was Tom Parker.

"I asked Tom to check on a few things at the plant," Peter explained. "Tell him what you learned, Tom."

Parker was open and friendly—perhaps too much so. Rand couldn't help thinking he was too good to be true. "I used to work there, see—with Mr. Sine. He took me on after I had some trouble with the police. I don't work there any more, but I still know the guys in shipping, and I stop by to shoot the breeze a couple times a month—for old times' sake, you might say."

"Tell him about today, Tom."

"Well, Mr. Smith here phoned and offered me some money to find out about the Lavender shipment. It was simple enough to do, and I'm always ready to help the government." Rand threw Peter a nasty look at those words. "Anyway, there were two Lavender Machines shipped out the other day, both to London. The same inspector signed for both of them."

"Two machines?" Rand repeated. "Both to London?"

"That's right."

Rand studied the man carefully. "You're a friend of George Sine?"

"I was. He had me fired, so I'm no friend of his any more."

Peter slipped the man some money and Parker left, obviously pleased that his job was over. He was probably telling the truth, Rand decided—at least, they would have to assume he was.

"Satisfied, sir?" Peter asked.

"No. Not with anything you've done today. I thought you realized the function of the Department better than you do."

"Our function is to intercept enemy communications and to safeguard our own, sir. That's just what I've been doing by tracking down this second Lavender."

"And where do you think the second one is?"

Peter Smith looked especially pleased with himself. "It was delivered by truck to an address in Wilmington, sir. Parker got that for me, too."

Rand was on his feet. "I'll phone Washington."

"Before you do, sir. Waldo Craig is appearing at a club in Wilmington."

Rand sighed and said, "All right. Let's go see him."

It was a little club on a side

street, the sort frequented by the not-quite-respectable elements of society. It reminded Rand of some of the places in Soho, back home, and he was not surprised when the waitresses appeared wearing brief costumes that barely covered their hips.

Waldo Craig was just finishing his act when they sat down. He was thin, bald, and vaguely old—like something left over from the silent movies. His jokes were blue, all in extremely bad taste without being in the least funny. Hardly anybody laughed. The customers were too busy talking and drinking to pay much attention, and the clinking of ice cubes drowned out the scattering of applause when Craig had finished.

But he seemed pleased to have someone buy him a drink, and he joined their table without hesitation. "How'd you like the show? Little slow tonight—crowd's not much. Always slow the week before Christmas—everybody busy shopping."

"George Sine," Peter said.

"George? Haven't seen him in nearly a year. How's he doing? I called him a Commie one night at a party, and he never forgave me, I guess."

"*Is* he a Commie?" Rand asked.

"Who knows? I was myself once, before I saw the light, and he was a heck of a lot friendlier then. I still do business with his company, though." As if reminded of something, he glanced at his watch. "I've got to hop. This was my last night here. I'm flying to Miami tomorrow for a week at the Beaches. Big-time stuff. I'm on the bill with Sammy Davis, Junior."

"You can't tell us any more about Sine, then?" Peter was pleading.

"Not a thing, chum. Ask his girl friend. Her name's Echo something."

Then he was gone, and they were left at their table. "All right," Rand said, making a sudden decision. "You head for Washington and get our friends at NSA. They have to be in on this, or you and I could be in big trouble. I'm driving back to Sine's plant, where I can catch him first thing in the morning. If there is a Lavender Machine loose somewhere, we have to locate it before it leaves the country."

The sun was shining when Rand drove into the company parking lot the following morning. He had become quite expert at right-hand American driving these past few days, and was even beginning to enjoy it. London would be something of a shock after this.

"Well! Rand again!" George Sine said, rising from behind his desk. "I thought you were in Washington."

"I came back."

"What can I do for you? It's something of a busy morning."

"It's about the Lavender Ma-

chine," Rand told him. "We have reason to believe—"

Sine's secretary interrupted at that moment. "Pardon me, Mr. Rand, but there's a call for you from Washington. They say it's an emergency."

Rand took the call in the outer office. He recognized the deputy director's voice at once. "We had a devil of a time finding you, Rand."

"What's the trouble?"

"Your man Peter Smith. He was murdered about two this morning in Wilmington, Delaware."

Rand put down the phone. He felt suddenly sick.

The deputy director of NSA had personally taken charge of the investigation. By late that afternoon he was installed in a suite of rooms at the motel where Rand and Peter had stayed the first night. There were others from Washington too, moving with a quiet precision that Rand had to admire.

"Tell it to me again, if you please," the man from NSA asked Rand.

"No, I think it's my turn to ask a few things. Peter worked for me. I don't even know where you found the body."

"Along a highway near the airport. He'd been shot twice and apparently dumped from a car. Funny thing—he had a little piece of paper crumpled in his pocket with just one word on it."

Rand was suddenly alert. "A word? What word?"

"Here it is. *Joke*. Just the word *joke* and nothing else. Was he in the habit of jotting down jokes he heard?"

"No." Rand thought about it. "We met a comedian, Waldo Craig, earlier in the evening, but none of his jokes was worth jotting down."

"Could he have been trying to tell you something, Rand? Could he have written this when he knew he was going to die?"

"It's possible, I suppose," Rand admitted. "He couldn't write the name of the killer, in case they searched his body, but he could leave me a coded message of some sort. The trouble is, how do we know he wrote it just before he died? It could have been crumpled in his pocket for days."

"Then it probably means nothing." The NSA man frowned. "So where do we stand?"

"If nothing else, his murder proves that Peter was right all along. Someone does have another Lavender Machine and is trying to get it out of the country. Someone got to George Sine and convinced him to deliver one to the enemy."

"Russia?"

Rand thought about Taz, his old enemy in Moscow. "I don't think so. China, more likely."

"China's awfully far away."

"Yes." Rand was thinking again about Peter Smith, who'd given up his wife because intelligence work

was the only life he knew. Peter Smith, who should have lived out his last years in a quiet country village, but who died instead along a highway in a city far from home. Rand had lost people on assignments before, and he would lose them again, but the knowledge didn't make any loss more bearable. They were all his fault, in a way—every one of them. Last year it had been Harry Truce in Paris, and now it was Peter Smith along a highway in Delaware.

"We're questioning George Sine," the NSA man said. "We'll get it out of him."

Rand nodded. He was very tired, as if he hadn't slept in weeks. Sine wasn't the type to keep secrets. If he himself hadn't killed Peter, he'd tell who did. And where the second Lavender was now.

But as it turned out, George Sine excused himself from his questioners, went into his private bathroom, and used a broken water tumbler to slash his wrists and throat. He was not quite dead when they broke down the door.

The first person Rand saw when he entered the hospital lobby was Echo Rogers. She was wearing pale green slacks and a fur-lined jacket, and was pacing the floor with an unlit cigarette held nervously in one hand. "Did you drive him to this?" she asked, her eyes angry.

"I had nothing to do with it," Rand answered. "How is he?"

"They think he'll pull through, but he's lost a lot of blood."

Then Rand saw that she was not alone. Tom Parker was also there. "I never knew I was getting him into anything like this," Parker said. "I should never have told you anything."

"Look," Rand said tightly, his own anger beginning to build. "It's too bad that George Sine tried to kill himself, and I'm sorry about it. But I lost a close friend myself last night. Peter Smith was murdered in Wilmington, and maybe Sine had something to do with Smith's death. I don't have any tears for Sine."

He left them and went on upstairs, already sorry he'd spoken the words. What had started as a routine assignment was turning into more and more of a nightmare by the hour.

The deputy director was just coming out of Sine's guarded hospital room. "He's sleeping now. They think he'll live."

Rand nodded. "Did he say anything?"

"Cuba. He said Cuba a few times, but he might have been delirious."

"They didn't get anything out of him before he cut himself?"

"Not a thing." The man from Washington shook his head. "Sine isn't the one we really want. He was just being used by the people who want the Lavender Machine."

Rand had to agree with that.

"Any idea who's behind him?"

"We're checking all his contacts now. Of course there's the girl, Echo Rogers. And that fellow who's downstairs, Parker."

"It was Parker who gave Peter some important evidence on the missing machine," Rand recalled. "I hardly think . . ."

Rand walked down the hall to the solarium and stood for a time gazing out at the hospital parking lot. Cuba. Cuba and Sine and . . And what? Waldo Craig?

Rand had taken the crumpled paper found on Peter's body and now he spread it out on the window sill. The paper itself was soft —like part of a paper napkin—and there was a bit of colored printing on one ragged edge. He was almost certain it was from the nightclub where they'd talked with Craig.

Joke.

Just one word. *Joke.*

Peter Smith had spent his lifetime in intelligence work. He knew codes and ciphers of every sort. With death staring him in the face he would have used a code to get a final message to Rand. But what?

"The joke's on me," Rand said softly. Joke meant comedian, and comedian meant Waldo Craig. Where was Craig now? He'd said something about—

Then Rand knew. As simple as that. He knew where the second Lavender Machine was, and he only hoped it wasn't too late to save it.

The NSA man listened as Rand talked, nodding his head occasionally. Finally he said, "You want us to intercept a plane on a charter flight and force it to land?"

Rand nodded. "I'm certain the missing Lavender Machine is aboard. The machine was shipped to Wilmington, and the trail ended there. But Waldo Craig told Peter and me that he still did business with Sine's company. He obviously didn't mean the manufacturing concern that made computer parts. He meant Sine's small private airline. In fact, his next comment was that he was flying to Miami today. Peter caught it too, and headed for the airport. That's when he met the murderer. He had to be killed so the machine could start its flight today in Waldo Craig's chartered plane. His body was found near the airport, remember."

"They're taking it to Miami?"

"The flight is bound for Miami, but remember Sine's mumblings about Cuba. The plane will be hijacked on the way and landed in Havana. Nothing too unusual—it happens a few times every year. The hijacker will remain in Cuba and the plane and passengers will be released after the usual few hours of questioning. During those few hours the Lavender Machine will be secretly removed from the plane. From Cuba it'll probably be shipped to China."

The NSA man was on the telephone to Washington. For the next

hour they merely waited, and Rand prayed that he had made his deductions in time. Finally the phone in the hospital office rang, and the NSA man smiled. "They intercepted it off the Florida coast," he told Rand. "Bound for Cuba, just as you said. Copilot was hijacking it. Had to threaten to shoot him down before he'd turn back."

Rand let out a long deep breath, "That means the machine is on board."

One of the NSA men joined them, and Rand recognized him as the guard from Sine's room. "We've relaxed the surveillance," the deputy director explained. "Sine's not going anywhere, and they've got Craig with the plane."

"Craig?" Rand stood up suddenly. "Waldo Craig's not the man behind Sine. He wouldn't risk using his own flight for the smuggling, when any flight would have done as well."

"Then who . . . ?"

"Sine's alone?"

"Of course. He's all doped up."

"Then his life may be in danger." Rand was already halfway out the door. "Don't you see, the spy can't let Sine live, can't let him tell everything now."

"But how do you know who it is?"

Rand was running now, almost knocking aside a startled nurse. "Peter's dying word told me. *Joke.*"

He pushed open the door of George Sine's room, and there was Echo, standing over his bed with a pillow pressed hard over the sleeping man's face.

"Just in time," the deputy director sighed. "Just in time again. That Sine must lead a charmed life. But Rand, how did you know it was Echo Rogers?"

"Who else was in a better position to corrupt him? It's not the first time a man has betrayed his country for a woman."

"But the word. *Joke.*"

"Peter was telling me the other day about a code made up of flag signals. Three-letter combinations in the International Code of Signals stand for any word or phrase you might need at sea. He thought of it because Echo had the alphabet flag for E painted on her car door. While we were waiting for the Washington call earlier, I confirmed the meaning of his message by phoning the local library. Peter figured I'd remember our conversation about the flag code, and he used that to tell me who murdered him. He'd been studying it, and he knew how to say what he needed."

"But three-letter combinations! There are four letters in *joke.*"

"The letters JOK in the International Code of Signals stand for the single word *murderer.* His dying message—JOKE—meant *murderer E,* or in the more specific language of the flag code, *murderer Echo.*"

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FOR WANT OF A NAIL

by BERKELY MATHER

I WAS MEETING ARTHUR IN A PUB near Charing Cross. It was handy for both of us—I was coming from the City, he from the bottom of Whitehall. Arthur grows the best chrysanthemums in Ealing and he had some cuttings for me.

It was just after six and the saloon bar was crowded and for once I was ahead of time. I pushed through to the counter and ordered a gin and tonic. I always take the first one of the day fast so there was only a half inch of fluid and a crescent of lemon in the glass when I set it down; but I still didn't like losing it. An arm shot past me from behind, reaching for the stuffed olives, knocking my glass flying. I turned angrily but was immediately disarmed by the culprit's patent penitence.

"My dear chap," he said. "How clumsy of me. Here, let me get you another. G and T?" He flicked his fingers at the barman. "Two, William. Doubles."

I told him it was only the dregs and it had been a single anyhow, but he would have none of it. Someone from the War Office, I decided. Fiftyish, dark suit, bowler, pencil-thin umbrella hooked in the bend of the disengaged arm, piercing blue eyes, closely trimmed graying mustache, and the sort of tan that not even a London November could yellow.

He was still collecting his change when the quiet voice behind us said, "The gentleman's my brother-in-law, Colonel. He lives in a semi-detached in Finchley, and the Nelson Column wouldn't be the damnedest bit of use to him."

We turned. Arthur was right behind us, regarding us with that paternal indulgence which is the hallmark of certain country parsons and of all senior Scotland Yard detective officers.

"In that case you had better have the other, Mr. Crewson," snapped my host. "I'm particular about whom I drink with." And he strode to the door, through it, and out into the evening gloom.

"What did he do? Knock your drink over?" asked Arthur, and as I nodded, he went on, "Bloody shame to see a man like that working Mugs Alley. He used to be the best in the business." He sighed. "Getting old, like us all. I remember him from the immediate post-war days. In fact, he was my first big nick after coming out of the Uniformed Branch."

"What sent him wrong?" I asked, sensing a story.

"Nothing," Arthur answered. "He was born that way, like all the really good pros. Pick up your drink—pity to waste 'em."

We bore the Colonel's largess to a table in the corner. "Cashiered from the Army?" I asked. Arthur always needed prompting in the early stages.

"They don't cashier cooks," he told me. "Actually, his army service added up to six months in the Catering Corps and twelve in the Glasshouse for flogging rations."

"He certainly looks the part—of a Colonel, I mean," I said.

"Equally good as an Admiral—without the 'tache, course—or as a bishop. Got a good leg for a gaiter. Or as a member of the House of Lords. Lawyer—the cheeky old bleeder once walked into a smart hotel in Lewes in a wig and gown he'd knocked off from the Robing Room during Assizes and cashed a rubber check for a hundred and fifty quid. Anything at all—you name it, he'll do it. But he prefers the military touch. He once reprimanded a copper in Piccadilly for wearing his helmet too far back on his bonce, fully aware that the copper actually knew him."

"What did the copper do?"

"On the instant, straightened his hat. Two seconds later he was using language ill becoming a member of the Metropolitan Police, but it was too late by then. The Colonel-sahib was on his way, swinging his brolly like a Guards drum major and looking like Monty on one of his better mornings."

Arthur passed me the chrysanthemum cuttings wrapped in a copy of the Scotland Yard Lost Property List, then gazed reflectively at our empty glasses. I did the necessary, and waited.

"He actually had the gall to have a tilt at old Fenner, the Hatton Garden diamond baron, once," Arthur continued.

"Fenner being a tough nut to crack, I take it?"

"You aren't kidding. He knew every grafter in the files—if not actually by sight, certainly by *modus operandi*. We used to call him in on consultation down at the Yard when we were really up against it with a new operator. He'd listen to the facts, sit with his eyes closed for a minute or so, then say, 'First pulled in Jo-burg in '38. Dutchman by the name of Jaarsfeldt. Got a brother, naturalized, runs a grocer's business in Clacton. Holes up with him between jobs. No record in England, so you wouldn't have him on the books.' Or: 'An Australian—O'Reilly, McBride, or Hennessey—always an Irish name—pulled that on a colleague of mine in Paris just after the war. You should have *him*. You nicked him in '51 as Fitzsimmons for a deal in uncut industrial stones, but you couldn't make it stick.' And he was always right."

"But the Colonel took him?" I asked.

Arthur nodded slowly. There was no further need for prodding. He was now in the groove.

"Time spent on reconnaissance and preparation is never lost, the Colonel had once read somewhere and that maxim was thereafter his guiding star. He cased this one for twelve months. He turned up at Fenner's office one morning and asked to see some moderately inexpensive stuff for a client in Glasgow.

"He fronted as a recently retired Colonel who was starting from scratch in the one-man business. He knew a little about jewelry from the intelligent amateur's standpoint, and would have been a pigeon ripe for the plucking for any merchant in the Garden less shrewd than Fenner, who believed that taking a sucker who might otherwise come again was bad business.

"The Colonel eventually found what he wanted—a second-water necklace that the client wanted for a twenty-first birthday present for his daughter. He paid by check but said he wouldn't be picking the thing up for a week, after he had returned from Paris where he was looking for some more stuff. That was just as well from Fenner's point of view, who put his trust in Jehovah but not in strangers' checks. But Fenner needn't have worried, because the check was met without question long before the Colonel returned to collect his tomfoolery.

He came back a month or so later, very grateful. The client had been pleased with his bargain, and the Colonel was ahead a hundred nicker commission. Business was picking up. He bought five thou-

sand pounds' worth this time—on spec and for cash, because somebody had told him all about the lean gray wolves down at the taxation department who watched deals like this, when banks were involved. Fenner beamed. He hated the idea of people just *giving* it away to the wolves.

"Well, the next thing the Colonel calls him on the telephone from New York, very excited. Does Fenner know anything about the Hattersley Diamonds? Who in the business didn't? They had been on the market for five years, ever since the old Duke of Lemanhampton had died, but the Dowager Duchess had slapped a minimum price of a hundred and fifty thousand on them, and they weren't worth that. Why, asked Fenner.

" 'Can they be got for, say, a hundred and thirty thou?' asks the Colonel.

" 'Just about,' Fenner tells him. 'The Duchess died last year and the executors are looking for some cash for death duties.'

" 'Make a few very discreet inquiries. Very, *very* discreet,' the Colonel instructs, 'and call me back collect this time tomorrow at the Waldorf-Astoria.'

"Fenner does just that. Yes, a hundred and thirty thousand would do very nicely. 'What's there in it for me?' the Colonel asks, and Fenner tells him five thousand, having actually got the price down to a hundred thousand. The Colonel hums and haws over this until Fenner comes up to seven thousand five hundred, and sticks there.

"So the Colonel settles for that and tells him he will be flying over that night. And he does, and he sees Fenner in his office the next day, but he's had second thoughts on his cut out of it. He thinks he ought to have ten thousand—and they have a rare old up-and-downer over it before compromising on nine. So it's finally agreed that Fenner will have the Hattersley Diamonds in his office the next day, and the Colonel will pick them up and fly back to New York the same night. Natually Fenner asks how the money will be paid.

" 'You don't have to worry,' the Colonel assures him. 'The client is arranging for a certified bank draft through a very well-known commercial finance house.'

" 'Who *is* the client?' Fenner asks, but the Colonel is not at liberty to tell him that. Highly confidential.

" 'All right by me,' Fenner says. 'But you realize that everything must be fixed before you take delivery. I'm responsible for the stuff until the money is paid over.'

" 'Naturally,' the Colonel agrees. 'All right then—see you tomorrow afternoon. I've got a lot of telephoning to do in the meantime. But I still think I ought to be getting ten thousand, you damned old shark.' And Fenner assures him with tears in his eyes, that he's cut

it to the bone already and that he couldn't do a better deal, not for his own mother—so they shake on that and part.

"Well, the Colonel turns up about four o'clock the next day, and Fenner has the stuff there, in a beautiful Russian leather 'tachy case, lined with black velvet—tiara necklace, and double wristpieces flashing like white fire. Gorgeous stuff it was. The Colonel drools over it, and keeps on drooling until Fenner coughs politely and asks what about the money?

" 'Oh, lord,' says the Colonel 'Here am I carried away by the sheer beauty of 'em and forgetting business. Ring up the Maldwyn Equity Security Corporation, will you, and ask for Mr. James Marriott, the Managing Director.'

" 'What's their number?' asks Fenner.

" 'Damned if I remember," says the Colonel. 'They're in the book.'

"Fenner reaches for the telephone book and looks it up.

" 'City three nine eight something something something,' he says, and dials it. He gets their switchboard and asks reverently for Mr. James Marriott—reverently because everybody knows of the Maldwyn Corporation. They're one of the biggest firms in the City, with a huge modern building near St. Paul's. The girl on the switchboard puts him through to a secretary who wants to know who what, and why. Mr. Marriott is just about as hard to talk to as the Prime Minister.

" 'Here, you'd better take this,' Fenner says, but the Colonel is still slavering over the ice. 'There's a secretary being awkward.'

" 'Oh, tell the idiot that Colonel Gainsworth-Brocklebury wants to talk to him,' the Colonel snaps, unwilling to close the lid of the 'tachy case. Fenner does so, and gets results fast. Of course, just a moment, sir. Actually Mr. Marriott has been trying to ring *you* at the Savoy. Click, click, click—and Mr. Marriott is booming over the line like an amiable foghorn.

" 'Brockles, you old rascal, you're cutting it pretty fine, aren't you? I told you I was leaving the office at four thirty—'

"Fenner hands the phone over.

" 'Sorry, James,' the Colonel apologizes. 'I've been terribly busy. I'm at Fenner's office now. Is the certified draft ready?'

"It is, Mr. Marriott assures him, and will he for Pete's sake come round and get it and let him get away—or leave it until the morning.

"But the Colonel can't do that, of course, as he's flying out that night—so they arrange to go up to Mr. Marriott's office hotfoot to collect it. And off they go in a taxi, the Colonel, Fenner, and the latter's bodyguard—a large ex-wrestling gent who always accompanies his boss when he is carrying anything worth more than fourpence

as he is now, because the 'tachy case is firmly chained to his left wrist as the Colonel would be going straight back to his hotel and then on to the airport as soon as the certified draft is handed over.

"As I've said, the Maldwyn Building is a huge new box as big as the United Nations complex. They keep normal banking hours, so the ground floor is already closed down. They go in through a side entrance and up in an automatic elevator to the fifth floor, and boy, they *had* cut it fine, because Mr. Marriott, a smartly dressed bluff and hearty gent, is just coming out of his office which is bang opposite the elevator with an imposing gilt sign on the door—*J. J. Mariott, O.B.E., Managing Director*—and he's bowler-hatted and briefcased ready for home. He has the certified draft in his hand, twice the size of an ordinary check.

"'Damn you, Brockles,' he booms. 'I've missed the last decent train from Charing Cross before the rush hour. I was going to leave this at the Savoy for you in passing.'

"He hands it to the Colonel, who runs his eye over it and then passes it to Fenner. The Colonel apologizes and Fenner almost genuflects. He always feels pious to people who give him certified bank drafts for sums of one hundred and thirty thousand pounds.

"Mr. Marriott looks at his watch and thinks he might still make the five-fifteen if he can grab a taxi without delay, but by then somebody on another floor has pressed the button and stolen the lift, so he frets and fumes and old Fenner feels real bad about it, and adds his apologies to those of the Colonel—and then there is a thud behind them and the gilt sign falls off the door, and the bodyguard, who is pretty quick-thinking for an ex-wrestler, jumps across and opens it—and all hell breaks loose because Mr. Marriott's nerve fails and he makes a dash for the stairs.

"But the bodyguard brings him down with a tackle and puts a Boston crab on him, while Fenner starts to shellack the bejabbers out of the Colonel with the 'tachy case—and then uniformed commissionaires are piling up the stairs to see what's what.

"And that was it. The Colonel and Mr. Marriott, who was better known to the police in those days as the Adjutant, copped five and three respectively for criminal conspiracy."

"But Fenner had spoken to the real Marriott," I exclaimed.

"He hadn't, you know," said Arthur ponderously. "He'd spoken to the two ladies down in the files as Dolores the Abbess and Fencing Lil, and then to the Adjutant, in a four-by-two office that the Colonel had rented just round the corner. We never made it stick on the girls because whatever else they may

have been, the Colonel and the Adge weren't grasses."

"But damn it all," I insisted "You said Fenner found the number in the telephone book and dialed it himself!"

"You bet he did," Arthur agreed. "That was the sheer brilliance of the whole affair. Casing—perfect casing. You see, the Colonel had doctored a telephone directory. Beautiful job done jointly by Itchy the Printer, who also forged the bank draft, and Ned Selcombe who always did his bird in the bookbinders' shop. They'd taken out the page that the Maldwyn Corporation appeared on, then Itchy had a plate made and reprinted the doctored page on phone-book paper—the only difference being that one telephone number. Then Ned rebound the book, and the Colonel had sleight-of-handed the substitution the day before in Fenner's office, under cover of getting something out of his brief case."

"Well, well, *well*," I said. "Brilliant, just as you said. They almost deserved to get away with it."

"Sort of damfool thing the law-abiding citizenry always think," said Arthur gloomily. "When they aren't the suckers. Actually they *didn't* deserve to get away with it. They took six months to find just the right Corporation with just the right building for that little caper, but they never checked to see what doors were made of. They were steel, painted to *simulate* wood, and at the last minute the Adjutant found he couldn't drive the little nail in to hold the sign onto the door. He just had time to nip down and buy a roll of that sticky tape stuff at a stationer's outside. The sticky stuff wasn't up to the job."

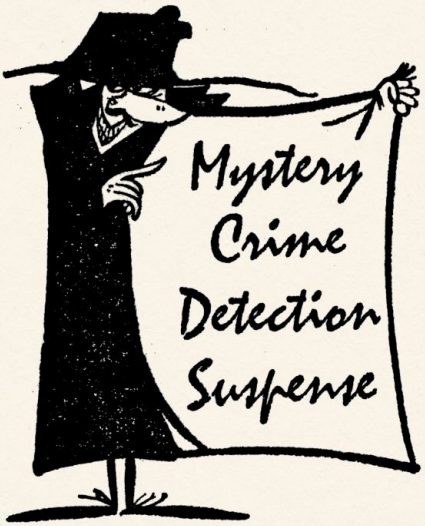
"Bad luck," I said. "But couldn't artists like that have passsed it off as just one of those things? Signs *have* been known to fall off doors by accident."

"Not that door," said Arthur. "Their sign was covering another and smaller one—which read *Gentlemen*. It was the only door they could risk monkeying around with."

NEXT MONTH . . .

Another INTERNATIONAL Issue

See page 133



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