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detective
SHORT NOVEL
complete
in this issue

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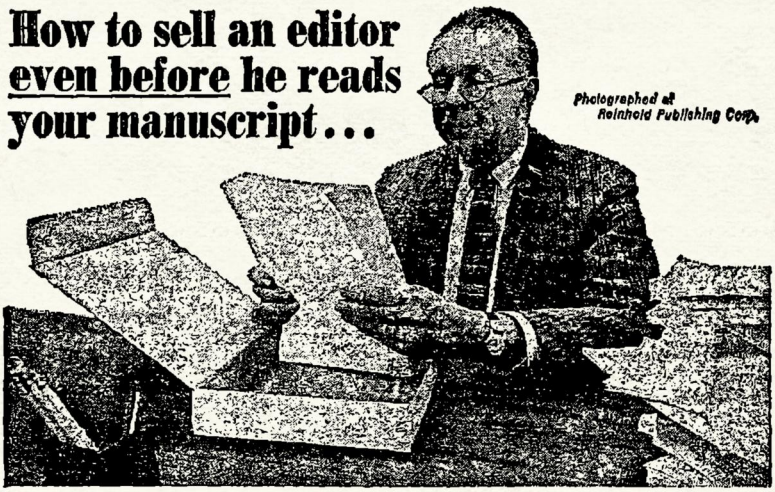

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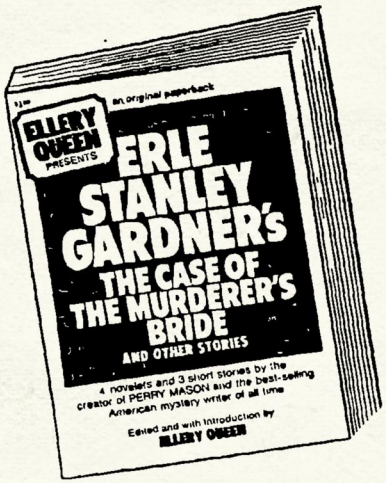

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PIERRE CHAMBRUN, hotel-manager detective

a *NEW* detective *SHORT NOVEL* by

HUGH PENTECOST

complete in this issue

For those of you who may not have read Hugh Pentecost's detective novels about Pierre Chambrun, or the short stories and short novel which have appeared in EQMM, let us give you a brief dossier on the resident manager of the Beaumont, New York City's top luxury hotel, and on the Beaumont itself. Pierre Chambrun is what might be called an "original"—a short dark man with very black eyes buried in deep pouches—eyes that can twinkle with humor or turn as cold as those of a hanging judge. He has a positive genius for dealing with people—from a dishwasher to a Duchess. He seems to have a special built-in radar that lets him know exactly where trouble is at the precise moment that it happens—any kind of trouble from a trivial complaint to murder.

The Hotel Beaumont is not so much a hotel to Pierre Chambrun as a "way of life." In fact, it is like a small town, self-contained, self-sufficient, with its own shops and restaurants, its own police force—and Pierre Chambrun in personal charge with his Swiss-watch precision, Continental efficiency, and American know-how . . .

You will find "The Masked Crusader" a fascinating short novel, complete in this issue, constantly moving and full of surprises. It asks the provocative question: can a TV character called The Masked Crusader, created wholly out of a writer's imagination, come to life and commit murder?

THE MASKED CRUSADER

by HUGH PENTECOST

IT BEGAN FOR ME ON A BRISK fall morning. At that time nobody was dead, except on paper. I was looking over the list of newly registered guests from the night before—part of my job as public relations director at the Hotel Beaumont—when my secretary buzzed me from the outer office.

"An old college friend of yours is out here to see you," she said. "Norman Geller."

"Never heard of him," I said.

"I'll send him in," Shelda said sweetly. I knew she was talking in front of this unwanted visitor. Intuition told me I was about to be clipped for the Alumni Fund by some eager beaver.

"Thank you, Miss Mason," I said, giving it a sardonic reading.

My old college chum walked into the office. I didn't know him, and yet there was something vaguely familiar about him. He was, at that moment, a sort of rumpled Westchester country-club type—tweed jacket, turtlenecked navy-blue sports shirt, gray flannel slacks, custom-made loafers. But he looked a little as if he'd slept in the entire outfit.

"Mark!" he said, holding out his hand, "what luck to find you here." His handshake was firm but not meant to impress. He saw that I was puzzled. "You don't have the faintest idea who I am, do you?"

"Something stirs, but bells don't ring," I said.

"Norbert Gellernacht," he said. "Little Norbert Gellernacht."

An image came sharply into focus. Norbert Gellernacht had been an eager sophomore in my senior year. He'd worn thick glasses in those days and he was trying desperately to gain a measure of popularity by writing an allegedly witty column for the college daily. I had thought of him as a pleasant nothing who was never going to make it because he tried too hard. My philosophy professor might have called that a *non sequitur*.

"Norbert!" I said, unable to think of anything else to say.

"I saw your name on the hotel card in my room," he said. "Public Relations Director. Boy, was I glad, because I need a friend in city hall."

"Sit down," I said. It obviously wasn't going to be a pitch for the Alumni Fund.

He sat down in the armchair by my desk and lit a cigarette. His hands weren't too steady. "I changed my name after I sold my first piece of magazine fiction," he said. "Nobody would ever remember 'Norbert Gellernacht'."

"So you've become a professional writer," I said. "You always wanted to, didn't you?" I thought he must be doing pretty well if he could afford the Hotel Beaumont's prices.

"I used to think so," he said, "until about three weeks ago. I now know that I am just a high-priced salami slicer."

"Oh?"

"Television," he explained.

"That's where the money is, no?"

"This road, paved with gold, leads straight to the alcohol tank or the loony bin," he said, grinning at me. "That's why I need your help, Mark."

"Oh," I said. I was full of "ohs" that morning.

"I am writing a pilot script for a new TV series to be called *The Masked Crusader*," he said. "It will star the great Robert Saville who is, as I daresay you know, a guest in this mink-lined hostelry of yours."

That was one thing I did know—that Robert Saville was a guest at the Beaumont—a suite on the 19th floor with half a dozen surrounding rooms for secretaries, valets, and other minions, including a doll who looked as though she did nothing at all efficient with her clothes on. Robert Saville is the current answer to filling the gap left when Clark Gable shuffled off this mortal coil. The difference between Gable and Saville is, I suspect, that Gable was a very decent guy and Saville is a prize phony. He had already produced one headache for me. His secretary, a sensible-looking girl named Sally Bevans, had come to my office the day Saville checked in.

"It is to be clearly understood, Mr. Haskell," she said to me, "that Mr. Saville's presence at the Beaumont is to be a deep dark secret. He's here to work with the producers, director, and writer on a film script. Let the word out that he's here and he'll be swamped."

"By the common people?" I said.

Her smile was amiable. A wise young owl, I thought. "We are only talking to vice-presidents this week," she said.

The next day it was in all the newspapers—plus a couple of TV interviews. Robert Saville was in town, staying at the Beaumont. Our lobby suddenly looked like Grand Central Station at commuter time. I had to assume that Saville's Hollywood-studio promotion man had blown the story.

I ran into the unruffled and chic-looking Sally Bevans in the center of a swarm of screaming female teen-agers in the lobby that afternoon.

"Don't blame me!" I shouted at her over the din.

"Title of a popular song," she said.

"Who did blow it?"

"The Master," she said.

"Saville himself?"

"He couldn't stand the loneliness," she said. "He's surrounded by a mere two dozen vice-presidents and he couldn't stand the loneliness . . ."

Norman Geller was grinning at me. "Interesting thing about Saville," he said. "Whenever you mention him people always go into a kind of trance. If you were a girl I'd know what you were remembering."

"So I'm not a girl, Norman," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"As I told you, I'm writing *The Masked Crusader,*" Norman said. "It was my idea. I got paid money for it. I got paid money for what is called a treatment. I was then hired to write the shooting script, which means more money, and royalties on the original run and all the reruns. Until about ten days ago I had dollar signs in place of eye pupils. Then things got rough. I am on the nineteenth rewrite now. You know why?"

"Why, Norman?"

"Because about fifty people have to get into the act. There's Saville who has his own personal image about The Masked Crusader. There's the director who thinks there should be a 'message.' There's the Network vice-president for Programming, and the Network vice-president for Development. There's Rachel Stanton, the leading lady, who has *her* image, and there is Walter Cameron, another writer waiting in the wings. And there is T. James Carson."

I knew that Thomas James Carson was the big wheel at the Network. Just the other day the papers had reported he'd exercised a stock option that had [illegible] him a million and a half.

"I get three-quarters of the way through the script," Norman said, "and there is suddenly mass hysteria. Hector Cross, V.P. for Programming, thinks the last scene should come first. Paul Drott, V.P. for Development, says the tease should be incorporated in the body of the script and I should think up a new tease. Karl Richter, the director, just looks at me, fish-eyed, and says, 'Where's the message, Norman? I mean you aren't *saying* anything, Cookie.'

"Then Saville takes the version over to T. James Carson and insists on reading it aloud to him. Saville is worth so much money to the Network and the movie

studio that Carson has to listen. But he hates Saville for making him listen and so he hates the script. 'Interesting, but it needs work—a lot of work.' 'Yes, sir, T.J. What kind of work?' T.J. will make notes when he has a free moment. Of course he doesn't have a free moment. And we're supposed to start shooting next Monday.

"Well, here's my situation, Mark. It's never going to be finished, see? They won't let me finish it. If I don't finish it I lose a major portion of my rights in it. But I can't finish it. They hang around me like vultures. They snatch each page as it comes out of the typewriter. They come back with suggestions. 'This version is going to be it?' I ask them. 'Yes, Norman,' they say, 'this is it. You're a great guy, Norman, a wonderful guy, Norman, a genius, Norman. This will be *it*.' But they won't let me finish it."

"Sounds wild."

"I've *got* to finish it—and then they can go fly!" Norman said.

"So finish it."

"I need a hideout," Norman said. "That's why I came to you. I need a room here in the hotel that nobody knows about. I mustn't be registered. No phone calls. I want to stay hidden from five thousand vice-presidents and their five thousand private detectives."

"I think something could be arranged," I said.

"Bless you!" Norman said. "I need two uninterrupted days to finish the script—just two days."

I have an apartment down the hall from my office—living room, bedroom, kitchenette. I spend some time there and some time at a nice little garden apartment three blocks from the hotel occupied by my secretary, Shelda Mason. Shelda and I are "like that." Norman could have my apartment for two days without registering. I explained the setup to him and he was delighted.

"Can I go there now?" he asked. "You could send someone to my room for my typewriter, the script, my razor, my slippers, and a clean shirt."

"It's a deal. You really don't want anyone to be able to reach you?"

"No one! I've been out on the town all night. There are four million messages for me in my mailbox. If there's anything really important I'll call back. But no one is to reach me."

"Right. They'll call your room. There'll be no answer. You don't answer the phone in my room because it will be for me."

"Mark, you're a doll!"

I took Norman down the hall to my apartment. I fixed him up with a card table he could put his typewriter on. There was stuff in the kitchenette so that he could

make coffee and eggs and a variety of sandwiches, so he wouldn't have to call room service. He was almost psychotic about being seen by anyone—word would get back to Saville and the vice-presidents...

I was getting some papers together for my morning session with the big boss when my telephone rang. I heard the calm voice of Sally Bevans, Robert Saville's secretary.

"I have to ask you a favor, Mr. Haskell," she said.

"Any time, any place, lady," I said.

"I know that joke," she said.

"I apologize. Just a figure of speech meant to imply a secret passion for you, Miss Bevans."

"This is serious," she said. "We've lost a writer."

"Well, well."

"His name is Norman Geller, registered in Room 1927. He's not there."

"How do you know?"

"Doesn't answer his phone. Hasn't picked up dozens of messages left at the desk for him. He's supposed to be working—matter of life and death, you might say. We have to have a shooting script by Monday. Mr. Saville became alarmed last night and got the housekeeper to open Room 1927 with a passkey. He wasn't there. The page in the typewriter is the same page he was writing late yesterday."

I'd forgotten to ask Norman how he'd spent his time "on the town."

"So he went out," I said.

"Going out is against the rules," Sally Bevans said, a slightly wry note in her voice. "I'm instructed to ask you to have the hotel security officer search the premises. Mr. Saville thinks Mr. Geller may have had a nervous breakdown. He fears suicide."

"And you?"

"I think he just couldn't take it any more," Sally said. "The point is if he doesn't finish the script he's out more thousands of dollars than I can estimate. He may be dead drunk somewhere in the hotel."

"I'll turn the mice loose," I said. "If they come up with anything I'll have Jerry Dodd call you. He's our security officer."

"Thank you, Mr. Haskell."

"Thank you, Miss Bevans. Would a very dry vodka martini in the Trapeze Bar about one o'clock interest you at all? Over a progress report?"

"It would interest me," she said, "but I'm afraid I'm chained to the chariot wheels."

I called Jerry Dodd and explained things. Norman was to be left unmolested. If Jerry was called by a vice-president or Miss Bevans or the great Saville or even T. James Carson he was to say he was still looking.

I then called Johnny Thacker, the day bell captain, explained the setup to him, and gave him a list of things Norman wanted from his room, with instructions to get them to my apartment as unobtrusively as possible.

The Masked Crusader could now, I felt certain, crusade for the next two days in peace.

Pierre Chambrun, resident manager of the Beaumont and my boss, is a real "original." As his name suggests, he is French by birth. He came to this country as a very young man, went into the hotel business, and reached the pinnacle as manager of New York's top luxury hotel. The Beaumont, he often says, is not a hotel but a way of life. It is, in fact, like a small town, self-contained, self-sufficient, with its own shops and restaurants, its own police force, and its own "mayor."

Chambrun, short, dark, very black eyes buried in deep pouches—eyes that can twinkle with humor or turn as cold as a hanging judge's when he's displeased—has a genius for dealing with people, from the lowliest dishwasher to visiting royalty. His staff gives him an almost fanatical loyalty. He has the sense to delegate authority and the genius to be on hand in a crisis to shoulder the major responsibility. They say he has a special radar that tells him exactly where trouble is at the precise moment it happens. "When I don't know what's going on in my hotel," he said, "it will be time for me to retire."

He didn't know about Norman Geller when I went into his office, but I told him. Anything out of the ordinary gets told, or else.

He was sitting at his carved Florentine desk in his very plush office, the walls decorated by two Picassos and a Chagall—not reproductions, you understand. He was sipping his inevitable demitasse cup of Turkish coffee. The coffee maker was on a sideboard and kept in constant operation by Miss Ruysdale, his indispensable secretary.

He listened with obvious amusement to my account of Norman's problems.

"Millions of dollars on the line for a piece of comic-strip literature. The Masked Crusader!" He snorted, and then his eyes narrowed. "Saville is creating a problem, Mark. The lobby is a madhouse."

"You could ask him to leave," I said.

He frowned. "The Network, the Hollywood Crowd—important customers," he said. "If Saville wasn't such a vain ass—"

"The funny thing is he comes and goes at will without those silly girls even knowing it," Miss Ruysdale said. "He puts on a gray

hairpiece, black glasses, black hat pulled down over his face, and has someone push him right through the crowd in a wheel chair. Who notices an old cripple? I watched him go out this morning and no one paid the slightest attention. Down the block off comes the hat, the wig, and the glasses, and the magnificent Robert Saville parades down the Avenue. He's made arrangements at the corner drug store for them to keep the chair for him. When he's ready he comes back—in disguise."

"Loving every minute of it," Chambrun muttered. "I take it from your story, Mark, that we're going to have to put up with it until Monday?"

"That's when Norman's supposed to be finished," I said.

The buzzer on Chambrun's desk sounded. Johnny Thacker, the day bell captain, was in the outer office. He was summoned into the Presence. He looked a little odd to me, as though he might have eaten something that didn't agree with him.

"You get my friend taken care of?" I asked.

"Yeah, I got the stuff to him," Johnny said. He moistened his lips. "There's something your friend didn't tell you, Mr. Haskell."

"Oh?"

"He didn't tell you there was a dead man in his clothes closet," Johnny said.

Norman's room was a mess: ashtrays overflowing, crumpled pieces of paper tossed around the floor, soiled shirts and underthings lying on the unmade bed. Evidently Norman had told the housekeeper he didn't want the maid in his room. Writer at work—Do Not Disturb.

Jerry Dodd, the Beaumont's security officer, was already in Room 1927 when Chambrun and I, with Johnny Thacker trailing, arrived. Johnny had done the proper thing, calling Jerry Dodd before he did anything else. Jerry is a slim wiry man in his late forties, with dark eyes that are never still. He is another of the indispensables on Chambrun's highly efficient staff. The Beaumont has its problems like any other hotel—deadbeats, drunks, expensive call girls who appear from time to time in the Trapeze Bar, professional hotel thieves who seldom get caught and amateurs who always get caught, suicides, heart attacks suffered by elderly gentlemen in the rooms of young ladies who are not their wives. There are births and normal deaths. And on at least a half dozen occasions in my time as P.R. director there have been violent deaths. Murder.

Jerry was standing by the open closet door when we came in. He looked around, his eyes bright and cold.

"Better not touch anything," he

said. "I've called Homicide."

"That bad?" Chambrun asked.

"That bad," Jerry said. "Broken neck. Looks like he might have been karate-chopped." He stepped away from the door so that we could see into the closet. A man was crumpled there, his body twisted into an unnatural position. There was almost a surprised look on the dead face.

"I know him," I heard myself say. "He lunches here three, four times a week. He's asked a favor or two of me on publicity releases. Talent agent name of Frank Hansbury. Handles actors, writers, directors—show-business people mostly."

"Handle your friend Geller?" Jerry asked.

"No idea. Hansbury's being here suggests—"

"It sure does," Jerry said. He turned to Chambrun. "I have a man stationed outside Mark's apartment, just in case Mr. Geller decides to take off."

"I think we better talk to your friend, Mark," Chambrun said.

"I'll join you when I get a man here to cover this room," Jerry said.

Chambrun and I went down to the fourth floor. Jerry's man was outside my door.

"All quiet," the man said. "He's in there typing away like mad."

I used my key to let us in. Norman, coatless, a cigarette dangling from a corner of his mouth, was at the typewriter set up on the card table I'd provided. He looked up, frowning. When he saw Chambrun he groaned.

"Now what?" he said.

"Is Frank Hansbury your agent?" I asked him.

"He is, and a damn good one," Norman said. He glanced at Chambrun. "You're the manager, aren't you? You're not going to tell me there's some reason I can't work in Mark's apartment?"

"Are you on the outs with Hansbury?" Chambrun asked.

"He is my rod and my staff, my comforter," Norman said. "I love Frank. But will you please get this over with, whatever it is, so I can get back to—"

"Hansbury is in your room," Chambrun said.

"Who let him in?" Norman said.

"And he's dead," Chambrun said.

That really got to Norman. He stared at us as though he hadn't heard right. "You have to be kidding," he whispered.

"We think he's been murdered, Norman," I said.

"God Almighty, *how*?" Norman said.

"Our man thinks a karate chop to the back of the head," I said. "Broke his neck."

The ash fell from Norman's cigarette. He didn't notice it dribble down the front of his navy-

blue sports shirt. "Geoffrey Cleghorn is a karate expert. Black belt," Norman said.

"Who is Geoffrey Cleghorn?" Chambrun asked, his voice sharp.

Norman started to laugh. There was a hysterical note to it. He waved at the page in his typewriter. "The Masked Crusader," he said.

There were little beads of sweat on Norman's forehead. "What a terrible thing," he said. "I talked to Frank only last night. He—"

"Where were you last night, Mr. Geller?" Chambrun said. "According to Mark you were 'out on the town'."

"It doesn't matter where I was," Norman said. "I went to see a friend—about six o'clock last night. I haven't been in my room since. When I came back this morning I went straight to Mark's office."

"Who is the friend you went to see?" Chambrun asked.

"That's immaterial," Norman said.

"You're going to need an alibi, Mr. Geller."

"Now wait a minute—

"You do research on the karate skills of your character, The Masked Crusader?"

"Well, sure. I had to know what I could expect him to be able to do. I took a few simple lessons—just to learn the basic techniques. But—"

"You are certainly going to need an alibi," Chambrun said.

Norman sat very still for a moment. Then he lit a fresh cigarette with hands that shook. "Is this official or am I talking to friends?" he asked.

I glanced at Chambrun.

"The police will be here shortly," Chambrun said. "That will be official. What would Hansbury be doing in your room, Mr. Geller? Did he have a key?"

"Not unless he got it from you," Norman said. He had made the decision to talk. "Frank was a very good friend as well as my agent. He knows all about the hell I've been going through with this pilot. Most of it's money hell. I'm supposed to get paid for each rewrite. I told Mark there have been nineteen. But none of them was actually finished—so the Network is claiming this is still the first draft. Frank has been fighting them tooth and nail. He's got the Writers' Guild on his side. We've been trying to bypass all the vice-presidents and Saville and get to Carson himself. He's the big wheel at the Network."

"So Hansbury came to your room to tell you he'd failed and you blew your stack and chopped him," Chambrun said.

"Oh, cut it out, will you?" Norman said. "I'm the fiction writer around here, Mr. Chambrun."

"So what did happen?"

"I talked to Frank just before I went out last night—around six. He was still in his office. He told me Saville was trying to keep us away from Carson. Saville owns a piece of this package and was afraid if we got to Carson the Network might junk the whole project. Frank said he was still trying to set up an appointment with Carson for today. I told him I was going out—for the night. I needed a breather. I told him where he could reach me if it was absolutely necessary."

"Where?"

Norman leaned forward. "Look, Mr. Chambrun, I spent the night with a girl friend and I'm not going to bring her into it."

"You may have to."

"Like hell I will!" Norman said.

"Hansbury knew you were going to be with this girl?"

"Yes, and if it's necessary he can vouch—" Norman stopped, his mouth hanging open. Frank Hansbury wasn't going to vouch for anything.

"You're on your own, Mr. Geller," Chambrun said quietly.

Norman looked at me. "If I killed Frank in my room why would I send you to get my things, Mark? You'd be bound to find the body. If I killed him—and I didn't—I'd make sure you didn't find the body for a couple of days."

"Why a couple of days?" Chambrun asked.

"So I could finish this damned script and get paid for it!" Norman said.

Chambrun sighed. "Let's be realistic, Norman," he said. "You didn't see or hear from Hansbury after you talked to him about six last night?"

"No."

"He didn't call you at your girl's apartment?"

"Not while I was there."

"Which is where?"

"No!" Norman said.

"In this TV project might Hansbury have come to the hotel to see someone else?"

"Sure, they're all here like vultures," Norman said. "Saville, a hatful of vice-presidents like Hector Cross and Paul Drott, Karl Richter the director . . . Frank could have come to see any of them about the appointment with Carson or about money. He wouldn't have come to my room, though, because he knew I was out."

"Could he have gone to your room to get the script? To make some point about it?"

"He'd know better. He'd know I'd clobber anyone who touched my script without my permission."

"Or karate-chop anyone, Norman?"

"Will you cut that out!" Norman said.

Lieutenant Hardy looks more like a puzzled Notre Dame fullback than a Homicide detective. He's tall, square-jawed, a very tenacious and efficient police officer. We were lucky to have him on the case. He'd been in on a couple of other murders at the Beaumont and he knew us—Chambrun in particular.

"What's your theory about your friend?" Hardy asked me.

We were in Chambrun's office. Hardy had been on the scene for about an hour, going over Norman's room with his technicians and their little vacuum cleaners, powders, brushes, cameras.

"I think not," I said.

"You, Chambrun?"

"If Geller killed Hansbury," Chambrun said, "he certainly didn't mean us *not* to pin it on him. You could say he actually sent us to his room to find the body. I notice that bedroom slippers were on the list of things he wanted. That would take us right into the closet."

Hardy scowled at the notebook he was holding open in his big hand. "Preliminary report would indicate that Hansbury has been dead at least fifteen hours. Could be more, but not much less—an educated guesstimate by the Medical Examiner's man." Hardy looked at his wrist watch. "It's now five minutes to noon. That means Hansbury was probably killed around eight, nine o'clock last night. If he came here to see some of the rest of these people it's time we found out." He put away his notebook. "My wife is going to drive me crazy," he said.

"How so?"

"Robert Saville and Cary Grant are my chief rivals," he said drily.

It was the attractive Miss Bevans who answered our ring at the door of Robert Saville's suite. Her thinly penciled eyebrows rose in an expression of surprise when she saw us.

"You have news of Mr. Geller?" she asked me.

I introduced Chambrun and Hardy.

"Police!" she said. "Then something *has* happened to Norman?"

"I think we'd better come inside," Hardy said.

"I'm sorry but Mr. Saville is in conference. If it's a matter of raising bail or something—"

"I'm sorry, Miss Bevans," Chambrun said. "A man named Frank Hansbury has been murdered. The Lieutenant will have to talk to Mr. Saville, conference or no conference."

"Hansbury!" she said. It was a whisper. "How perfectly awful!"

We went into the suite's small foyer. In the room beyond we could hear excited voices, chief among them Robert Saville's pear-shaped tones projecting to the back row of the second balcony.

"I will *not* have a double for my tricks," Saville was blasting. "I will *not* be subjected to jokes about my not doing my own stunts. Therefore the stunts are going to have to be things I *can* do, Karl, and that's that!"

"You'd better let Norman in on the secret," a drawling voice said. "He's got a climbing sequence on the side of a building in the second scene that you just *can't* do, Bob. It's been agreed to from the very beginning. Maybe we'd better change the whole concept and call it 'Little Lord Fauntleroy Rides Again'."

"You cheap son-of-a—" Saville shouted.

"Sticks and stones, Bobby," the other voice interrupted.

"Hansbury was here last night," Miss Bevans said at my elbow. "I simply can't believe it."

She opened the door and we walked on stage.

Whatever kind of a jerk he may be in private life, Robert Saville, in the flesh, was impressive. He was tall, dark, with good character lines in his handsome face. His mouth had a weak, slightly pouting look to it, but all in all he exuded masculinity. In all honesty I think the Little Lord Fauntleroy crack was unwarranted. I knew he was an expert horseman, brilliant with fencing foils, and I'd heard he was beating the brains out of the squash pro each day in the courts on the roof of the hotel. He was tanned a beautiful bronze. Caught off guard, as he was when we walked into the room, he still managed an attitude of graceful elegance.

"Would you be good enough to explain this invasion, Sally," he said, looking at Chambrun, Hardy, and me as though we were three cigar-store Indians.

Sally introduced us. "Something dreadful has happened, Mr. Saville," she said. "They tell me Frank Hansbury has been murdered."

"I always knew that jerk would do us in some way or other," Saville said.

I saw Chambrun's face go stony. He isn't fond of flippancy—unless he's responsible for it himself.

"You'll have to forgive Bobby for exposing his warm human emotions so openly," the blond man by the windows said. He was, I took it, Karl of the Fauntleroy crack—Karl Richter, the director of Norman's opus. He had a Germanic crewcut, and his thin lips were twisted in a sardonic smile. Not a very nice guy, I thought. He gestured toward his almost total opposite—a young man with black hair, worn rather long, who sat deep in an upholstered armchair, his face a blank. "The robot in the armchair is Paul Drott, gentlemen, a vice-president."

Hardy took charge. "Hansbury

was found dead, his neck broken, in a closet in Norman Geller's room," he said. "Do the stunts you can do, Mr. Saville, include karate?"

Saville ignored the question. "Sally, call Walter Cameron and tell him he's going to have to finish the script. Get Hector Cross here. He'll have to know. And tell him to keep it from Carson as long as he can. We don't want Carson flying off the handle till we know where we're at. And send George in here."

"Right away, Mr. Saville." Sally started for the next room.

"Just a moment," Hardy said. "I'm giving the orders here. I heard you say, Miss Bevans, that Hansbury was here last night."

"Of course he was here," Saville said. "He's Norman's agent. He's been in our hair ever since this project got under way. He was here last night before dinner, bellyaching about something or other." He made a sweeping gesture that took in the others. "I told you Norman was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I told you we shouldn't keep all our eggs in one basket. Wally Cameron should have been working on this script long ago." He turned to Hardy. "Why did Norman kill him?"

"We don't know that Geller did kill him," Hardy said.

"Where is he? Have you found him?" Saville asked. "The little twerk has been missing since early last night. We have a mountain of notes for him and he's not around. He deserted—powdered—ran out!"

"I understand you got yourself into his room last night," Hardy said.

"With a housekeeper—and Sally," Saville said. "We thought he might be sick when he didn't answer his phone."

"What time was that?"

Saville looked at Sally.

"About a quarter to ten," she said.

"Did you look in the closet?" Hardy asked.

"Why should we look in the closet?" Saville said. "You don't expect to find a writer in a closet, do you?"

"I ask because at a quarter to ten Hansbury was dead and probably in that closet," Hardy said.

"Oh, God!" Sally said.

"When you find Norman you'll find the answers," Saville said.

"We know where Geller is," Hardy said. "We'll ask him in good time."

"Well, where is he? I've got to talk to him, Lieutenant. The whole beginning of Scene Three is wrong. He's probably working on it right now."

"What makes you think he's working?"

"That's what he's being paid for!" Saville said.

"I think," Chambrun said in a saw-toothed voice, "I've had about enough of this black comedy, Mr. Saville. A man has been murdered in my hotel. The Lieutenant and I are here to gather facts."

"Where is George?" Saville shouted, completely ignoring Chambrun.

"On stage, Professor," a new voice said.

The man who came through from the bedroom section of the suite was something you wouldn't believe. He was about two inches over six feet with a body right out of Bernarr McFadden's dream world. Muscles, muscles, muscles. He wore a tight cotton T-shirt that exposed them all. There were also gray slacks and white sneakers. This was a man who could bend iron bars and straighten out horseshoes.

"This is my lawyer, George Brimsek," Saville said. "He'll tell me what I have to do and not do."

Brimsek's hair was a reddish crewcut and he had the coldest gray-green eyes I've ever seen. His smile was pasted on.

Sally made quick introductions and brought him up to date. As Brimsek listened his biceps rippled. I discovered in due course that he really was a lawyer, but his only client was Robert Saville, and his chief duty was to keep Saville in top physical condition. It was his job to lose to Saville in any public competition—golf, tennis, squash, boxing, foils. The truth was he could have taken Saville in any sport with his right arm tied behind him.

"I think you better answer the man's questions, Bob," he said. "They can make you do it somewhere else less pleasant, you know." He turned to Hardy. "Do I understand you know where Geller is?" It hadn't been mentioned in his presence, so I assumed he'd been listening from the next room.

"We know where he is," Hardy said. "I want to know about Hansbury's visit to this suite last night."

"That's reasonable," Brimsek said. "He showed up here about seven o'clock. We were just going down to the Grill Room for dinner. I was here, Bob, Sally, and—and you too, weren't you, Paul?"

The vice-president nodded. He seemed to be still in shock.

"There was a lot of shouting," Brimsek said, his smile tightening. "That's been more or less par for the course in our dealings with Hansbury. He has been claiming that Norman was entitled to certain payments for various drafts of the script he's writing. Since there has never been a single completed draft, we claim he's only entitled to payment for that initial draft. Hansbury called us

a bunch of crooks and threatened to go to Carson with the whole story. We said he was a chiseling little rat trying to blackmail us. When all that had been said we went down to dinner."

"And Hansbury?"

"We left him here. It was the only way to get rid of him since he wouldn't accept our invitation to leave. The last I saw of him he was trying to reach Norman on the phone—I assumed."

"Assumed?"

"He was dialing. He had told us he was going to tell Norman not to write another line. I gather he went to see Norman, they got in an argument, and Hansbury got his neck broken. Norman's very good at karate. I know. I taught him."

"You all went to dinner—you, Miss Bevans, Mr. Saville, and Mr. Drott—leaving Hansbury here?" Hardy looked around and got a collection of affirmative nods.

"Dinner was pretty impossible," Brimsek said. "Bob couldn't swallow a shrimp without having to sign his autograph. We came back up here about eight thirty."

"Hansbury was gone?"

Brimsek nodded. "Gone, leaving a cigarette burn on the telephone table. We began trying to reach Norman then. Bob and Paul had notes for him. He didn't answer. We kept trying. At about a quarter to ten Bob and Sally got the housekeeper to let them into Norman's room. We thought he might be sick or had done himself some harm. Bob's quite right, he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Norman wasn't there, so that was that. We went out to find some action somewhere."

"Action?"

Brimsek shrugged. "Bob likes to play poker," he said.

"You went out through the mob in the lobby?"

Brimsek grinned. "We have a way."

"The wheel chair," Chambrun said.

"Oh, so you spotted that," Brimsek said.

"There are four keys to this suite," Chambrun said. "None of them is at the front desk. Who has them?"

"That's none of your damn business!" Saville exploded.

"Might as well tell him, Bob," Brimsek said. "He'll find out." He was being uncommonly cooperative, I thought. "Bob has one, of course. I have one. Sally has one."

"And the fourth?"

Brimsek shrugged. "Sheri has one," he said.

"Who is Sheri?" Hardy asked.

"Miss Sheri Southworth," Brimsek said. "She's a lady companion of Bob's who stays here with him."

"When you rent a suite you can have anyone stay with you

you want," Saville said.

"Miss Southworth lives in his suite?" Hardy asked.

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"She's in bed. She's got a bad cold," Saville said.

"Was she here last night?"

"Of course."

"You didn't mention her going to dinner with you."

"I tell you she's got a virus!" Saville said. "She was sick in bed."

"In this suite?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Then she probably knows when Hansbury left. I'd like to talk to her," Hardy said.

"She's sick in bed!" Saville shouted.

"Ask her to join us," Hardy said.

Brimsek nodded to Sally, who left to find Sheri.

"We all have our special tastes in women," Karl Richter said. "Bob is neither a romantic nor an intellectual. He just likes them."

Brimsek looked down at his bulging biceps with an amused grin.

If Miss Sheri Southworth had a cold or virus it was not noticeable. What she did have was a gorgeous shiner. Her left eye was purple and swollen shut. She looked around at us with an amiable grin and said, "I'd really rather switch than fight."

She was something. The blonde hair was out of a bottle; the eyelashes were false; ditto the long tapering fingernails. The only things not false were revealed by her negligee.

"Oooh, look at all the lovely men," she said.

"Shut up, Sheri!" Saville barked.

"There has been a murder, Miss Southworth," Hardy said.

"Ooooh, how thrilling!" Sheri said. "Anybody I know?"

"Frank Hansbury. Somebody broke his neck," Saville said.

"I understand you were alone with Hansbury in this suite for a while last night, Miss Southworth," Hardy said.

"That Frank Hansbury!" Sheri said. Her gold-tipped fingers touched her swollen eye. "He was only here a little while. On the phone all the time. He was too busy to be interested in me. I came in here for a cigarette and he didn't even look at me." She touched her eye again, then looked at Saville with her good one. "I behaved myself, Bobby."

"Will you shut up, Sheri!" Saville yelled.

"Can you tell us what time Hansbury left here?" Hardy asked.

"Ooooh, I'm afraid not, Lieutenant," she said. "I really have no sense about time at all. Bobby and the others were downstairs at dinner."

"Do you have any idea who he was talking to on the phone?"

"I'm afraid I don't. I mean, he wasn't really talking to anyone. He kept dialing numbers he didn't get any answers to. One number did answer, I guess, and he said, 'Is Norman there yet?' But I guess Norman wasn't because he hung up. Then I went back to my room, closed the door, and I didn't hear when he left."

Hardy drew a deep breath. "You will all keep yourselves available till I tell you otherwise. Don't leave the hotel till you get the word from me."

"Now look here, copper—" Saville began.

"Cool it, Bob," Brimsek said. "The Lieutenant can hold us all as material witnesses if he chooses. He's being real polite."

"What about me?" Karl Richter said. "I wasn't even in the hotel last night."

"You stay too," Hardy said.

"Any reason I shouldn't go downstairs for a drink?" Richter asked. "I have a batch of phone calls to make—private."

"You can use my office," Chambrun said.

I was surprised, but I didn't show it. I noticed, as I was leaving, that Paul Drott was getting up out of his chair. He hadn't spoken a word during our entire visit.

Out in the hall Chambrun turned to Karl Richter. "You wanted to tell us something, Mr. Richter?"

Richter's cold face was a mask. "You're smarter than I thought you were, Mr. Chambrun." We were standing by the elevators. He took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. "Our Bobby's private life is rather unusual," he said. "Can you guess how it is with Sheri? She is—shall we say friendly?—to his friends and for that he beats her up."

"I'm sure that isn't what you really wanted to tell us," Chambrun said coldly.

"I enjoyed telling it to you, anyway," Richter said. "But you're right. I wanted to tell you that people like Bob Saville live in a world you may not understand. This is an ordinary guy from upstate New York—Utica, I think. He came from a middle-class family with no dough. He wanted to be an actor, genuinely. He went to an acting school, worked at anything—dishwashing, waiting on table, night watchman. He got a few odd jobs off-Broadway. A real dedicated guy. Then he hit it big.

"Do you know what he gets for making a movie? Half a million bucks—plus residuals, plus advertising payoffs, plus a share of profits. This TV series, if it sells, will make him several million dollars. He's so damned rich you couldn't begin to count it. And he's no longer the

dedicated young actor from Utica. He's King! If anybody gets in his way, like a writer or a director or a dame or a shoeshine boy—or a talent agent, our Bobby just rolls over him and leaves the remains for the dustman. To him it's unreasonable to imagine that anyone else has any rights. The world is a special-privilege oyster made only for him; none of its rules or laws apply to him. He's not a bad guy, really, but he's lost contact with reality."

"Are you trying to tell us—" Hardy began.

"I'm trying to tell you that if a waiter brought Bob a cold poached egg Bob might easily throw him out of the nineteenth-story window. Then he'd turn to George Brimsek and say, 'I lost my head. I'm sorry. Get me out of it.' Up to now George has always got him out of it. Don't let the muscles fool you. There is more between George's ears than mush."

An elevator door opened and we all stepped in. Chambrun turned to me as the car started down. "There's very little hope this story won't leak," he said. "You're going to be swamped by news people, Mark. As far as you know Hansbury died of a heart attack in Norman's room. The presence of the police is ordinary routine. If there are any statements to be made Lieutenant Hardy will make them. Have a simple release mimeoed and just hand it out."

I got off at the fourth floor.

If somebody broke my neck and stuffed me in a closet the interested parties would be limited. I have no family. Shelda, my secretary, would cry. Chambrun would feel depressed, I think. The police would be concerned, and so would my insurance company.

Hansbury's death touched many more bases, all of them with red-hot publicity angles. There were huge investments on the line. If Robert Saville was in any way involved, his motion picture company stood to lose about $12,000,000 in as yet unreleased films. The Network had a penny-ante investment of $250,000 in this pilot of Norman's, plus residuals on other shows, plus half a dozen old Saville movies bought for the Late Late shows at about $3,000,000 each. This was all real money, plus many other millions they had reasonably expected to make off Saville in the future.

As I sat in my office writing out the phony news release I could imagine what was going on in a dozen offices here and on the West Coast. Robert Saville must be kept clean at all costs. To hell with who murdered Frank Hansbury so long as Saville's public image remained unsullied. I knew the Beaumont would sud-

denly be swarming with high-priced lawyers, high-priced executives, and in all probability, high-priced private investigators.

Nobody would give a damn about Hansbury—no one except a family or a girl or maybe a dog waiting in an apartment somewhere for his evening walk.

And then I began to think about Norman—once known as "little Norbert Gellernacht." Norman's position was sticky, to put it mildly. Hardy would be down on him presently with some pretty deadly ammunition. The scene of the crime—Norman's room, undoubtedly loaded with Norman's fingerprints. The relationship with Hansbury—possibly f r i e n d l y, quite probably explosive at the moment. The murder weapon—the edge of a hand, precision-skilled. Norman had that skill. He had admitted it. George Brimsek had modestly claimed the role of teacher.

I had a vision of little Norbert Gellernacht sitting under a bright light, surrounded by the accusing faces of Hardy and high-powered lawyers and vice-presidents and even presidents. Norbert was ideal guillotine fodder. Norman might well save the huge investments in Robert Saville. Who cares what happens to a writer? Writers are the "nothings" of the entertainment industry, even though the executives keep wistfully chanting that there would be no films, no television, no theater without them. Everybody knows it's actors and directors and executives and vice-presidents who matter.

I went down the hall to my apartment. Believe it or not, I found Norman pounding away at the typewriter when I let myself in with my key. He gave me a slightly irritated smile and went right on pounding.

"Norman," I said, "you're in trouble."

"Be a good boy, Mark, and leave me alone," Norman said. "At this moment Geoffrey Cleghorn, the Masked Crusader, is crossing Fifth Avenue hand over hand on a rope stretched ten stories above the street."

"That's out," I said. "Saville refuses to have any stunts in the script that he can't do himself."

Norman's fingers halted, poised over the keyboard. "Where did you get that?"

"I just heard him say so."

"That punk! It's been agreed from the start that we'd use a stunt man."

"Norman, have you forgotten that Frank Hansbury has been murdered?"

"I haven't forgotten," he said, quite seriously. "But the only thing I know to do is finish this script. It means money for me, and money for Frank's estate. His commission."

"Does Hansbury have a family?"

"Divorced. No kids," Norman said, looking back at Geoffrey Cleghorn suspended over Fifth Avenue.

I made what I thought was a joke, because it was the worst thing I could think of. "I don't suppose the girl you spent the night with was Hansbury's ex-wife."

Norman looked up at me, frowning. "I don't know how you found out, Mark, but if you tell anyone I'll break your neck."

I felt a cold chill running down my back. "Norman," I said, "don't use that phrase again."

"What phrase?"

"'I'll break your neck.' There are people who already think you did that to Hansbury."

"Don't be absurd. Frank was my best friend."

"And you were living with his wife?"

"She isn't his wife, Mark. They're divorced."

"And he didn't care?"

"Of course he didn't care. I told you that I told Frank where I was going last night. He even called me there."

"I thought you said you didn't see or hear from him after six o'clock," I said.

"I didn't! He called Gillian before I got there."

That, I thought, would be the phone call that Sheri had heard Hansbury make. "Norman, unless I'm very wrong, you're going to be set up as a fall guy. You'd better forget about *The Masked Crusader* and start thinking about yourself."

"Who's going to set me up?"

"Quite a lot of people who think of Robert Saville as the equivalent of the gold deposit in Fort Knox," I said. "You've just wrapped up the package. You're a karate expert. You knew how to break Frank's neck. You told him you were going to spend the night with his wife and he came up to your room to raise hell about it. You chopped him. Opportunity, motive, weapon."

"You're off your rocker, Mark."

"They all say you were on the verge of a nervous breakdown."

"Oh, come on, Mark! Do I look as if I were on the verge of nervous breakdown?"

"No. And that in itself is suspicious. Norman. The way things are you *ought* to look like it." I lit a cigarette and my hands weren't too steady. "If Hansbury didn't come to your room to see you, how did he get in there? Did he have a key?"

"Nobody had a key. I was keeping people out so I could work, not inviting them in. Frank didn't come to my room while I was there."

"Then how did he get in?"

"You've got me, Mark. You've been in the room. Were there any signs of a fight there?"

"Only between you and your typewriter," I said.

"Maybe somebody brought him there and stuffed him in the closet after he was dead," Norman said. He looked at me, his eyes widening. "Maybe somebody *is* trying to frame me!"

"I think you can classify that suggestion with the Gettysburg Address for sheer literary clarity," I said. "Norman, you're up to your neck in trouble."

I left Norman and went down to the second floor to see Chambrun. What I wanted to tell him and ask him had to wait because Lieutenant Hardy was there.

We have a private card file at the Beaumont that lists special information about our guests—their financial status, marital situation, any personal habits worth knowing like whether the guest is an alcoholic or a patron of call girls or an addicted gambler or a troublemaker of a special sort. This information is handled by a simple code—A for alcoholic, D for diplomat, O for over-his-head, meaning the guest can't really afford the Beaumont's prices and mustn't be allowed to get in too deep. WX after a man's name means he's a woman chaser double-crossing his wife. MX after a female guest means she's a manchaser, double-crossing her husband. N stands for general nuisance, a complainer who has no basis for his complaints.

Hardy was going through a little collection of cards that covered Saville and his entourage. That, I guessed, would include Norman.

Chambrun sat at his desk, his hooded eyes half closed. "You will notice," he said, "that the Network is paying the bills for everyone. Saville's company may be sharing the cost, but that's not our concern."

"These people just turn on the money faucet and watch it go down the drain," Hardy said.

"The world of expense accounts," Chambrun commented wryly.

Hardy looked at me. "How close are you to your friend Geller?" he asked.

"Not close at all. I haven't seen him since college and we were just nodding acquaintances there."

"Then you don't really have any reason to believe in him?"

"Not on a buddy-buddy basis," I said. "But the whole thing so far is just too pat for me to swallow, Lieutenant. I've just been talking to him. I'd swear he was innocent—too damned innocent."

"Meaning?"

"That he's been set up as a prize pigeon. These people would do anything to keep Saville off the hook. You heard Richter. My guess is somebody got in a row with Hansbury—maybe Saville, maybe his muscular lawyer. Both

of them play karate games. Maybe Hansbury took a swing at somebody and was chopped down. Not planned, not intentional—but murder. So what to do? If it was me I'd go to the police, admit I had a row with Hansbury, tell them he took a swing at me and that I clobbered him. Self-defense. The worst that would happen would be a manslaughter charge. I might get away with it.

"But Saville can't risk that. Juries sometimes have a way of being rough on a celebrity. The notoriety could cost a lot of people a lot of money. So Saville and Company take the first out that comes to mind. They know Norman isn't in his room down the hall—they'd been trying to reach him. They drag the dead man down there and stuff him in the closet—and leave Norman to face the music when he gets back."

"So answer me three questions," Hardy said.

"Try me."

"This had to be before eight thirty in the evening."

"Why?"

"That's when Saville and Miss Bevans and Brimsek and Drott came back upstairs from dinner. Are you suggesting all four of them would be covering up a murder?"

"It's not impossible."

"Five of them, to be exact," Hardy said. "The tootsie was in the Saville suite too."

"I still say it's not impossible."

"Busy time of night in the hotel. People coming and going. Have you figured the risk involved in carrying a dead man even a few yards down the corridor?"

"They had to risk it."

"Nobody pays much attention to a couple of men handling a drunken friend," Chambrun said, his eyes closed.

"Okay," Hardy said drily. "So we have five people in on a conspiracy. The body is moved by acting as though he's a drunk. Now, your friend Geller says he spent the night with a girl. He'll produce her if he has to. How do these conspirators know he hasn't got a perfect alibi?"

"They have to risk that too," I said.

"Boy, they sure do!" Hardy said. "If he doesn't have an alibi what would his motive be? Hansbury, he says, was his best friend."

My mouth felt dry. I knew what the motive could seem to be, and I knew Norman might not be able to produce an alibi without simultaneously producing a motive.

"They've been trying to set it up for you," I said. "Nervous breakdown. Unendurable work pressures. They quarreled over Hansbury's failure to get Norman paid for the work he'd done. Another slight case of manslaughter."

"Why don't they let friend Norman in on it, then?" Hardy asked. "Pay him a nice chunk of dough to take the rap—maybe a year or two in jail. From what I hear that would be an easier way to make a big hunk of money than writing television pilots."

"And let Norman blackmail them for the rest of their lives?"

Hardy's eyes were cold. "Is your friend the blackmailing type? No, don't answer me, Haskell. You don't know. You'd only be guessing." He stood up and started for the door. "The more I try to involve an army of people in this murder the better I like my chances of pinning it on one single guy—on your friend Geller. His room, he had the know-how, and we'll find the motive. See you around."

Chambrun sat motionless in the big armchair behind his desk. He didn't lift his heavy eyelids when Hardy had gone. But one corner of his mouth moved in a wry smile.

"You are perhaps the worst actor I have ever seen in my life, Mark," he said. "Only a Hardy could have missed the fact that you're bursting with information that will do your friend Norman's case no good at all."

"You mind if I pour myself a drink?" I said. "I missed my usual mid-day martini."

"Help yourself."

I went over to the sideboard and poured myself a stiff Scotch on the rocks. Chambrun lit one of his Egyptian cigarettes and looked at me through a haze of pale smoke as I swallowed most of my drink at one tilt. I came around to the chair beside his desk and sat down.

"This is how it is," I said.

I told him that Norman had spent the night with Gillian Hansbury, Frank Hansbury's ex-wife. That Hansbury knew he was planning just that. If Mrs. Hansbury came forward to supply Norman with an alibi she would also supply Hardy with a 24-carat motive.

"Maybe not," Chambrun said slowly. "Your friend Norman told us he took off from his room about six o'clock. We know Hansbury was alive at seven, or a little after. He was in Saville's suite making phone calls. If Norman was already at Mrs. Hansbury's—"

"He wasn't. A call came there from Hansbury before Norman arrived."

Chambrun flicked the ash from his cigarette. "Why do you care what happens to Norman?" he asked.

"I'm the chump of all time when it comes to lost causes and underdogs," I said, "and I hate power plays from modern monsters like Saville and Company."

"You're a nice boy, Mark,"

Chambrun said. "Why not go have a chat with Mrs. Hansbury?"

"Norman would never forgive me."

"Would you care—if it cleared him?"

Mrs. Gillian Hansbury was listed in the phone book. She lived on the East Side in the Eighties. I debated calling her to ask if I could talk to her, but then it occurred to me she might get in touch with Norman in some fashion and they'd be ready with a prepared story for me. I wanted to talk to this woman without her being too well balanced.

I don't recall now that I had any particular picture of what Gillian Hansbury might be like as I rode uptown in a taxi. The woods are full of youngish divorcees living on generous alimony who take love where they can find it. It takes a while for a suddenly single girl to develop a whole new social circle. I realized I'd forgotten to ask Norman how long the Hansburys had been separated. If it was fairly recent, Hansbury's reaction to Norman's teaming up with Gillian could be quite unpredictable.

I think I expected an attractive, probably chic, somewhat hard-boiled gal to answer my ring at the door bell.

I was accurate about part of it. Gillian Hansbury was rather special to look at: natural red hair, almost violet eyes, a lush figure. She was wearing a very mod shift that stopped about five inches above her knees. A sophisticated, expensive girl-executive type, possibly a former model or an actress. Frank Hansbury had been a talent agent. They could have met professionally.

Before she spoke, after opening her front door tentatively, I saw that she had been crying.

"Yes?" Her voice was pleasantly husky.

"Mrs. Hansbury?"

"Yes."

"My name is Mark Haskell," I said. "I'm a friend of Norman Geller's."

"You're the man at the hotel," she said. She opened the door a little wider. "Come in if you like, Mr. Haskell."

I stepped into a small attractive living room with a wood-burning fireplace. There were many books and a few undistinguished oil paintings that might, I thought, be her own work. On a low table in front of the orange-covered couch was a stale-looking cup of coffee. A silver ashtray was overflowing with butts. The place smelled nice—like a woman.

"Norman sent you?" she asked. "Please sit down."

"He doesn't know I'm here," I said.

Her bright red mouth tightened slightly.

"I want to help Norman," I said. "He's in grave difficulty and he won't help himself."

"Poor Norman," she said. She sat down on the couch and I found it difficult not to look at her lovely legs. "I told him he wouldn't be able to retain his sanity if he kept on writing that television script. I've seen writers go into that Waring Mixer too often."

"His troubles at the moment aren't primarily concerned with the TV script," I said.

She looked rather intently at the ashes in the fireplace. "It's been a rugged day for both of us," she said. "Norman and Frank were very close. And I—" Her voice shook a little. She reached for a cigarette in a lacquered box on the table. I held my lighter for her. Her long lashes were faintly damp. She was fighting tears again.

"Norman's in a kind of a two-way bind," I said. "I take it you could provide him with an alibi for last night. He may need it, Gillian. On the other hand, if you give it to him, you may provide the police with the one thing they need—motive."

She looked back at me, her eyes widening. "Motive for what?"

"At the moment Homicide looks at Norman as their Number One suspect," I said.

"They think *he* killed Frank?"

"They think he may have. They don't know yet about Norman's relationship with you. That would just about sew it up for them."

"How utterly ridiculous!" she said.

"I hope so."

"As far as the alibi is concerned, of course I'll provide it if he needs it," Gillian said. "He got here a little after eight last night and he left here after breakfast this morning."

I reached for a cigarette of my own. I felt little needles along my spine. "I understood Norman left the hotel around six o'clock last night," I said.

"I suppose he may have," Gillian said. "He's staying at the Beaumont because the TV people insist on his being available twenty-four hours a day. But he has an apartment of his own just off Gramercy Park. He went there to pick up mail and get some clean clothes before he came here."

"He told you that?"

"Of course. He phoned me that he'd had it up to his ears and was going to take the night off. That was around six o'clock. He told me he'd get here when he caught up with whatever he found at his apartment. It was a little after eight when he got here." She shook her head. "I don't understand why Norman's relationship with me would supply the police with a motive."

"You were Hansbury's wife," I said. "Hansbury may have objected to Norman's being here. He evidently knew Norman was coming here last night. The police will assume they quarreled about it and Norman, who has been doing research on karate, chopped him down. Hansbury did know Norman was coming here. He tried to phone Norman here, didn't he?"

"Yes. About an hour before Norman got here."

"Was he angry?"

"Frank?" She laughed, and it had a hurt sound to it. "He was angry because he couldn't find Norman, but not because Norman might have been here. He couldn't have cared less."

I took a deep drag on my cigarette. "How long have you and Hansbury been divorced, Gillian?"

"Three years," she said.

"Did he have another girl?"

"Girls," she said, tightlipped "Girls—plural."

"That was the difficulty? Other women?"

"Frank's business brings him into constant contact with a long stream of glamor," she said. "He should never have married me or anyone else. I should have known it but I—"

"You were in love with him?"

"God help me."

"But it was all over."

"For Frank," she said.

"And you, too. I mean, there is Norman—"

"Norman is a very sweet guy," she said. She put out her half-smoked cigarette with rather elaborate punchings into the ashtray. "He became a client of Frank's about six months before we were divorced. Norman sympathized with me. He knew I was the one who was hurt. He used to drop around about once a week or so for almost a year—just to see how I was. A good friend. He took me to dinner or the theater once in a while. That was all. Then—"

She drew a deep breath and went on. "Then one night we went to an opening and sat around with friends at Sardi's waiting for the reviews. It was a hit and we all got a little high. Norman brought me home early in the morning and—well, I was grateful to him and it was about time I—I started to think about living again. That's when it began. Not a love affair, but a pleasant sort of now-and-then thing. That's all it's ever been, Mark."

She looked around the room. "It's saved me from being mauled and clawed and slobbered over by half the wolves in town. Norman has supplied me with what I needed to stay on some kind of an even keel. And I think I've supplied Norman with something that's made him happy without any chains, rules or obligations."

"And Hansbury didn't care?"

"He didn't care," she said, her voice unsteady. "I see him—I've seen him from time to time. He invites me to lunch, all very gay, very casual, very civilized. He teased me about Norman. Three or four times—" She stopped.

"Yes?" I said.

"Frank had to keep all the bases touched," she said bitterly. "I think he went back to every woman he'd ever made love to, periodically, just to reassure himself that he was irresistible. Three or four times he came back to me, and God help me, I played his game. I helped to reassure him. I guess I'm the kind of nitwit who can only fall really in love once. I guess I used to dream that I'd be so fantastically wonderful that he'd come back to me to stay."

She looked away. "I must not have been." Then she looked straight at me. "You must have noticed that I'd been crying just before you came in. You see—you see, in spite of everything I loved that miserable two-timer. Only three nights ago—oh, God, Mark!"

She broke down into uncontrolled weeping. She got up and hurried into what I assumed was the bedroom. I felt a little uncomfortable, as though she'd told me more than she meant to. I found myself thinking of the late Frank Hansbury in just the terms she'd applied to him—a miserable two-timer. You didn't play put-and-take with a girl like Gillian. How what she'd told me affected Norman's position I wasn't quite sure. Certainly Hansbury hadn't given a damn what happened to Gillian except as it satisfied his own ego. If she had to, Gillian could make it quite clear that Hansbury would have had no reason to be jealous of or to quarrel with Norman over her.

She came back from the other room, the ravages of tears skillfully repaired. She held her lovely head high and proud.

"I apologize, Mark," she said. "I told you things I couldn't even tell Norman because I—I had to, somehow. I had to tell someone, just once. But now let's think how we can help Norman. If he needs the alibi, of course I'll provide it. And I think I can convince your policemen that I'm the last thing in the world they'd have quarreled about. You and I know that Norman couldn't possibly kill anybody. He's a gentle sweet nice guy. But there are other people in the picture who aren't."

"The fantasy world of Robert Saville," I said.

"Which is also the fantasy world of Thomas James Carson and his vice-presidents and George Brimsek and Karl Richter. The other night when Frank was here—" She hesitated, color coming into her pale cheeks, then went

on. "The other night Frank told me a good deal about things. We always used to talk shop in the old days. I know things about the great T. James Carson and his vice presidents and Bob Saville and Brimsek and all the others that would curl your hair.

"And Frank knew a great deal more than I do, Mark. He once said to me, joking, that if he found himself doing badly as a talent agent he could turn blackmailer and become a millionaire." She frowned and reached for a cigarette. "Frank was in a real mess with all of them over this job of Norman's. They were blandly trying to cheat Norman out of a lot of money. The first thing I thought, when I heard about Frank, was that in the heat of an argument he'd threatened someone with one of his special little tidbits and there'd been an explosion."

"What kind of things do you know about them?" I asked.

"My things are nothing," she said. "Gossip about affairs, who's queer, who's virile, who's not. What Frank had was real stuff —business deals that won't bear scrutiny, blacklistings that would outrage the public if they became known, tax dodges that wouldn't stand investigation, under-the-table bribes to city officials, stuff in the small print of contracts that quietly crucify decent people. If Frank aimed one of those guns at somebody in an argument—" She shrugged.

The telephone rang and she reached out to the side table and answered it. She looked at me.

"For you," she said.

Only one person in the world knew where I was. Chambrun's voice sounded cold-angry.

"Any luck?" he asked.

"Maybe."

"You'd better get back here on the double," he said. "Someone tried to throw your friend Norman out the window of your apartment."

"Tried?" I said.

"Norman's pretty badly shaken up, but all right."

"Who was it?"

"Stocking mask over his face," Chambrun said. His tone was bitter. "Maybe it was The Masked Crusader. He got away."

(*Continued on page 137*)

2 *NEW* procedurals featuring

NICOLAS FREELING's Van der Valk

and

J. J. MARRIC's (John Creasey's) Gideon

Something different this month—a detective doubleheader—two police procedurals, one from the Netherlands, the other from England . . .

Nicolas Freeling has written, especially for EQMM, a series of six new short stories about Van der Valk, during the period in which he was Chief Inspector of the Juvenile Brigade of Amsterdam. Mr. Freeling makes no secret of his literary purpose—to blend "entertainment" with "meaning." He believes (and we agree with him) that contemporary stories about crime and detection should have contemporary "point." And to add to the meaning—to add a plus value—Mr. Freeling has woven a connecting thread between the six stories: each is, in a way, a modern parallel of one of the Fables of Jean de la Fontaine . . .

In this first of the series Van der Valk tangles with four of Amsterdam's "young toughs" and finds his procedural tactics in the fable of Rodilardus. Remember?—the tale of belling the cat . . .

VAN DER VALK AND THE FOUR MICE

by NICOLAS FREELING

VAN DER VALK, THE INSPECTOR of the Juvenile Brigade, was getting acquainted with his Commissaire. More than ten years an Inspector in the Criminal Police, and having worked in most of the districts of the city of Amsterdam, Van der Valk supposed he

knew something about his business; but Commissaires (and people who committed crimes, too) sometimes thought otherwise. The new Chief Inspector was extra-sensitive, also, about the promotion which still hung awkwardly on him, and to the little ways of a new boss. Van der Valk paid attention to peoples' little ways—especially to those of Commisaires.

This old Boersma—people thought him a fool, but Van der Valk didn't agree. Fat, Friesian, a constant smoker of pipes, given to oracular utterances in homespun phrases. A crackerbarrel philosopher—but bright. Lazy, not given to running round the streets. He looked at his new Chief Inspector now with little piggy eyes and nodded. "You'll do. You're big enough."

Van der Valk was six foot one, weighed 160 pounds. Placid face, big nose, blue eyes, massive teeth, rough fair hair described by his wife as "a rich mouse shade."

"Is that important?"

"Size impresses children. Asked who I really wanted as an assistant, I'd take King Kong." He rose suddenly behind his desk, inflated a barrel of a chest, and beat on it with hairy fists. "Boom Boom."

"I'll practise that."

"Brains might help a bit but don't count on it. Go and do your homework."

Van der Valk spent the day in a small office reading files, getting up occasionally to look in the glass and go "Boom Boom," to see how he was getting on. At 5:00 in the afternoon he walked out, up toward the Central Station, a place which held few charms for him but had a strange fascination for juveniles.

The rush hour was beginning; clerks and teen-age typists were bolting for their trains; he got shoved about with impatient mutters of "Buy a bus, dad." He showed his pass to the dull-faced ticket collector, worked up to Platform One which is used mostly for long-distance trains and is therefore less crowded, and decided he had earned a drink.

The snack bar was empty, everybody being in a hurry to get home for supper. A few housewives were resting their feet and their shopping bags, a few nervous businessmen whose trains were not yet in were looking up with startled eyes and going back to scribbling little memos that they tucked into their huge bulging brief cases. Van der Valk had no brief case, but he had a nondescript hat and a fawn raincoat. He ordered a beer, got a train timetable which might come in useful sometime, and sat in a corner to "make like" the Secret Police. He could not do it often; Amsterdam is a smallish city and one gets known quickly.

How nice, how kind of fate to get a reward on his very first day! Not a big reward, but it was a good omen, put him in a good mood, and for some months he too could be a crackerbarrel philospher, and one who pleased Commissaire Boersma, whose schooldays were distant and who had forgotten Jean de la Fontaine.

Two boys of sixteen dumped their kind of bulging brief case on the large table beside him after pushing past without apology; it was plainly "their" corner. "Two cokes, Mac," they said with condescension to the counterman.

"Lined?" the fat one of the two inquired, businesslike. The other, a gawky one, slapped his inside pocket in an important gesture.

"Pen—a Parker, not a bad one. Raised a tenpop on it."

The fat one giggled slyly.

"I did better—worked the change trick with a twenty-five."

"But you can't do that twice."

"It was only the cheese place."

A newcomer showed a clenched fist to each in turn and said, "Mao." Solemnly they said "Mao" back, sipped their cokes, lit cigarettes, leaned back, and rubbed their hands together while staring around with casual insolence.

"What's that?" muttered the fat one, slewing an eye at Van der Valk.

"Only a traveler of some sort."

Van der Valk busily underlined the 7:31 train from Arnhem to points north; he would watch that fat boy: cunning little beast.

"Hot news, mecs," said the new one, a handsome boy, vain of his appearance. A spot on his chin was carefully masked with a tiny circle of court plaster.

"What's your word?"

"Wait for Lou," said the handsome one, who understood the value of suspense. His words were mantled in importance.

"Come on, sam," said the gawky one, whose bony ankles stuck out from outgrown trousers and who had lank dark hair and huge red wrists.

"Lou's always late."

"Nothing doing, sam—unity first. You know the rule."

"Here he comes now."

Van der Valk stared with unseeing cow eyes, muttering, "Sittard at nine twenty-four, Roermond nine forty-seven" and heaved deep preoccupied sighs; the company nudged and snickered. Lou was the headman, it was plain, a year or so older than the others, and cultivating sideburns. As though to underline his superior standing he nonchalantly ordered a beer in a deep bass voice.

"Greetings, mecs," said Lou.

"Hot news, sam." Close attention was paid to the handsome one, who was smartly dressed.

Only son, thought Van der Valk, of comfortable circumstances. But all were plainly lyceum boys—the superior type of school that in Holland always means comfortable circumstances. There was a pause until the beer came.

"Cool slop," said the fat one suddenly. Decidedly he was the gang's eyes—sharp eyes that missed little. Perhaps the gang's brains too: the fat-boy look could be deceptive, and handy when it came to the "change trick," which is done by presenting a large banknote for a trivial purchase in a busy shop too small to have a cashier. One counts the change importantly and somehow forgets to hand over the large note. Quite easy when the next customer is already tapping impatiently, and if rumbled, one can always say, "Oh, sorry—stupid of me."

A uniformed policeman had looked in, glanced idly around, and withdrawn. A group of schoolboys waiting for their train attracts no attention. Van der Valk recalled that the fat boy's bit of jargon was an old scrap of slang—Eighteenth Century for "Hold it—fuzz."

"What's your hot news?" asked Lou with studied indifference.

"Well, a month back I got burned by a cow of a woman in a supermarket, lifting a lighter."

"You bloody fool, you didn't tell us that!"

"No importance—I jawed out of it. Said I'd no money and had to get a present for the old man—for the old man, ha, ha! The old bitch wanted to call a flatfoot, so I had to feed her a lot of sob before she'd ease off. But she quacked that if she saw me again she'd tell the Brigade and they'd be round to my place."

"How would the flics know your place?"

"She made me give my name and address, show my card and all—shut up, sam, she'd have called the flats, I'm telling you. Anyway, it's all right—been nobody around my place."

"What's this Brigade?" inquired the gawky one.

"You can be a stupid sam sometimes," said Lou, crushingly. "Plainclothes flics. If they tag you they'll take you to the bureau and give you a chatting up, to scare you, see. Thing is, they take a photo of you and warn you you're on file and if they get you again they'll charge you, see. Happened me once, two years ago. Never since, mec, never since."

Did it really? thought Van der Valk, comparing his watch with the clock on the wall, then winding it up and listening to it anxiously.

"Now listen, mecs." Lou had assumed the voice of This-is-the-Captain-speaking. "One thing to remember—don't go soft. Flats

pick you up, and they call a flic from the Brigade, he always snows you. 'Come clean and admit it, and we'll let you off with only a warning.' Never admit *anything,* even if they have you cold. Say it's a misunderstainding, an accident, somebody put it in your pocket for a joke, anything but that you were lifting—admit that and they've got you. Don't fall for that gag of 'We'll go round to your old man.' I ask you—so what? Even if the old man believes them there's still no real proof. You get a lot of big mouth but that's all. What's the time?"

"All right—ten minutes still."

"If you're picked up, keep your big scared trap shut—goes especially for you, sam, you'd blab anything when you're scared. I tell you, without me you'd all be sucked in and swallowed."

Van der Valk could now hear quite well, because with the importance of all these instructions the tone had risen. He had now turned his back and was studying the patterns in his half-drunk glass of beer. He lit a cigarette and prepared to profit by the valuable lesson.

"A mec I know—he's a student now, lot older than you," continued Lou, "got picked up with a camera. Course he just said he was a camera bug looking over a Jap model, and he stuck to that. The flic—one of these Youth-and-Morals sods—didn't like that and hit him, slapped him around plenty. This sam thought: well, I won't forget you, and he and the other mecs took to watching the head flic place up there by the Marnixstraat, and one day they saw this one, followed him home and beat him up."

At this point Van der Valk stopped laughing into his beer, because a vague memory told him this tale was true.

"Were you there?" asked the fat one eagerly.

"No," admitted Lou. "But I heard about it. They kicked up a racket and threw a stone through his window, and instead of calling flats the stupid swine thought he was tough and came out himself, and they rushed him and put the boot in. You can't do that with a flat; he's in uniform, see, and if you even touch him that's rebellion and you're in trouble. But a flic in plain clothes, that's just a mec like any other mec. You can claim he threatened you, that you didn't know he was a flic, and you put the boot in out of self-defense."

There was a vastly impressed silence.

"Is four enough?" asked the gawky one nervously.

"Four's enough if nobody hangs back," said Lou, letting his cigarette hang down idly, as though he were rather bored.

That nasty docker's expression— "putting the boot in," thought Van der Valk grimly. Horrible little schoolboys. Ordinarily only too pleased to draw attention to themselves, and delighted when you notice them. Vindictive, the little squirts, as well as immersed in self-importance. He thought he ought to find a way of deflating them.

Lou was talking again, smoking in short puffs, a little contemptuous of these neophytes.

"Still haven't had your big news, sam."

"That's just it," said the handsome one excitedly. "In the paper—new chief flic appointed to the Youth-and-Morals. Name's Van der Valk."

"Suppose," said the fat one, "we were to spend some time in the Marnixstraat. Couldn't do any harm to know some of those plainclothes flics a little." It was at that moment, wondering sardonically if they would next propose to follow him home, that Van der Valk got the idea of Rodilardus.

He was a cat. The rats, as La Fontaine tells the fable, held a council to discuss ways and means of suppressing this most undesirable animal. The proposal of the oldest rat was approved by all—yes, yes, the thing to do was to hang a bell on Rodilardus. Where they fell out was in finding volunteers for this delicate and dangerous mission. It was quite likely the origin of the expression "to bell the cat."

"Rodilardus" judged that the time had come for melodrama. It was not a suitable idea for children, this hanging around the Marnixstraat. They would be getting home late, their mothers would worry, and they might catch a chill. So the "cat" rose abruptly, jerked a chair out, and sat down in a neat Rodilardus movement.

"Greetings, mecs. We'll be very quiet—the public's here. Any of you squeak I'll ruin you. See this beer glass? I break that and the barman wants to know what the scene's about. I send him for the flats. The first one who's brave, I let him have the jagged glass in the face—nasty, very nasty."

Four mice sat still.

"I am nasty. I am Rodilardus the cat. Four of you aren't enough, by the way, even if you weren't all paralyzed, because the boot takes practise and I'd do it first, and then it would be 'Mama, help!' I think we'll break you up. We'll have you, fatty, because the change trick is really too corny, and I think we'll put you in the paper. Just a tiny paragraph, about the same as the new Chief Inspector the Brigade got. Have to look for it—you won't be the star, you're not photogenic enough.

"You, gawky, will go back and

pay for that pen out of your pocket money. You, handsome, you need your pennies to buy that makeup you put on your spots. Consult Elizabeth Arden—she's expensive but worth it. Lou boy, you've been mixing in bad company. Since there's already a photo of you, you've been tagged. I've nothing to hang on you but telling fairy tales, so we'll just give you the conspiracy treatment."

The cat stood up, black and menacing, solid, broad, tooth and whisker grinning from ear to ear.

"Barman," he called in a thundering voice that made everyone turn round. "Police—call a copper. You'll miss your train, children—I'm sorry about that."

He reached out, took hold of Lou's nose, and twisted it, quite painfully. The boy sat there with his eyes full of tears; the fat one looked at Lou reproachfully. That should pull him down a couple of pegs, said Van der Valk to himself judiciously. Hits him in his ascendency.

A uniformed policeman, good and large, appeared in tow of a worried barman.

"Four little boys for you. Fatty here is twenty-five pop up on a change trick in the cheese shop—find out and book him. The others—get 'em printed, photoed, filed, and cautioned for petty shoplifting. That one lifted a pen and sold it to a mate of his. Don't keep them all night—let them catch the last train home."

"Come on," said the flat. "Walk slowly and behave yourselves if you don't want your ears warmed."

Rodilardus bowed sarcastically. Van der Valk was a bit sorry then at having been so petty; he gave them an amiable smile and suddenly beat his chest with both hands.

"Boom boom," he went at the four flabbergasted children. "King Kong." The policeman, even though he knew Van der Valk well enough to show no surprise at small eccentricities, was nevertheless startled. As for all the worthy citizens sitting and drinking coffee—they looked thoroughly disapproving.

But Van der Valk decided not to explain that it was really all Commissaire Boersma's fault.

a *NEW* Gideon by

J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

Matching the six new Van der Valk stories, we miraculously have six Gideon stories by J. J. Marric (John Creasey)—Gideon cases that have never before been published in the United States. We have "paired" the two series so that a new Van der Valk and a new Gideon will appear back to back.

In this first of the Gideon series, the Commander of the C.I.D. (the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard) is faced with an outbreak of shoplifting on a grand scale. Gideon puts himself in the crooks' skin—he has a special knack for doing that—and then uses (to recall a phrase from Edgar Wallace) his "criminal mind"...

GIDEON AND THE SHOPLIFTING RING

by J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

BEATS ME HOW THEY DO it," complained Superintendent Lemaitre gloomily. There seemed no guile in the expression on his thin bony face, nor in the nasal twang of his voice. "I don't mind telling you, George, it's got me beat."

"So you said before," murmured George Gideon dryly. He was Commander of Scotland Yard's C.I.D., the Criminal Investigation Department, and so London's top detective. Lemaitre was his chief aide. Gideon placed a large hand on a folder on his desk, and a faint shadow from the flat-topped fingers showed from summer's bright light reflecting off the Thames into this office. "Everybody who has handled the job says the same, sooner or later. How much do you think they've robbed the Oxford Street stores of this month?"

Lemaitre drew in a whistling

breath, for deliberate emphasis.

"Thirty thousand quid's worth, they say."

"Who says?"

"The big store bosses say. I don't mind telling you, those bosses will make trouble before long. Shoplifting on this scale is something new in London. Why, they must use a whole blinkin' army!"

"Which 'they' this time?"

"Come off it, George! Someone's organizing the shoplifting, you know that as well as I do. Perfume, jewelry, stockings, fur coats, dresses, and what-have-you—they take 'em out by the ton. The hell of it is we can't catch anyone red-handed—with the stuff on them."

Gideon pursed his full lips, but made no comment. He was a much bigger and heavier man than Lemaitre, with slightly rounded, very thick shoulders, a big neck, rather heavy features, iron-gray hair.

He and Lemaitre had one thing above everything else in common—a love of London, and a knowledge of London and its people.

"Why the heck don't you say something, instead of sitting on your backside and looking at me as if I were a hippie?" Lemaitre demanded. When excited, the Cockney twang of his voice became almost shrill. "If this gets any worse we'll be in real trouble. You don't *want* the newspapers saying that the Yard's slipping, or awkward questions being asked in the House of Commons, do you?"

"Might not be a bad thing," said Gideon. "Might make some of our chaps start thinking, instead of taking every known shoplifter found in Oxford Street off to the nick and then finding they haven't a thing on them. How many have been pulled in like that?"

"It's in the report."

"You tell me."

"Twenty-three!" shrilled Lemaitre. He leaned on the big desk in front of Gideon, arms widespread, knuckles white where he gripped the edge. "Well, what was wrong with that? A fortune's being lifted from those stores on Thursday nights, so we pull in all the known shoplifters. Go on, tell me. What's wrong with that? Go on, tell me, George."

"It didn't work."

"I'm asking you to tell me what will."

"The shoplifters all say they were after bargains on late-opening night, with their families," remarked Gideon. "They all had at least one member of their family with them. They—"

"Do you mean to tell me you think that half the shoplifters in London would go to Oxford Street on a Thursday night to *buy* stuff?" Lemaitre demanded, with withering sarcasm. "You're the one

who's slipping, George."

"Wouldn't be surprised," said Gideon mildly. "Anyhow, each member of each shoplifter's family volunteered to be searched to make sure they weren't wearing stolen goods or carrying them out in shopping bags."

"They were searched all right. Why, last Thursday we had twenty policewomen and eighty plainclothes chaps in Oxford Street—and all being paid overtime."

Gideon chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"A hundred of our people concentrating on the wrong crooks," said Gideon. "When you come to think of it, Lem, it *is* funny. Every shoplifter who was taken to the nick and every volunteer who was searched must have gone off home laughing his head off. We're likely to be guyed in *Punch* or the *Times* if this goes on. Any of these people you had to release been throwing money about lately? Especially in larger sums?"

"Can't say they have. They've all been doing all right, mind you, but they haven't been spending too free. Do you think they've been paid to go along Oxford Street and draw our fire?"

"Of course."

"Had a nasty feeling it might be something like that. But who's doing the actual jobs? How do they get away? This is on such a big scale that it must take a lot of organizing. It's been going on for six weeks now, and getting worse every week," Lemaitre went on. "George, could you take a look yourself? You might spot something the rest of us keep missing."

"Tell you what I will do," said Gideon. "I'll catch a Number 15 bus at Regent Street and take a ride as far as Marble Arch."

"I daresay a bus is as good as any place for thinking." Lemaitre said. "Want me to come along with you?"

"I'd like you to follow and meet me when I get off the bus. Are our chaps out in strength tonight?"

"Couldn't spare so many—there's the big fight at Albert Hall. But we've got a dozen women and thirty men in Oxford Street."

"Have them stationed at the main street corner," Gideon ordered. "Then we can stop any cars or hold up traffic for ten minutes if we want to."

"That'll make you popular!" Lemaitre put on a knowing look. "You've been thinking about this, you old fox, haven't you?"

"I've been trying to."

He was driven in a Flying Squad car as far as Piccadilly Circus where he caught a bus at half-past six. The crowds were at their thickest. Regent Street was jammed outside the Galleries Lafayette and Dickens and Jones, if rather thinner at Libertys.

When the bus crawled round Oxford Circus into Oxford Street, Gideon marveled at the seething mass of slow-moving people and cars.

On the warm evening the windows were open, the stink of gas fumes floated in, and the clatter and roar of engines and the occasional toot of a horn merged with the cackle of human voices. Every man, woman, and child seemed to be chattering at the same time. The canyon of Oxford Street made the voices echo, the big plate-glass windows acting as sounding boards.

Gideon sat and watched and thought, nursing a pair of binoculars.

Now and again the bus crawled to a traffic light and passed it. He glanced down and saw uniformed police and plainclothesmen carrying out his orders. He smiled faintly. If it were not for the big problem he would have been thoroughly enjoying himself. In a way he was. The Londoner in him loved the sight, the sounds, the families gathered together, the little knots of people talking, the sidewalk salesmen finding a tiny space to make their squeaking dogs or squealing dolls prance, or thrusting pairs of substandard or stolen stockings into the faces of pert young girls.

" 'Arf the price you'd pay inside, duckie. 'Wot about giving your young man a treat?"

Gideon thought, as he had so often done lately: *If I were organizing this shoplifting, how would I get the goods away on this vast scale?* Finding out who the organizer was would be comparatively easy once the police knew how it was done. *Well, how would I do it?* Shoplifters unknown to and unsuspected by us and by the store detectives must be used, but there can only be a limited number of them.

The volume of goods stolen on Thursday nights was too large for only a dozen or so clever crooks to handle in single raids. *There must be a ferry system,* Gideon thought. *The actual thief lifts the stuff, takes it outside, leaves it with an accomplice, then goes back for more.*

He had reached that point in his thinking last week, after Lemaitre and the Divisional men had brought the problem to him. The conclusion was the result of clear, rational thought, like all detective work. Assume that twenty thieves were busy; assume that each one stole £100 worth of goods on each raid—that would come to £2000. Thirty thousand might be an exaggeration by the anxious and angry store owners, but even if £20,000 worth was stolen each night, that meant ten visits by each thief.

He looked at John Lewis', then along to D. H. Evans and

Marshall & Snelgrove, and eventually to Selfridge's. Yes, it could be done. If a shoplifter started at Selfridge's say, spent twenty minutes making a good haul, came out and handed the proceeds to the accomplice, he could go on to the next store and repeat the performance. Thus each big store could be raided in about an hour and a half, at the height of the rush hour period.

Gideon leaned forward in his seat.

How *would* he do it if he were organizing such a campaign? He did not have to think so hard now: the answer was obvious. He would use a taxi or an ordinary car—in fact, he would use three or four. Each would make a tour of the West End, driving along Oxford Street at normal or subnormal traffic speed. They would keep close to the curb, so that the shoplifter could hand over the stolen goods easily.

Ah!

They would be private cars, not taxis. If a man or a woman were seen handing goods to a taxi driver or putting them into an empty taxi, it would be more noticeable than doing the same thing with a private car. What could be more natural than hubby driving along the curb and wifey coming along and popping the stuff into the back?

"I'll see you farther along the street, dear."

"Okay, darling."

It would all sound so normal.

Smiling broadly, Gideon used his binoculars and peered up and down the street. Most of the big stores being on the north side, it was easier to keep them all under survey.

He saw a woman in brown standing at the curb some distance from a corner, but not near a bus stop or outside a store entrance. A gray Morris 1000 pulled up. She gave a bright smile, handed a shopping bag to the driver, spoke briefly, then turned and hurried away. Gideon took the number of the car—one of the least noticeable kind in London—then followed the woman's progress along the street.

He saw her take a string shopping bag from her handbag as she turned into the entrance to Selfridge's.

"That looks like it," Gideon said with deep satisfaction. He sat back for as long as it took him to reach Marble Arch. Lemaitre was standing by a shoe-shop window, looking rather like a bookie when all the favorites had come in first. He moved forward, lips turned down.

"Waste of time, wasn't it?"

"Lem, have a dozen of our chaps on the tops of a dozen different buses," Gideon said. "Tell them to look out for—"

Lemaitre's eyes were already glistening.

"You mean you've got something?"

In fact, they caught eleven women shoplifters that night. Each of them had raided at least four shops. They also caught the drivers of three Morris 1000's, each loaded in the back and in the trunk compartment with "shopping." Five more women and one more driver were arrested from statements made. There was no school leader—it was a kind of cooperative caper.

"Now they can cooperate in jail," Lemaitre said, with deep satisfaction. "I always knew we'd get 'em, George."

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Campbell, Karen	SUDDENLY IN THE AIR	Stein & Day	$4.95	10/28
Herron, Shaun	MIRO	Random House	4.95	10/10
O'Hara, Kenneth	THE BIRDCAGE	Random House	4.50	10/3
Weston, Carolyn	DANJU GIG	Random House	4.95	10/21

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Mason, Van Wyck	SECRET MISSION TO BANGKOK	Popular	.75	10/21
Mason, Van Wyck	TROUBLE IN BURMA	Popular	.75	10/21

Titles and Data Supplied by the Publishers

FIRST PRIZE WINNER NUMBER 13

After a hiatus of five years *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* ran another international short-story and novelette contest (not to be confused with the contests limited to members of Mystery Writers of America and to members of Crime Writers Association of England). First Prize in this 13th world-wide contest was won, in 1961, by Cornell Woolrich's *One Drop of Blood,* a memorable example of the contemporary "inverted detective story."

The first two thirds of the story deal with the crime—and the events leading up to it; the last one third deals with the detection—and how the detective proved it. Mr. Woolrich posed the question: Can a man commit an unpremeditated murder and be clever enough, thorough enough, painstaking enough, to get away with it?

Mr. Woolrich posed other questions too. As in some Woolrich short stories and novelettes, the detective is anonymous, and in this story even the criminal has no name. Is the murderer Everyman? Or is it the murderer's nemesis, the detective, who is Everyman? . . .

ONE DROP OF BLOOD

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

1: The Crime—and the Events Leading Up to It

HE DIDN'T PREMEDITATE IT, AND YET, HE TOLD HIMSELF AFTERward, it all turned out better than if he had. Much better. He might have done all the wrong things, he told himself. Picked the wrong place, the wrong time, the wrong weapon. Too much careful planning ahead might have made him nervous, as it had many another. In the effort to remember *not* to forget something, he might have forgotten *something else.* How often that had happened!

This way, there was nothing to forget—because there had been

nothing to remember in the first place. He just walked through the whole thing "cold," for the first time, without having had any rehearsal. And everything just seemed to fall into place—the right place, by itself. These hair-split timetables are very hard to stick to, Impromptu, the way he did it, the time element doesn't become important. You can't trip over a loose thirty seconds and fall flat on your face when there aren't a loose thirty seconds to trip over.

The situation itself was old and trite. One of the oldest, one of the tritest. Not to him, of course, and not to her—it never is to those involved. It's always new, first-time new.

To begin with, he was single, and had no troubles whatsoever to deal with. He had a car, he had a job, he had health, and he had good looks. But mainly, he had freedom. If he came home at ten o'clock or if he came at two, if he had one drink or if he had a few, there was no one but himself to keep score.

He was the personification of the male spirit, that restless roving spirit that can only get into trouble because it didn't have any trouble to start with, that had no other way to go but—from lack of trouble into a mess of trouble.

And so we find him one star-spiked May evening, in a $95 suit, with $75 in his wallet, with a new convertible waiting outside to take him in any direction he wanted to go, and with a girl named Corinne in his arms—a very pretty Corinne too, dexterously dancing and spinning around together, breaking apart, coming together again, and above all (a favorite step of theirs) making an overhead loop of their two hands so that she could walk through it, turn, then go back through it again. All in excellent time and in excellent rhythm to the tune of *The Night They Invented Champagne,* played by an excellent band.

Beautiful to watch, but what a fatal dance that was, because—it was their first together. They should have turned and fled from each other in opposite directions.

Instead they went out to the car. She patted it admiringly as he beamed, proudly possessive as only a young male car-owner can be. Then they drove to where she lived, sat a while and watched the stars, and kissed and kissed, and watched the stars . . . and that was it.

Another night, another dance, same car, same stars, same kisses—or same lips, anyway. She got out to go in. He got out to keep her from going in. Then they both got in the car again and went to a motel . . . And that was it again.

After some time had gone by she asked him about marriage. But she didn't get much of an answer. He liked it the way it was. She hadn't asked him soon enough, or in the right order of things. So, afraid that she would lose him altogether, and preferring to have him this way rather than no way at all, she didn't ask him again.

It was a peaceful, comfortable existence. It was definitely not sordid—she was not a sordid girl. She was no different, in effect, from any other girl on her street who had stepped out and married. Only she had stepped out and not married. He was the first man she had ever loved, and it stopped there. The only thing was, she had left freedom of action, freedom of choice, entirely in his hands—which was a tactical error of the worst sort in the never-ending war between the sexes. She was a very poor soldier, for a woman. They were not actually living together. They were keeping company, one might say, on a permanent basis.

At any rate, one night when he called to take her out, she complained of not feeling well. In fact, it was easy to see she wasn't shamming, and noticing that she was alternately shivering and burning up he sent for a doctor and remained there while the doctor examined her. (She spoke of him as her fiancé whenever it became necessary in front of a third person.) It was nothing serious—merely an attack of the flu, but she had to go to bed.

He would not—to give him some credit—have walked out on her then and there; but she was feeling so miserable that for her part she wished he would leave her alone. So, noticing this, he kissed her—a mere peck—and left.

His original intention—at least, from the door to the car—was to go to his own apartment and make the best of an unexpected solitary evening. But the stars were at their dirty work again, and his wrist watch didn't help either (9:48); he was 28 and *didn't* have the flu, so—

Her name was Allie.

And she wasn't going to be like Corinne—he found that out right from the start. She could enjoy the stars, sure, and she could kiss, sure, but she'd take up both those occupations on his time, as his officially credited fiancée or his lawfully wedded wife—not on her own time, as a free-lance, if you get the distinction.

And her sense of timing was much better, too. He came out three or four kisses short the first meeting. So he wanted to see her again, to try to make up the shortage. But she always knew

just when to stop. He was still a couple short the second meeting, so that made him want to see her a third time. By then he was so hopelessly in hock to her that his only chance of clearing up the debt was to marry her, and try to work it out on a lifetime payment plan.

She was a five-star general in the battle of the sexes. And it must have been inborn, because she'd never heard a shot fired until she met him.

At first he managed to sandwich the two of them in together. He saw Allie a couple of nights in the week, saw Corinne a couple of others. In fact, he would have liked to continue this three-way-stretch arrangement indefinitely; the difficulty, however, lay not with them but with himself. Soon more and more nights with Corinne reminded him of the night she'd had the flu: the stars above and the wrist watch were there, but not Corinne's stars any more and not Corinne's time. A waste of Allie's time, instead.

Finally there were no more nights with Corinne—just one last station-break and the program went off the air.

"You've lost interest in me. I'm not blind. I've noticed it for some time now."

"That's the chance you have to take," he told her, "when you're in love."

"But why did it happen to you?" she wanted to know, "and not to me? Shouldn't we both come out even?"

"You don't come out even in love," he told her. "Someone always has to come out behind." And then he added, "I'll call you up some night." Which is the way some men say goodbye to a woman.

She'll find somebody else, he thought; she was easy for me, she'll be easy for the next one. And he shrugged her off.

But there are three things in this world you can't shrug off: death, taxes—and a girl who loves you.

Now they were in the homestretch, Allie and he. Now when they looped their hands above their heads on the dance floor, her engagement diamond blazed toward the lights, proclaiming, "This is mine. Hands off." Not to jewel thieves, but to stealers of men.

Now all the tribal customs were brought to bear—everything the world insists shall surround the lawful mating of a man and a woman. The meetings with the relatives from far-off places; the luncheons, dinners, parties, showers; the choosing of a trousseau; the finding of their first home; even the purchase of the furniture that was to go into it.

Now the date was set, the license applied for, the church reserved, the flowers and the caterers and the champagne arranged for. Now even the blood tests were taken, and they were both declared pure. All that remained was the marrying and the honeymoon.

Now the boys got together and gave him his bachelor party, his last night to howl. And the howls were something to hear. Three separate times around town they were arrested *en masse,* and twice the arresting officers not only released them but even accompanied them for a short part of the way, and the third time wished them well and urged them only to "keep it down, boys." Then finally the last two survivors, the diehards whose pledge had been to see him safely home, had him at his door, and after much fumbling with keys, and draping of arms across shoulders, and swaying and tottering, they thrust him inside, closed the door, and left him.

And suddenly he was sober, stone-cold, ice-cold sober, and the whole party had been a waste of liquor—at least, for him.

Corinne was sitting there. Waiting for him.

"You took so long to get back," she complained mildly. "I knew you still lived here, but I thought you'd never get back."

"Had a little party," he said. He was starkly sober, but his tongue hadn't yet quite caught up with the rest of him. A warning bell started ringing: I wonder if she knows, I wonder if she knows.

"I'm not criticizing," she went on. "You're free to go out with your pals—free every night in the week. It's only natural, so what's the harm?"

The warning bell stopped suddenly. There was silence. She doesn't know, he told himself, *and she's not going to know from me.*

Business of fooling around with a cigarette, so he'd use up time and wouldn't have to say too much to her. Maybe she'd go away.

"I know it's late," she said.

He looked at the wrist watch that had played such a double-crossing part in their little story. Meaning, it is late.

She doesn't want to start over again, does she? For Pete's sake, not that! Love is a one-way street.

"Aren't you working?" he asked. "Don't you have to get up early in the morning?"

"I haven't been working since last week," she said. Then, understandingly, "You're tired; I know."

"Aren't you?"

"Yes, but I do have to talk to you about something. I've got to. It's very important."

Now he knew, more or less. There were only two things a girl could possibly want from a man, in all the world, in all this life: love or money. And since love was out, that left only money. Another thing told him: she was much too tractable, noticeably taking pains not to antagonize or ruffle him in any way.

"Won't it keep till tomorrow?" he said by way of acquiescence. "I'm beat. Completely beat. I'll come over to see you tomorrow."

"But will you?" she asked, frowning, but still with that air of not wanting to push him, not wanting to crowd him.

"Aw, for the love of Mike, Cor," he said impatiently, "when did you ever know me to break my word to you?"

It was true. He never had—not in the little things.

She had to accept that—it was the best she could get.

"I've moved since the last time I saw you," she said, and gave him the new address.

"All right, I'll be there, Allie," he promised. He was almost nudging the door inch by inch right in her face, anxious to get rid of her.

For a moment he lost an inch or two. "Allie?" she said. "Who's Allie?"

"That's Al," he said quickly. "Fellow I go around with—with him tonight. I'm so used to saying his name every five minutes or so."

He finally got the door shut and went "Whew!"—from the shoelaces up. Money, he said, that's all it is—she wants money. That hint about not working. All right, I'll give her some. Wind the thing up that way. She was entitled to something after all, he supposed.

He took five hundred out of his savings account the next day, during his lunch hour. The nick it made wasn't too bad. There was still plenty to cover the honeymoon expenses and the first few months of married life. And he was making a good salary.

Then right in front of the bank, coming out, he met Dunc, Allie's brother. Dunc glanced up at the bank façade, then at him, and said, "Look, if you could use a little extra—I know how it is at a time like this, I went through the mill myself three years ago."

Bing! another two hundred and fifty from Dunc, smack in his palm. His face didn't even change color. After all, they were both going to be in the same family, weren't they?

First, he thought, I'll put two fifty of my own back. Then he thought, why be a rat—let her have it all, it's only money. So

she was coming out pretty good for a last year's leftover crush; she had no kick coming. She'll fall all over my neck, he thought complacently. But no fooling around tonight; I'm going to unwind her arms and give them back to her.

The bungalow was 'way out at the end of nowhere—dim in the growing darkness. Even the road in front of it wasn't paved yet, just surfaced with some kind of black stuff. But there were going to be other bungalows—he could just make out the skeleton frames of some of them already starting up in a straight line past hers, getting thinner as they went along, until there were only foundations, then just a bulldozer.

She had it fixed up real pretty, the way women like to do, even women with broken hearts. Chintz curtains fluttering out the windows, like vermilion lips coaxing to be kissed.

She didn't even give him a chance to get onto the porch and ring the bell. She was waiting there for him. She had on a little apron to match the curtains. Last year's love, playing house all by herself.

"I wasn't sure you were really coming."

He raised his brows. "Did I ever break my word to you?"

"No," she said. "Not your word. Only—"

She had cocktails frosting in a shaker.

"You used to like martinis best," she said.

"I don't like martinis any more," he said, and let that sink in.

She traced a finger on the frosting of the shaker and made a little track, shiny as a mirror. "I've got to talk to you."

"We don't have to," he said. "This talks better than anything. This talks best." He'd taken the money out and laid it down.

"What's that for?" she said, her face suddenly white with shock and insult and hurt.

"Well, if you don't know why, don't ask me."

She sat in a chair for a few moments getting over it—or, it would be more correct to say, getting familiar with it. She had a slow temper. Until this moment, as a matter of fact, he hadn't known she had any temper at all.

Then she got up, and her face was unlike any face he'd ever seen her wear before. She flung the words point-blank at him.

"You don't have to do *this* to me! You don't have to do *this!*"

"Then what else is there?" In all honesty he couldn't understand her outrage. He'd lost her train of thought, and the situation was becoming an irritant.

"What *else* is there? You have to stand by me, that's what else there is! I can't go it alone!"

Now his voice went up, almost into a wail of incomprehension. "Stand by you! What does that mean?"

She took her open hand and slammed it down on the table, so hard that the ice in the shaker went *tlink!* "I'm going to have your baby, that's what that means!"

The shock was dizzying. He had to reach out and hold on to something for a moment.

"How do I—?"

"There never was another man in my life, that's how you know." And he did know.

"All right," he said.

"All right what?"

"I'll take care of everything. Hospital and—"

Now finally she screamed piercingly at him in her passion and torment, and she wasn't the kind to scream. "Hospital? I don't want a hospital, I want a husband!"

The second shock, on top of the first, completely unbalanced him. The rest was just physical reflex, not mental reaction at all.

She said only one thing more in her life. In her entire life.

"You're going to marry me, do you understand? You're going to *marry* me!"

The object was suddenly in his hand, as though it had jumped into his hand of its own accord. He hadn't seen it before, hadn't even known it was in the room.

She died at almost the very first blow. But he kept striking on and on and on, to the point of frenzy, to the point of mania, to the point of sheer hallucination. And then she was gone, and it was over. And the thing that a hundred other men, a thousand other men, had done, and that he'd thought he'd never do—now he'd done it too. And the thing he'd read about a hundred times, a thousand times, now he wasn't reading about it, he was living it. And he liked it much better the other way.

He looked at the object he was still holding, and he realized he actually didn't know what it was even now. What could have been more unpremeditated than that? Some sort of long curving blade, razor-keen. Then at last he identified it—more by hearsay than by actual recognition. A Samurai sword, souvenir of the long-ago war with Japan. He remembered now she had once mentioned she had a brother who had served in the Pacific theater—only to come

back and die in a car crash not long after. Many men had brought these back with them at the time.

He let go, and it dropped with a muffled thud.

After a while he located the bracket she had driven into the wall. It must have been hanging up there. When he went over to it he found, on the floor underneath, the severed cord it had hung by and the empty scabbard. His subconscious mind must have recognized it for a weapon, for he had no recollection whatever of snatching it down, and yet he must have, in the blinding red explosion that had burst in his brain and ended in murder.

In the beginning he was very mechanical, as the glaze of shock that coated him all over slowly thawed and loosened. He tipped the cocktail shaker into one of the two glasses and drank. He even ate one of the two olives she'd had ready at the bottoms of the two glasses. Not calloused. His instinct told him he needed it, if he wanted to try to live. And he wanted to try to live very badly. Even more so now that he'd looked at death this close with his own eyes. Then he poured a second one, but let it stand. Then he emptied what remained in the shaker down the sink.

It seemed hopeless. There seemed no place to begin. The room was daubed with her, as though a house painter had taken a bucket of her blood, dipped his paint brush in it, then splashed it this way and that way and every which way all over the walls. He was splattered himself, but fortunately he was wearing a dark suit and it didn't show up much; and that part of the job could wait until later.

The first thing to do was to get her out of here. All the little hers . . . He went to her closet and found a number of opaque plastic garment bags—even more than he needed, in fact . . . and finally he zippered them up securely and let them lean there a moment.

Then he went out to his car, opened the trunk compartment, and made room. He went around to the front seat, got the evening newspaper that he remembered having left there, and papered the entire trunk with it, to prevent any errant stains or smears. It was so incredibly unpeopled out here that he didn't even have to be furtive about it. Just an occasional precautionary look around him.

Then he went in again, brought out the garment bags, put them in the trunk, and locked it. He stepped back into the bungalow to put out the lights, took her key with him so he'd be able to get back in again, got in his car, and drove off.

And as far as that part went, that was all. There was nothing more to it.

He drove steadily for some hours. And strangely enough, at a rather slow pace, almost a desultory glide. He could do that because, again strangely enough, he felt no panic whatever. Even his fear was not acute or urgent. It would be untrue to say that he felt no fear at all; but it was distant and objective, rather than imminent and personal—more on the level of ordinary prudence and caution. And this must have been because it had all come up so suddenly, and blown over so suddenly, that his nerves hadn't had time to be subjected to a long, fraying strain. They were the nerves of an almost normal person, not of a man who had just taken another person's life.

He even stopped once, left the car, and bought a fresh pack of cigarettes at a place he saw was still open. He even stayed there for a few moments, parked in front of it, smoking, then finally slithered on again.

At last his driving stopped being directionless, took on purpose, as he finally made up his mind about a destination. There was very little noticeable change in it, and he still didn't hurry. He simply made fewer haphazard turns and roundabouts, and perhaps stepped it up another five miles per hour.

Even with a target, he still continued driving for several more hours. The metropolitan section was now left far behind. On the final lap he was purring steadily along a road that paralleled a railroad right-of-way. An occasional pair of lights would blink past him going the other way. There was nothing for anyone else to see or recall—just a relaxed silhouette behind the wheel, with a red coal near its lips, and tooling by. Although a good, wide road, it was not a main artery of traffic.

More than half the night had now gone by, but he still drove on. This had to be done, and when a thing has to be done, it should be done right, no matter how much time it takes.

At last, as he neared the outskirts of a large-sized town, the railroad tracks broadened into numerous sidings, and these blossomed finally into strings of stagnant freight cars of assorted lengths, some only two or three coupled together, others almost endless chains.

He came to a halt finally by the side of the road, took out a flashlight, and left the car. He disappeared into one of the dark lanes between the freight cars, an occasional soft crunch of gravel the only indication of his movements. He was gone for some time,

taking his time in this as in everything else. Almost like a shopper shopping for something that exactly suits him, and refusing to be satisfied with anything else.

When he came back to his car there was very little more to it. He went out to the middle of the road, stood there first looking up one way, then down the other. When he was sure there were no lights approaching even in the remotest distance, he stepped over to his car, moving deftly and quickly but still by no means frightenedly, opened the trunk, and took out the garment bags. He propped them for a moment against the car while he took the precaution of closing the trunk, so that it might not attract attention in case anyone should drive by while he was gone.

Then, half supporting and half trailing the garment bags, he disappeared into the lane of his choice between the parallels of freight cars—the one that led to the freight car he had found with its door left unfastened. There was the sound of the slide grating open, then in a few moments the sound of it grating closed again. And that was all.

When he came back to the car he was alone, unburdened.

The drive back was as uneventful as the drive out. If he had been of a cynical nature, he might have been tempted to ask: What's there to a murder? What's there to worry about?

In due course he came back to the point where the route that led out to her bungalow diverged from the route that would eventually bring him to his own apartment. He didn't even hesitate. He took the road home. He was taking a gamble of a sort, and yet it wasn't as great a gamble as it appeared; he felt now that the longer odds were in his favor, and besides, there was nothing more he could do in her bungalow at this time. She had told him she had stopped working. There was a good chance no one would go there to seek her out during the course of the next day or two. And if someone should, there was an even better chance they would not force entry into the bungalow.

So he decided to go home, leave the bloodstained room the way it was for the time being, and not return until after he'd had a chance to make the necessary preparations for cleaning it up.

He set his alarm for nine, and slept the three hours remaining until then. Which is three hours more sleep than the average murderer can usually get on the first night following his crime.

When he awoke it was Saturday morning, and without even breakfasting he went to a paint store completely across town from

where he lived and explained to the clerk that his so-and-so of a landlord wouldn't paint for him; so he was going to do the job himself and be damned to him.

The man in the paint store was sympathetic. "What color you want?" he asked.

"What color would you advise?"

"What color is it now?"

He picked it out with positive accuracy on a color chart the man showed him.

"Well, your best bet to cover that would be either a medium green or a medium brown," the clerk said. "Otherwise the color on now is going to show through and you'd have to give it two coats."

He thought of the color of dried blood and promptly selected the brown—a sort of light cinnamon with a reddish overtone. Then he bought a like shade of glossy paint for the woodwork, a ladder, and the requisite brushes and mixing fluids. Then he went to a clothing store—not a haberdashery but the sort of outlet that sells work clothes—and purchased a pair of overalls, and added a pair of gauntlets so that he wouldn't get any paint under his fingernails. Such a thing could be the devil to pay.

Then he went back to where he'd killed her.

It was only just past mid-morning when he got there. This time he drove off the unpaved roadway, detoured around to the back of the bungalow, and parked directly behind it in such a way that the house itself hid his car.

There was really no need for this precaution. Being Saturday, the neighborhood was empty—no workmen, no residents; but he felt better taking every possible safeguard, even against an unlikely prowler.

Then on foot he circled around to the front and examined the porch before unloading anything from his car. It was just as he had left it. There was every evidence that his gamble had paid off, that no one had come near the bungalow since it had happened. From a remark she had dropped at his place when they were setting up what had turned out to be the murder appointment, he knew she had no telephone. She was on the waiting list but they hadn't got to her yet. From their old days together he remembered she had never been much of a newspaper reader, so it was extremely improbable she would have regular delivery service, especially in this deserted section. As for milk, there were no signs of that

either; she must have brought home a carton from the grocery store whenever she needed it. Finally, the mail slot opened directly into the house itself, so there was no way of telling from the outside whether the mail had been picked up by its recipient or not.

There wasn't a single thing that wasn't in his favor. He almost marveled at it himself.

He gave another precautionary look around, then opened up the front door with her key, and went in.

For a moment—and for the first time—his heart almost failed him. It looked even worse than he'd remembered from the night before. Maybe he'd been too taken up with removing her to give it due notice. There was only one wall that was completely sterile. Two more were in bad-to-middling shape. But the fourth was practically marbleized, it had such veins and skeins twining all over it. It resembled nothing so much as a great upright slab of white-and-brown marble.

He could see what had caused the marbleized effect. It wasn't that the blood had spurted of its own accord: it was the strokes of the Samurai sword that had splashed it like that—all over everything.

It was too big a job; he felt he could never swing it.

And then he remimded himself: you got rid of her body, didn't you? If you did that, you can do this too.

He then did another of those incongruous things that he kept doing all the way through. He picked up the shaker from the night before, got out the gin and the vermouth, and made himself two more martinis. He left out the olives though.

Feeling more confident now, he changed to his work clothes. He even took off his shoes and remained in his socks. Paint spots on shoes could be just as hard to remove and just as incriminating as paint underneath fingernails.

When he began the new paint job he realized that he didn't have to be too finicky about it—they couldn't arrest you just because your painting wasn't up to major league standards. The daubing went as fast as a speed-cop's motorcycle on the way with a ticket. Almost before he knew it, he had all four sides done, including the one that hadn't needed it. This latter he threw in by way of artistic flourish. The room would have looked queer with three walls one color and the fourth another.

The ladder folded, the buckets out of the way, the overalls and gauntlets stripped off, he stood in the center of the room and

took a comprehensive look at his handiwork—and drew a deep sigh. Not only of relief, but somewhat of cocksure pride.

It might not have been the best paint job that had ever been done, but it guaranteed one thing: the walls were bloodless; the damning stains were completely covered up.

The furniture, of course, was going to be a different matter. Fortunately, it wasn't outsized, the room itself being fairly small. He rolled up the rug and stood it in a corner, just inside the front door.

This part of the program, he knew, would be less arduous than the walls, but it was also going to be a good deal more risky. It necessitated arson.

He slipped out and made a tour of inspection of the skeleton bungalows that sprouted past hers, giving the interior of each one a quick glance.

The first three were too close to hers for his purpose—the inference might be a little too easy to draw. The one at the opposite end was nothing but a gouged-out foundation and poured concrete. The next-to-the-last already had its two-by-fours up, but no flooring or roofing. The next one in had enough wooden construction—plus a lot of shavings—to be ideal: it was like starting a fire in an empty lathe-basket.

Three trips were necessary. He carried the rolled rug, the removable cushions from settee and chair, a small end-table, a parchment lampshade, and whatever else had been stained beyond hope of coverup, to the unfinished bungalow. He didn't forget to include the suit he had worn the night before. He made a pyre of these, topped it off with the paint-impregnated overalls, gauntlets, and brushes, and poured on the highly-inflammable residue from the paint cans.

Then he drained gas from his car, using a receptacle he'd brought from the bungalow, leaving just enough in the tank to get him home, and liberally doused it not only on the mound itself but on the wood around it.

He turned his car around, facing in the direction he was to go, killed the engine, and sat waiting, looking all around him. Finally he started the engine again, very softly, like a newborn kitten purring, picked up a furled newspaper, took a lighter out of his pocket, clicked it twice to make sure it was in working order, got out of the car leaving the door open in readiness, and went inside the unfinished house.

He came out again at a run—this was the first time since he'd killed her that he moved fast—jumped in the car and started off with a surge. He only closed the door after he was careening along, foot tight to the floor. This part of the operation, if no other, was split-second schedule, and not a stray moment could be spared.

For as long as the place remained in sight behind him he could see no sign of flickering flame, of incipient fire. After that—who was around to care?

He got out in front of his own door, locked the car, tossed his keys jauntily up into air and caught them deftly in the same hand.

Upstairs, he sprawled out in a chair, legs wide apart, and let out a great sigh of completion, of finality.

"Now let them say I've killed her." Then, sensibly, he amended it to: "Now let them *prove* I killed her."

II. The Detection—and How They Proved It

They did neither the one nor the other. They started very circumspectly, very offhandedly, in a very minor key—as those things often happen.

A ring at the doorbell.

Two men were standing there.

"Are you—?"

"Yes, I'm—"

"Like to ask you a few questions. Mind if we come in?"

"Come in if you want. I have no objections. Why should I?"

"Do you know a Corinne Matthews?"

"I did at one time."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"What is this—June, isn't it? Either late February or early March. I'm not sure which."

"Not since then?"

"You asked me a minute ago and I told you. If I'd seen her since then, I'd say so."

"Not since then. That's your statement?"

"My statement, right."

"Any objection to coming downtown with us? We'd like to question you in further detail."

"You're the police. When you ask people to come downtown with you, they come downtown with you. No objection."

They came back again that evening. He went down again the

next day. Then back again, down again. Then—

Down again for good.

Held on suspicion of murder.

A back room. Many different rooms, but a back room in particular.

"I suppose now you're going to beat the hell out of me."

"No, we're not going to beat the hell out of you—never do. Besides, we're too sure of you; we don't want anything to backfire. Juries are funny sometimes. No, we're going to treat you with kid gloves. In fact, you're even going to wear kid shorts when you squat down in the old Easy Chair."

"Is that what I'm going to do," he asked wryly, "for something I didn't do?"

"Save it," he was advised. "Save it for when you need it, and you're going to need it plenty."

All through the long weary day identification followed identification.

"Is this the man who bought a pack of cigarettes from you, and handed you in payment a dollar bill with the print of a bloody thumb on one side and the print of a bloody forefinger on the other?"

"That's him. I thought it was an advertising gag at first, the prints were both so clear. Like for one of them horror movies, where they stencil bloody footprints on the sidewalk in front of the theater, to pull the customers inside. I couldn't help looking at him while he was pocketing his change. I didn't call him on it because I could tell the bill wasn't queer, and he acted so natural, so nonchalant. I even saw him sitting out there smoking for a while afterwards. Yes sir, that's him all right!"

"I don't deny it."

"Is this the man who bought a can of Number Two russet-brown paint from you? *And* gloss. *And* brushes. *And* a folding stepladder."

"That's him."

"I don't deny it."

"Is this the man who bought a pair of overalls from you? And a pair of work gloves?"

"That's him."

"I don't deny it."

Room cleared of identifying witnesses.

"Then you took the materials you've just confessed you bought and went to work on the living room at One Eighty-two."

"That I don't admit."

"You deny you repainted that room? Why, it's the identical shade

and grade of paint you bought from this paint store!"

"I didn't say I denied it. What I said was, I don't admit it."

"What does that mean?"

"Prove I painted there. Prove I didn't paint somewhere else."

They knew they couldn't. So did he.

"Show us where you painted somewhere else, then."

"No, sir. No, *sir*. That's up to you, not up to me. I didn't say I painted somewhere else. I didn't say I didn't pour it down a sewer. I didn't say I didn't give it away as a present to a friend of mine. I didn't say I didn't leave it standing around some place for a minute and someone stole it from me."

The two detectives turned their backs on him for a minute. One smote himself on the top of the head and murmured to his companion, "Oh, this man! He's got a pretzel for a tongue."

The plastic garment bags and their hideous contents were finally located. Perhaps all the way across the country in some siding or railroad yard in Duluth or Kansas City or Abilene. They didn't tell him that outright, in so many words, or exactly where, but he could sense it by the subtle turn their questioning took.

They had their *corpus delicti* now, but they still couldn't pin it on him. What was holding them up, what was blocking them, he realized with grim satisfaction, was that they couldn't unearth a single witness who could place him at or near the freight yard he'd driven to that night—or at any other freight yard anywhere else on any other night. The car itself, after exhaustive tests and examinations, must have turned out pasteurizedly pure, antibiotically bloodless. He'd seen to that. And the garment bags had been her own to begin with.

There was nothing to trace him by.

Even the Samurai sword—which he had had the audacity to send right along with her, encased in a pair of her nylon stockings—was worthless to them. It had belonged to her, and even if it hadn't, there was no way of checking on such a thing—as there would have been in the case of a firearm. Being a war souvenir, it was nonregisterable.

Finally, there was the total lack of an alibi. Instead of counting against him it seemed to have intensified the deadlock. From the very beginning he had offered none, laid claim to none, therefore gave them none to break down. He'd simply said he'd gone home and stayed there, and admitted from the start he couldn't prove it. But then they couldn't prove he'd been out to the bungalow

either. Result: each canceled the other out. Stand-off. Stalemate.

As if to show that they had reached a point of desperation they finally had recourse, during several of the periods of interrogation, to stronger measures. Not violence: no blows were struck, nothing was done that might leave a mark on him afterward. Nor were any threats or promises made. It was a sort of tacit coercion, one might say. He understood it, they understood it, he understood they did, and they understood he did.

Unsuspectingly he accepted some punishingly salty food they sent out for and gave to him. Pickled or smoked herring. But not water.

A fire was made in the boiler room and the radiator in one of the basement detention rooms was turned on full blast, even though it was an oppressively hot turn-of-spring-into-summer day. Still no water.

As though this weren't enough, an electric heater was plugged into an outlet and aimed at his straight-backed chair. He was seated in it and compelled to keep two or three heavy blankets bundled around him. In no time the floor around his feet had darkened with the slow seep of his perspiration. But still no water.

Then a tantalizingly frosted glass pitcher, brimming with crystal-clear water and studded with alluring ice cubes, was brought in and set down on a table just within arm's reach.

But each time he reached for it he was asked a question. And while waiting for the answer, the nearest detective would, absently, draw the pitcher away—just beyond his reach—as if not being aware of what he was doing, the way a man doodles with a pencil or fiddles with a paperweight while talking to someone. When he asked openly for a drink he was told (for the record): "Help yourself. It's right there in front of you. That's what it's here for." They were very meticulous about it. Nothing could be proved afterward.

He didn't get a drink of water. But they didn't get the answers they wanted either. Another stalemate.

They rang in a couple of ingenious variations after that, once with cigarettes, another time by a refusal of the comfort facilities of the building. With even less result, since neither impulse was as strong as thirst.

"All we need is one drop of blood," the detective kept warning him. "One drop of blood."

"You won't get it out of me."

"We have identified the remains, to show there *was* a crime—somewhere. We've found traces of blood on articles handled

by you—like the dollar bill you gave the storekeeper—to show, presumably, that you were involved in some crime—somewhere. We've placed *you* in the vicinity of the bungalow: metal bits from the overalls and remains of the paint cans and brush handles in the ashes of the fire. Now all we've got to do is place the crime *itself* there. And that will close the circuit.

"One drop of blood will do it. One single drop of blood."

"It seems a shame that such a modest requirement can't be met," was his ironic comment.

And then suddenly, when least expected, he was released.

Whether there was some legal technicality involved and they were afraid of losing him altogether in the long run if they charged him too quickly; whether it was just a temporary expedient so that they could watch him all the closer—anyway, release.

One of the detectives came in, stood looking at him.

"Good morning," he said finally to the detective, sardonically, to break the optical deadlock.

"I suppose you'd like to get out of here."

"There are places I've liked better."

The detective jerked his head. "You can go. That's all for now. Sign a receipt and the property clerk will return your valuables."

He didn't stir. "Not if there are any strings attached to it."

"What do you want, an apology or something?"

"No, I just want to know where I stand. Am I in or am I out—or what."

"You were never actually under arrest, so what're you beefing about?"

"Well, if I wasn't, there sure has been something hampering my freedom. Maybe my shoelaces were tied together."

"Just hold yourself available in case you're needed. Don't leave town."

He finally walked out behind the detective, throwing an empty cigarette pack on the floor. "Was any of this in the newspapers?"

"I don't keep a scrapbook. I wouldn't know," said the detective.

He picked one up, and it was, had been, and was going to be.

The first thing he did was to phone Allie. She wouldn't come to the phone—or they wouldn't let her. She was ill in bed, they said. That much he didn't disbelieve, or wonder at. There was also a coldness, an iciness: he'd hurt these people badly.

He hung up. He tried again later. And then again. And still

again. He wouldn't give up. His whole happiness was at stake now.

Finally he went back to his own apartment. There was nothing left for him to do. It was already well after midnight by this time. The phone was ringing as he keyed the door open. It sounded as if it had been ringing for some time and was about to die out. He grabbed at it.

"Darling," Allie said in a pathetically weak voice, "I'm calling you from the phone next to my bed. They don't know I'm doing it, or they—"

"You don't believe what you've been reading about me?"

"Not if you tell me not to."

"It was just a routine questioning. I used to know the girl a long time ago, and they grabbed at every straw that came their way."

"We'll have to change everything—go off quietly by ourselves. But I don't care."

"I've got to see you. Shall I come up there?"

"No," she said tearfully. "Not yet. You'd better wait a while first. Give them a little more time."

"But then how am I going to—?"

"I'll dress and come out and meet you somewhere."

"Can you make it?"

"I'm getting better every minute. Just hearing your voice, hearing you say that it was not true—that's better than all their tranquilizers."

"There's a quiet little cocktail lounge called 'For Lovers Only.' Not noisy, not jammed. The end booth."

Her voice was getting stronger. "We were there once, remember?"

"Wear the same dress you did that night."

It was on all over again. "Hurry, I'm waiting for your hello-kiss."

He pulled his shirt off so exuberantly that he split the sleeve halfway down. He didn't care. He shook the shave-cream bomb until it nearly exploded in his hand. He went back to the phone and called a florist.

"I want an orchid sent somewhere—end booth—she'll be wearing pale yellow. I didn't ask you that, but what does come after the fifteen-dollar one? Then make it two fifteen-dollar ones. And on the card you just say this—'From a fellow to his girl'."

And because he was young and in love—completely, sincerely in love, even though he'd killed someone who had once loved him the same way—he started, in his high spirits, in his release from long-sustained tension, to do a mimic Indian war dance, prancing

around the room, now reared up high, now bent down low, drumming his hand against his mouth. "O-wah-o-wah!"

I beat it! he told himself, I've got it made. Just take it easy from here in, just talk with a small mouth—and I'm the one in a thousand who beat it!

Then someone knocked quietly on his door.

Less than an hour after going to bed, one of the detectives stirred and finally sat up again.

His wife heard him groping for his shoes to put them back on. "What's the matter?" she asked sleepily. "You want a drink of water?"

"No," he said. "I want a drop of blood."

"If you couldn't find a drop of blood in the daytime how are you going to find it at night?"

He didn't answer; he just went ahead pulling his pants on.

"Oh, God," the poor woman moaned, "why did I ever marry a detective?"

"Oh, God," he groaned back from the direction of the door, "what makes you think you have?"

"O-wah-o-wah!"

Someone knocked quietly on his door.

He went over to it, and it was one of them again.

He looked at the intruder ruefully—confidently, but ruefully. "What, again?" he sighed.

"This time it's for real."

"What was it all the other times, a rehearsal without costumes?"

"Hard to convince, aren't you? All right, I'll make it official," the detective said obligingly, "You're under arrest for the murder of Corinne Matthews. Anything-you-say-may-be-held-against-you-kindly-come-with-me."

"You did that like a professional," he smirked, still confident.

The detective had brought a car with him. They got in it.

"This is going to blow right up in your face. You know that, don't you? I'll sue for false arrest—I'll sue the city for a million."

"All right, I'll show you."

They drove to the bungalow that had been Corinne Matthews', and parked. They got out and went in together. They had to go through the doorway on the bias. The detective had him on handcuffs now—he wasn't taking any chances.

The detective left it dark. He took out his flashlight and made a big dazzling cartwheel of light by holding it nozzle-close against one section of the wall.

"Take a good look," he said.

"Why don't you put the lights on?"

"Take a good look this way first."

Just a newly painted, spotless wall, and at one side the light switch, tripped to OFF.

"Now look at it this way."

He killed the flashlight, snapped up the wall switch, and the room lit up. Still just a newly painted, spotless wall, and at one side the light switch, reversed now to ON.

And on it a small blob of blood.

"That's what I needed. And look, that's what I got."

The accused sat down, the accuser at the other end of the handcuffs, standing, his arm at elbow height.

"How can a guy win?" the murderer whispered.

"You killed her at night, when the lights were on, when the switch was up like this, showing ON. You came back and painted in the daylight hours, when the lights were not on, when the switch was down, showing OFF. We cased this room a hundred times. for a hundred hours—*but always in the daytime too,* when the lights were not on, when the switch was down, showing OFF. And on the part of the switch *that never showed in the daytime,* the part marked ON, the way it is now, there was one drop of blood that we never found—until tonight."

The murderer was quiet for a minute, then he said the final words—no good to hold them back any more. "Sure," he said, "it was like that. That's what it was like."

His head went over, and a great huff of hot breath came surging out of him, rippling down his necktie, like the vital force, the will to resist, emptying itself.

The end of another story.

The end of another life.

The stranger in the bar said he wasn't a salesman—but he could probably have sold prefabricated, ice-block igloos to the natives of Tahiti . . .

A CRAZY WAY TO MAKE A LIVING

by ED DUMONTE

THE SALOON BUSINESS IS A crazy way to make a living, let me tell you.

Not that I'm kicking, mind. I make a fair living at it and I've had some laughs. But the hours are long and I've had my share of grief from it, too. Like for instance, I've been stuck up a couple of times. And once in a while there's a drunk who gets belligerent and has to be handled. And once in a while I get caught in the middle of a fight between a man and his wife over his girl friend. Or I get caught in the middle of a fight between a man and his girl friend over his wife. Or between a wife and a girl friend over a man.

But none of that is too unusual. You figure it's a part of the business and you learn to live with it. It's the really weirdo things sometimes happen that drive you crazy.

Let me tell you.

The joint I own is just a small place, serving for the most part neighborhood trade. But I'm not so far off the beaten track that I don't get a few strangers.

There was this guy who came in about ten o'clock on Friday morning, just before I was really ready to open. He was wearing a dark-blue suit, a white shirt, and a conservative tie, and I figured him for a salesman with a few minutes to kill before calling on a client.

"Be with you in a minute," I told him. I was in the midst of filling the coolers with beer.

"Don't rush on my account. I'm in no hurry."

While I finished with the coolers and iced the soda machine, he took the stools down off the bar where I'd put them when I mopped the place, and set out the ashtrays. Then he picked out a spot at one end of the bar and sat down to wait, lighting a cigarette.

"I'll take a glass of beer when you're ready," he said. "Whatever you have on tap is okay."

I drew a beer and put it on a

coaster in front of him, pushing back the bill he laid on the bar. The moneybag was hidden behind an empty beer case under the bar. I counted out the change I'd need for the day—$50 in nickels, dimes, quarters, halves, and singles—and put it in the register. Because it was Friday and I cash paychecks for some of my regular customers, I had an extra $500 on hand. I put that under the change tray in the register. Then I got a beer for myself and walked around to the other side of the bar to sit beside the stranger.

"Won't be anybody in for a while yet," I told him. "You a salesman or something?"

"Nope. I was just walking around and saw your door open and came in to have a couple of beers."

There didn't seem to be anything more to say, so we just sat there drinking our beers. After a few minutes I got up and got us both refills and sat down again. That's when this crazy thing started happening.

A guy came into the place and walked up to the bar and I got off my stool to go around and serve him. When you've been in the business as long as I have, you get to sense when something's funny in the air. I got that feeling now.

It wasn't that there was anything wrong-looking with the guy. He was a pleasant-faced young man wearing chinos, a sports shirt, and a light tan jacket. But the way he looked at me and then at the other guy at the bar made me uneasy. I noticed his hands were moist and that he kept rubbing them together as though to dry them.

He ordered a bottle of beer and I turned to get it out of the cooler. When I turned back he was holding a gun on me. One of those little things that looks like a toy until it's pointed at you.

"Don't get nervous, Pop, and don't make me nervous. Just reach behind you and give me the bills out of the register."

The only thing that made me nervous was the fact the the kid was already nervous. The hand that held the gun was trembling visibly. I pressed the *No Sale* key on the cash register and pulled out the singles I had for change.

"Don't do it, son," the man at the other end of the bar said quietly.

The kid whirled to face him, the gun still pointed at me.

"Don't do it, son," the stranger repeated. "It isn't worth it."

"You keep out of this mister, and don't you move from where you are." The kid tried to snarl, but there was a tremor in his voice that matched the tremor in his hand. "I don't want to hurt anybody, but I won't hesitate to shoot if I have to."

"Don't stir him up, buddy," I said to the stranger. "Look at him

shake. I think he's hopped up on something."

"He isn't hopped up. He's just scared." The man used that same quiet, soothing tone of voice. "It's probably the first time he's tried anything like this and he's scared stiff. That right, kid?"

"Can the chatter, both you guys. I need that money and I intend to have it. Now give!"

"I don't know why you need that money, son, but whatever the reason, it isn't worthwhile getting this way. Believe me, I know." The man paused for a moment. "Even if you get away with it this time—and at best you'd only get a few dollars of the bar's money—you'd be a marked man the rest of your days. We'd give your description to the police and it would go on file and sooner or later somebody will recognize you and you'll get caught. It's sure as the rising and setting of the sun."

The stranger paused again, almost as if he was sighing.

"Maybe it will be the next time you try a stickup. Or maybe some cop giving you a parking ticket will recognize you from the description. Or you might be picked up just walking down the street. Do you know what it's like to spend your life looking over your shoulder, wondering who's after you?"

The man kept talking in the same gentle, persuasive tone and the kid stood listening, as if he was hypnotized. Slowly the hand that held the gun dropped.

"So far you're clean, you haven't really done anything, you can walk away from here without having to worry about being hounded the rest of your life." The stranger stared at the kid. "Now I can tell from the look of you that you're a decent sort, that you've never done anything to get you in trouble before. You're too unfamiliar with that way of life to try to take it up now. Why, I'll bet you don't even have bullets in that gun you're holding."

The kid had been slowly edging his way toward the door. At the mention of the bulletless gun he turned pale and bolted out of the place. I stood paralyzed for a moment, then took a long breath.

"I thought you told me you weren't a salesman," I said. "That was the most beautiful sales pitch I ever heard. You talked that kid clean out of a stickup. What are you, a cop or a social worker or something,"

"No, I'm not a cop or a social worker," he said, downing the last of his beer. "I'm a thief."

He reached under his coat and pulled out a big ugly .45 automatic and laid it carefully on the bar, pointing it in my direction.

"And don't forget that wad of bills under the change tray," he added.

Like I said, it's a crazy way to make a living.

a MISS MARPLE story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

As Mr. Petherick, the shrewd solicitor, said: "In a case of illness one likes two points of view—that of the specialist and that of the family physician." In a case of murder Mr. Petherick also liked two points of view—so he consulted Miss Marple. He regarded her as a "family physician," but the truth was, she was also a specialist—in the diagnosis of crime. Actually, Miss Marple proved herself a specialist-specialist, especially in two traditional 'tec themes—the "locked room" and the . . . but it will be more fun if you find out the second for yourself . . .

MISS MARPLE TELLS A STORY

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER TOLD you, my dears—you, Raymond, and you, Joan, about a rather curious little business that happened some years ago now. I don't want to seem *vain* in any way—of course, I know that in comparison with you young people I'm not clever at all—Raymond writes those very modern books about rather unpleasant young men and women—and Joan paints those very remarkable pictures of square people with curious bulges on them—very clever of you, my dear, but as Raymond always says—only quite kindly, because he is the kindest of nephews—I am hopelessly Victorian. I admire Mr. Alma-Tadema and Mr. Frederic Leighton and I suppose to you they seem hopelessly *vieux jeu*.

Now let me see, what was I saying? Oh, yes—that I didn't want to appear vain—but I couldn't help being just a teeny weeny bit pleased with myself because, just by applying a little common sense, I believe I really did solve a problem that had baffled cleverer heads than mine.

Though really I should have thought the whole thing was *obvious* from the beginning . . .

Well, I'll tell you my little story, and if you think I'm inclined to be conceited about it, you must remember that I did at least help a fellow creature who was in very grave distress.

The first I knew of this business was one evening about nine o'clock when Gwen—you remember Gwen, my little maid with red hair?—well, Gwen came in and told me that Mr. Petherick and a gentleman had called to see me. Gwen had showed them into the drawing room—quite rightly. I was sitting in the dining room because in early spring I think it is so wasteful to have two fires going.

I directed Gwen to bring in the cherry brandy and some glasses and I hurried into the drawing room. I don't know whether you remember Mr. Petherick? He died two years ago, but he had been a friend of mine for many years as well as attending to all my legal business. A very shrewd man and a really clever solicitor. His son does my business for me now—a very nice lad and very up to date—but somehow I don't feel quite the *confidence* I had in Mr. Petherick.

I explained to Mr. Petherick about the fires and he said at once that he and his friend would come into the dining room—and then he introduced his friend—a Mr. Rhodes. He was a youngish man—not much over forty—and I saw at once that there was something very wrong. His manner was most *peculiar*. One might have called it *rude* if one hadn't realized that the poor fellow was suffering from so much *strain*.

When we were settled in the dining room and Gwen had brought the cherry brandy, Mr. Petherick explained the reason for his visit.

"Miss Marple," he said, "You must forgive an old friend for taking a liberty. What I have come here for is a consultation."

I couldn't understand at all what he meant, and he went on, "In a case of illness one likes two points of view—that of the specialist and that of the family physician. It is the fashion to regard the former as of more value, but I am not sure that I agree. The specialist has experience only in his own subject; the family doctor has, perhaps, less knowledge—but a wider experience."

I knew just what he meant, because a young niece of mine not long before had hurried her child off to a very well-known specialist in skin diseases without consulting her own doctor whom she considered an old dodderer, and the specialist had ordered some very expensive treatment, and later they found that all the

child was suffering from was rather an unusual form of measles.

I just mention this—though I have a horror of *digressing*— to show that I appreciated Mr. Petherick's point—but I still hadn't any idea of what he was driving at.

"If Mr. Rhodes is ill—" I said, and stopped—because the poor man gave the most dreadful laugh.

He said, "I expect to die of a broken neck in a few month's time."

And then it all came out. There had been a case of murder lately in Barnchester—a town about twenty miles away. I'm afraid I hadn't paid much attention to it at the time, because we had been having a lot of excitement in the village about our district nurse, and outside occurrences like an earthquake in India and a murder in Barnchester, although of course far more important really, had given way to our own little local excitements. I'm afraid villages are like that.

Still, I *did* remember having read about a woman having been stabbed in a hotel, though I hadn't remembered her name. But now it seemed that this woman had been Mr. Rhodes's wife—and as if that wasn't bad enough, he was actually under suspicion of having murdered her himself.

All this Mr. Petherick explained to me very clearly, saying that, although the Coroner's jury had brought in a verdict of murder by a person or persons unknown, Mr. Rhodes had reason to believe that he would probably be arrested within a day or two, and that he had come to Mr. Petherick and placed himself in his hands. Mr. Petherick went on to say that they had that afternoon consulted Sir Malcolm Olde, K.C., and that in the event of the case coming to trial Sir Malcolm had been briefed to defend Mr. Rhodes.

Sir Malcolm was a young man, Mr. Petherick said, very up to date in his methods, and he had indicated a certain line of defense. But with that line of defense Mr. Petherick was not entirely satisfied.

"You see, my dear lady," he said, "it is tainted with what I call the specialist's point of view. Give Sir Malcolm a case and he sees only one point—the most likely line of defense. But even the best line of defense may ignore completely what is, to my mind, the vital point. It takes no account of what actually happened."

Then he went on to say some very kind and flattering things about my acumen and judgment and my knowledge of human nature, and asked permission to tell me the story of the case in the hope that I might be able to suggest some explanation.

I could see that Mr. Rhodes was highly skeptical of my being

of any use and that he was annoyed at being brought here. But Mr. Petherick took no notice and proceeded to give me the facts of what occurred on the night of March 8th.

Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes had been staying at the Crown Hotel in Barnchester. Mrs. Rhodes who—so I gathered from Mr. Petherick's careful language—was perhaps just a shade of a hypochondriac, had retired to bed immediately after dinner. She and her husband occupied adjoining rooms with a connecting door. Mr. Rhodes, who is writing a book on prehistoric flints, settled down to work in the adjoining room.

At eleven o'clock he tidied up his papers and prepared to go to bed. Before doing so, he just glanced into his wife's room to make sure that there was nothing she wanted. He discovered the electric light on and his wife lying in bed stabbed through the heart. She had been dead at least an hour—probably longer.

The following were the points made. There was another door in Mrs. Rhodes's room leading into the corridor. This door was locked and bolted on the inside. The only window in the room was also closed and latched on the inside. According to Mr. Rhodes, nobody had passed through the room in which he was sitting except a chambermaid bringing hotwater bottles. The weapon found in the wound was a stiletto dagger which had been lying on Mrs. Rhodes's dressing table. She was in the habit of using it as a paper knife. There were no fingerprints on it.

The situation boiled down to this—no one but Mr. Rhodes and the chambermaid had entered the victim's room.

I inquired about the chambermaid.

"That was our first line of inquiry," said Mr. Petherick. "Mary Hill is a local woman. She has been chambermaid at the Crown for ten years. There seems absolutely no reason why she should commit a sudden assault on a guest. She is, in any case, extraordinarily stupid, almost half-witted. Her story has never varied. She brought Mrs. Rhodes her hotwater bottle and says the lady was drowsy—just dropping off to sleep. Frankly, I cannot believe, and I am sure no jury would believe, that she committed the crime."

Mr. Petherick went on to mention a few additional details. At the head of the staircase in the Crown Hotel is a kind of miniature lounge where people sometimes sit and have coffee. A passage goes off to the right and the last door in it is the door into the room occupied by Mr. Rhodes. The passage then turns sharply to the right again

and the first door round the corner is the door into Mrs. Rhodes's room.

As it happened, both these doors could be seen by witnesses. The first door—that into Mr. Rhodes's room, which I will call A, could be seen by four people, two commercial travelers and an elderly married couple who were having coffee. According to them, nobody went in or out of door A except Mr. Rhodes and the chambermaid.

As to the other door in passage B, there was an electrician at work there and he also swears that nobody entered or left door A except the chambermaid.

It was certainly a very curious and interesting case. On the face of it, it looked as though Mr. Rhodes *must* have murdered his wife. But I could see that Mr. Petherick was quite convinced of his client's innocence and Mr. Petherick was a very shrewd man.

At the inquest Mr. Rhodes had told a hesitating and rambling story about some woman who had written threatening letters to his wife. His story, I gathered, had been unconvincing in the extreme. Appealed to by Mr. Petherick, he explained himself.

"Frankly," Mr. Rhodes said, "I never believed it. I thought Amy had made most of it up."

Mrs. Rhodes, I gathered, was one of those romantic liars who go through life embroidering everything that happens to them. The amount of adventures that, according to her own account, happened to her in a year was simply incredible. If she slipped on a bit of banana peel it was a case of near escape from death. If a lampshade caught fire, she was rescued from a burning building at the hazard of her life.

Her husband got into the habit of discounting her statements. Her tale as to some woman whose child she had injured in an automobile accident and who had vowed vengeance on her—well, Mr. Rhodes had simply not taken any notice of it. The incident had happened before he married his wife and although she had read him letters couched in crazy language, he had suspected her of composing them herself. She had actually done such a thing once or twice before.

Now, all that seemed to me very natural—indeed, we have a young woman in the village who does much the same thing. The danger with such people is that when anything at all extraordinary really *does* happen to them, nobody believes they are speaking the truth. It seemed to me that was what had happened in this case. The police, I gathered, merely believed that Mr. Rhodes was making up this unconvincing tale in order to avert suspicion.

I asked if there had been any women staying by themselves in

the Hotel. It seems there were two—a Mrs. Granby, an Anglo-Indian widow, and a Miss Carruthers, rather a horsey spinster who dropped her g's. Mr. Petherick added that the most minute inquiries had failed to elicit anyone who had seen either of them near the scene of the crime and there was nothing to connect either of them with it.

I asked him to describe their personal appearance. He said that Mrs. Granby had reddish hair rather untidily done, was sallow-faced and about fifty years of age. Her clothes were rather picturesque, being made mostly of native silk. Miss Carruthers was about forty, wore pince-nez, had close-cropped hair like a man, and wore mannish coats and skirts.

"Dear me," I said, "that makes it very difficult."

Mr. Petherick looked inquiringly at me, but I didn't want to say any more just then, so I asked what Sir Malcolm Olde had said.

Sir Malcolm Olde, it seemed, was going all out for suicide. Mr. Petherick said the medical evidence was dead against this, and there was the absence of fingerprints, but Sir Malcolm was confident of being able to call conflicting medical testimony and to suggest some way of getting over the fingerprint difficulty.

I asked Mr. Rhodes what he thought and he said all doctors were fools but he himself couldn't really believe his wife had killed herself. "She wasn't that kind of woman," he said simply—and I believed him. Hysterical people don't usually commit suicide.

I thought a minute and then I asked if the door from Mr. Rhodes's room led straight into the corridor. Mr. Rhodes said no—there was a little hallway with bathroom and lavatory. It was the door from the bedroom to the hallway that was locked and bolted on the inside.

"In that case," I said, "The whole thing seems to me remarkably simple."

And really, you know, it *did* . . . the simplest thing in the world. And yet no one seemed to have seen it that way.

Both Mr. Petherick and Mr. Rhodes were staring at me so that I felt quite embarrassed.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Rhodes, "Miss Marple hasn't quite appreciated the difficulties."

"Yes," I said, "I think I have. There are four possibilities. Either Mrs. Rhodes was killed by her husband, or by the chambermaid, or she committed suicide, or she was killed by an outsider whom nobody saw enter or leave."

"And that's impossible," Mr. Rhodes broke in. "Nobody could come in or go out through my room without my seeing them, and even if anyone did manage to come in through my wife's room

without the electrician seeing them, how the devil could they get out again leaving the door locked and bolted on the inside?"

Mr. Petherick looked at me and said, "Well, Miss Marple?"

"I should like," I said, "to ask a question. Mr. Rhodes, what did the chambermaid look like?"

He said he wasn't sure—she was tallish, he thought—he didn't remember if she was fair or dark. I turned to Mr. Petherick.

He said she was of medium height, had fairish hair and blue eyes and rather a high color.

Mr. Rhodes said, "You are a better observer than I am, Petherick."

I ventured to disagree. I then asked Mr. Rhodes if he could describe the maid in my house. Neither he nor Mr. Petherick could do so.

"Don't you see what that means?" I said. "You both came here full of your own affairs and the person who let you in was only a *parlormaid.* The same applies to Mr. Rhodes at the hotel. He saw only a *chambermaid.* He saw her uniform and her apron. He was engrossed by his work. But Mr. Petherick has interviewed the same woman in a different capacity. He has looked at her as a *person.*

"That's what the woman who did the murder counted on."

As they still didn't see, I had to explain.

"I think," I said, "that this is how it went. The chambermaid came in by door A, passed through Mr. Rhodes's room into Mrs. Rhodes's room with the hot-water bottle, and went out through the hallway into passage B. X—as I will call our murderess—came in by door B into the little hallway, concealed herself in—well, in a certain apartment—ahem—and waited until the chambermaid had left. Then she entered Mrs. Rhodes's room, took the stiletto from the dressing table—she had doubtless explored the room earlier in the day—went up to the bed, stabbed the dozing woman, wiped the handle of the stiletto, locked and bolted the door by which she had entered, and then went out through the room where Mr. Rhodes was working."

Mr. Rhodes cried out, "But I should have *seen* her. And the electrician would have seen her go in."

"No," I said "That's where you're wrong. You wouldn't see her—*not if she were dressed as a chambermaid.*" I let it sink in, then I went on, "You were engrossed in your work—out of the tail of your eye you saw a chambermaid come in, go into your wife's room, come back, and go out. It was the same dress—*but not the same woman.*

"That's what the people having coffee saw—a chambermaid go in

and a chambermaid come out. The electrician did the same. I daresay if a chambermaid were very pretty a gentleman might notice her face—human nature being what it is—but if she were just an ordinary middle-aged woman—well, it would be the chambermaid's *dress* you would see, not the woman herself."

Mr. Rhodes cried, "Who was she?"

"Well," I said, "that is going to be a little difficult. It must be either Mrs. Granby or Miss Carruthers. Mrs. Granby sounds as though she might wear a wig normally—so she could wear her own hair as a chambermaid. On the other hand, Miss Carruthers with her close-cropped mannish head might easily put on a wig to play her part. I daresay you will find out easily enough which of them it is. Personally, I incline to Miss Carruthers."

And really, my dears, that is the end of the story. Carruthers was a false name, but she was the woman all right. Mrs. Rhodes, who was a most reckless and dangerous driver, had run over her little girl, and it had driven the poor woman off her head. She concealed her madness very cunningly except for writing distinctly insane letters to her intended victim.

She had been following her about for some time, and she laid her plans very cleverly. The false hair and maid's dress she posted in a parcel first thing the next morning. When taxed with the truth she broke down and confessed at once. The poor thing is in Broadmoor now. Completely unbalanced, of course, but a very cleverly planned crime.

Mr. Petherick came to me afterward and brought me a very nice letter from Mr. Rhodes—really, it made me blush. Then my old friend said to me, "Just one thing—why did you think it was more likely to be Carruthers than Granby?"

"Well," I said. "It was the g's. You said she dropped her g's. Now, that's done a lot by hunting people in books, but I don't know many people who do it in real life—and certainly no one under sixty. You said this woman was forty. Those dropped g's sounded to me like a woman who was playing a part and overdoing it."

I shan't tell you what Mr. Petherick said to that—but he was very complimentary—and I really couldn't help feeling just a teeny weeny bit pleased with myself.

And it's extraordinary how things turn out for the best in this world. Mr. Rhodes has married again—such a nice, sensible girl—and they've got a dear little baby and—what do you think?—they asked me to be godmother. Wasn't it nice of them?

Now I do hope you don't think I've been running on too long . . .

a *NEW* crime-horror story by

RAY RUSSELL

Ray Russell has had nearly sixty stories published in "Playboy"—which is probably a world's record. Here is his first story to appear in EQMM—the tale of a palazzo in Venice, sometime in the 1790's—"a tale crammed with cruelty, and vile device, and dark profundity of horror"—a tale that can be described in one word (Ray Russell's own word) — "baroque" . . .

THE MAN WHO SPOKE IN RHYME

by RAY RUSSELL

AN UNDATED LETTER WRITTEN by *Lord Henry Stanton to Sir Robert Cargrave, a London physician, probably in 1876 or 1877, judging from internal evidence*:

Sir Robert Cargrave
Harley Street
London, England

My dear Bobbie,

Of all the news in your last letter, the item that has struck me most forcibly is your casual mention that "telephones" have actually begun to be installed in London, and that the serenity of even your own gracious home will soon be shattered by the shrilling of that vulgar novelty. In Venice, from which I write, we are still unsullied by such encroachments. I live here, in my rented palazzo, like a Renascence prince, *un gran signore,* sipping old wine, strolling among the pictures and sculpture, looking out upon the gondolas on the canals, listening to the songs of the *gondolieri,* and poring over old books, such as a certain *Varie avvertenze utili e necessarie agli amatori di buoni libri,* written some 160 years ago by the good Father Gaetano Volpi, priest and librarian.

The book is before me at this moment, and for your delectation I will copy out a few passages

of his advice on the care and protection of one's library. He warns us not to emulate the example of Magliabechi, the famous librarian of Florence, "who read during meals and was known to drop a kipper amid the pages to mark his place . . . Nor use your library to hold meetings, for it is known that bookstalls have been found convenient—*o tempora, o mores!*—for gentlemen to relieve themselves . . ." Mark well and profit by those sage words, Bobbie.

And do not think this is an ordinary palazzo in which I pass my days. It enjoys the distinction of being haunted; or perhaps I should say the reputation of being haunted, for I have yet to see or hear the shade of mad Count Carlo in these halls. I have heard his tale, however, recounted by the venerable person from whom I rent this palazzo—a remarkably well-preserved morsel of decayed gentry, 85 if he is a day (possibly older), yet still fond of food and wine and blest with that stamina which spinners of elaborate stories vitally require (to say nothing of their listeners).

It was just yesterday, in the latter part of the afternoon, that he was here and I asked him about the Count. He fixed me with his still bright eyes, shook his great white-haired head in the negative; then, when I entreated him to tell, he gave a sigh, and seemed to relent, and said, in his somewhat quaint and stilted way (in Italian, of course, which I here translate): "So many tales are told, so much mendacious folly is spread about, that it is good for such a one as I to loose his tongue and say such words that may—if God is good and you inclined to hear them—tell the bare, unpainted truth about those hapless folk . . ."

I nodded eagerly, offering him a chair, pouring him more wine, urging him on.

He sipped the wine, and waxed ruminative. "A single cold misgiving yet I harbor," he said, "although I will not let it stay me. It is this: my poor stiff words, ungarlanded by malice or invention, will yet disclose a tale more crammed with cruelty, and vile device, and dark profundity of horror, than any silly falsehoods you have heard. You wish me to go on, Lord Henry?"

Foolish question! *"Certo,"* I replied.

You will be relieved to know I have no intention of setting down the good old man's words verbatim, in their admittedly colourful but convoluted and meandering original, for few of us have time for such bedizened narratives in this modern world of "telephones" and "talking machines" (have you heard of this latter?—an American named Ed-

disohn or Eddisen has spawned a devilish device that will abolish every opera house and concert hall in the world within a decade, I predict; a frightening and barbaric race, these Yankees). No, I will paraphrase my ancient host's tale, which, I should guess, took place in the vicinity of 1790; at any rate, some time near the end of the last century.

Count Carlo lived in this palazzo with a carefully chosen minimum of servants and retainers, and no other kin but his sister Fiammetta, who was as fair as he was plain. His skin was raddled, hers was opalescent; his nose was large and shapeless, hers was a dainty, demure, delicately modelled masterpiece; his eyes were small and piggish; hers large and dark and luminous and clear and shaded by the fine fringed canopies of her lashes. Many were the swains who came here to the palazzo to win her; who came, I say, but who were discouraged, turned away, repulsed, every one of them, by her brother the Count.

"Why may not young men pay suit to me?" she often asked her brother. "Is it your plan to make of me a nun?"

At such times, he would emit his dry cackle of a laugh. "A nun! Ah, no, *bella sorella*—" he would repeat the phrase in a singsong, a kind of daft liturgy "*—sorella bella, bella sorella!* You are too fair, too fine, too rare a wine, in cloistered convent walls to pine, O matchless little sister mine!"

"Matchless is well said, you refuse to make a match for me!" And she would weep.

Then he would calm her, and soothe her, and assure her he was but saving her for a suitor worthy of her beauty, grace and station, a mate of the proper blood.

"What is this of blood?" she would wail. "These are no churls who have sung songs at my window, begging for my hand, swearing eternal love, but highborn fellows, all. Blood, indeed!"

"Blood," repeated the Count, and the word seemed to spur his whirling mind, to spiral it into another shower of dotty doggerel: *"Sangue rosso, sangue caldo . . ."* (Again I shall endeavour to render this into English.) "Blood is red and blood is hot; blood may seem what blood is not. Blood most innocent, if shed, hatred on that blood is fed . . ."

"Oh brother, leave off with these riddling rhymes, I pray you. They are sour to my ear."

"Sour?" And that would be enough to send him into another theme: "That which sweetest tastes of all may be changed to bitter gall. Apollo can a Gorgon be, and songs of love—cacophony!" (Did you not tell me once, Bobbie, that there is a form of mental disorder in which the patient expresses

himself exclusively in rhyme? Count Carlo seems to have been an early example.)

There came to the palazzo one fateful day a traveller from Spain, a handsome young man of good family who sued to see not Fiammetta but Carlo. The Count, apparently impressed by something in the young man's name or mode of approach, granted him audience.

"Honoured sir," said the Spaniard, "you see before you one whose life is dedicated to beauty. The beauty of dappled hills, of horses, of guileless children, of gleaming ripe fruits, of draperies; the sad and humbling beauty of timeworn faces; the cold beauty of silver, the warm beauty of gold; the unadorned beauty of man and woman in their perfection—all these and more I have captured upon canvas. For some time now, I have dreamed of a great picture, my dear *conte*—Mother Eve, alone in the Garden, in the innocence before the Fall, the world a glowing quietude around her, unblemished, undefiled. This picture I have sketched and sketched again more times than I can say—the composition and much of the detail, the trees and flowers, gossamer insects, playful tame beasts, the soft sky and gentle clouds above them. I lack but one element, without which all is nought. Eve herself escapes me— nowhere have I found her, not among living models or in the realms of my mind, and it is not for want of searching."

Carlo said, "You fascinate me, honoured guest. Pray go on and tell the rest."

"It was a friend of mine and sometime teacher," the young man continued, "who put me on the scent, as it were. He is himself an artist of no small gifts, recently appointed *pintor de cámara,* Francisco Goya by name, and one day he said to me, 'Ramon, when a man has painter's ears as well as painter's eyes, he notes things other men pass by. That talk we heard in taverns a month or two ago, and again this past week, those stories, rumours, about a young Venetian maiden named Fiammetta, whose beauty is the theme of songs and sonnets in her own land—might there not be some truth behind them? Do you recall the ardour, the passion of the song we heard that sailor sing?—

Divina Fiammetta,
Bellissima giovinetta . . .

—is it likely the subject of his song is but a fiction? Where there is smoke, is there not likewise fire? If I, like you, were searching for an Eve; and if I, like you, were unencumbered and not saddled with a court appointment, I would get me straightway to Venice!' So said my friend, and I am here, dear count."

Carlo, who had thwarted all

others seeking interviews with Fiammetta, seemed to succumb immediately to the Spainiard's blandishments. Even the thought that his sister, as Eve, would be obliged to pose *au naturel* did not perturb him. In his words: "Though men are ruled by lechery and lust, physician, priest and painter one may trust."

One small step had yet to be taken, of course—obtaining the permission of the lady herself.

We have all heard that "Opposites attract," but I have found this less true than the axiom that "Like speaks to like," that beauty seeks beauty and grace calls out to grace—and surely this was the state of things when Fiammetta for the first time beheld Don Ramon José Villardos y Manadereneña. For if she was a young goddess, he was a young god, a Grecian statue, an anthology of perfections, reflecting her own beauty lustre for lustre, even to the opal glow that lit both his skin and hers. They were fated to fall immediately and furiously in love; lock and key seemed not more made to join together; and such elemental passions as theirs not hurricane or holocaust, not puny Man or Almighty God may tear in twain. Her permission, it is superfluous to say, was granted at once.

And so it was that Fiammetta was left behind closed doors with Don Ramon while he blocked out the main lineaments of the huge canvas, and painted the first brush-strokes. Days went by, and weeks, and on every day of this time save Sundays, Fiammetta spent hours under the eyes of Ramon, as innocent of raiment as the Eve she represented.

Are we to be surprised, then, that one morning Carlo stepped suddenly, unexpectedly, into the room to find not only Eve, but also Adam, cleaving together not on canvas but in the living flesh? Behind them, like a fine theatrical cloth, stood the immense spectrum of colour that was the uncompleted canvas—the lush jungle of Eden, veiled in primordial mist, the leaves and grasses in every imaginable variety of green, the flowers a dazzling riot of vibrant scarlet, soft lavender, bright yellow, lush purple, the insects and birds almost audibly buzzing and chirping, the lion and the lamb asleep together, and, coiled sinuously in the branches of the focal Tree, the unblinking, watchful Serpent. The figure of Eve had hardly been touched—she remained a blurred charcoal outline—but this gaping cavity in the canvas was masked by the figures of the flesh-and-blood model and her painter who seemed to be part of the picture, but a part that stood out in breath-taking relief.

With a cry of shock, the young lovers drew apart and reached for

draperies to cover themselves withal. Fiammetta trembled at the wrath she knew would come. Ramon, when his voice returned to him, gathered about himself as much dignity as the circumstances would permit, and said:

"Sir, I alone am blameworthy in this. Here is my breast: draw your sword and slay me, for I know you must, but find forgiveness for your sister and spare her life, I beseech you."

Carlo appeared to be confused by this speech, and asked for elucidation; whereupon Ramon replied, "In my country, you, as the lady's brother and only living relative, would be compelled by custom to observe the *pundonor,* the point of honour, and slay the woman as well as the man, even though the woman be raped. Blood alone, the blood of both, can wash out such a stain—"

"So may it be in Spain," said Carlo, neatly completing the rhyme. Then he laughed in a not unfriendly manner, and added: "Your ancient ways it ill becomes me to disparage, but all the punishment I plan for you is—marriage!"

Nothing could have pleased the two young people more than this. They joined Carlo in laughter, and then and there, under the most—shall we say informal?—of conditions, made plans for a quiet wedding, to take place in one week's time.

It was a simple ceremony, attended almost entirely by the servants, conducted in the chapel of the palazzo by a simple padre.

Ramon took up residence in the palazzo, the old walls of which seemed to glow with the love of the newlyweds. Their life was an enchanted idyll; they lived in an Eden of bliss that paled the painted Eden of his canvas. The picture was at length finished: it hangs here now, in the main hall, where all may see and admire the beauty of Fiammetta-Eve, and the talent of her adoring husband.

Some nine months after that embarrassing interruption that precipitated the hasty marriage, Carlo planned a special supper for the three of them. Fiammetta was great with child, and the midwife expected the infant to arrive the following day; so the supper was in the way of a celebration. The finest wines and cheeses were brought forth from the cellar, roasted birds and baked meats were proffered, fantastic pastries decorated the table. There was much laughing and joking, a deal of kissing, and Carlo and Ramon exchanged a great many stories of chivalry and brave exploits, thus delighting Fiammetta, who liked a good tale. Carlo asked Ramon if he did not perhaps know a story concerning *pundonor,* which would help him understand this strange custom of the Spaniards.

"I do," replied Ramon. "A

story both true and terrible, a story close to me for reasons you will soon perceive. It is a story of a beautiful Spanish widow, the still-young mother of a boy not yet fifteen, who was seduced—nay, raped would be the more honest word—by a hidalgo of hot blood and cold cunning, grown bold by the recent death of the poor lady's husband and protector. But he did not reckon with her brother, who, as guardian of the family's good name, slew him—then slew the lady, too, his own sister, to satisfy the code of *pundonor*, which demands that both defiler and defiled must be slain."

"How cruel!" said Fiammetta. "That the lady, too, should die! It is a heartless code, this *pundonor*."

Carlo, agreeing with her in his jingling, jangling way, said that the Italian *vendetta* was much more sensible and fair than *pundonor* since it would demand the death of the traducer only, not of the wronged woman as well.

Placing a tender hand upon her husband's arm, Fiammetta cooed, "My love, you said this tale was close to you. Was the poor widow your mother, and yourself the lad of fifteen years?"

"No, my sweet, I was ten at the time, but there is more to tell. The unhappy lady was my dear and saintly aunt, the brother who split her blood, my father. My cousin, the boy of fifteen, with whom I and my little sister were wont to play and gambol for hours together, so congenial were we— that dear cousin, that jolly companion, roiled by his mother's death and by the manner of it, wrought a horrible revenge upon us." Ramon shuddered. "Even now, across the span of years, the picture of that vengeance poisons me . . ."

Count Carlo said, "But pray go on, although it chill your marrow—a half-told tale's a bow without an arrow."

Rámon resumed: "One night, while we all slept, my cousin stole stealthily into our house, crept up to the bedchamber of my little sister, and then—with his father's saber, which we found all bloody on the floor—hacked her into unrecognizable pieces!"

Fiammetta sucked in her breath and recoiled. "Ah, no!"

"Butchered that four-year-old! Butchered her tiny blameless form as if she were a suckling pig—nay, one would not even chop a pig so much, so madly!"

"Oh, my poor Ramon . . ." Fiammetta sought to solace him with tender kisses upon his cheek, so wrought was he with the reliving of the hideous event. "And your cousin?" she asked. "How did he fare? Was he caught and punished?"

Ramon shook his head. "He

vanished. We searched for weeks, for months, a year, but he was never found."

A silence had covered the table like a shroud. The setting sun cast a ruddiness upon the room that, at any other time, would have been lovely, but now looked like nothing more nor less than a film of blood. At length, Carlo rose from the table stroking his chin reflectively, and paced, saying, "This haunted tale of hellish hate I might yet elaborate."

"Elaborate?" said Ramon, wonderingly.

Carlo nodded. "Suppose, by devilish design, indeed your cousin killed a swine, made of it a mincemeat mess, wrapped it in the silk nightdress of your sister and then fled, bearing her away not dead—not dead but very much alive, to such a place where she would thrive, and grow more beautiful each day, in a palazzo far away . . ." He turned suddenly to the puzzled Spaniard.

"In a. . .palazzo?" said Ramon. "You mean in Italy?"

Carlo nodded.

"Strewed the gory pieces of a pig in her crib and left the saber there . . ."

Ramon tried to smile. "It is an ingenious conceit, I grant, but . . ." His voice trailed off, uncertainly.

Said Carlo: "That cousin of such horrid fame: tell me, may we know his name?"

Ramon opened his mouth, then closed it again without replying, as if the requested name had frozen in his throat. His eyes flickered from Carlo to Fiammetta and back again.

She, who had been silent through this, now said, "Ramon, what was your cousin's name?"

Ramon did not look at her. In a chilled voice, he said, "Carlos."

Carlo laughed.

Fiammetta laughed, too, at what she knew not. Her laughter faded and died as her mind called back a line from one of Carlo's past nonsense verses: *Blood may seem what blood is not.* Did it have a meaning? And: *Blood most innocent, if shed, hatred on that blood is fed.* What of that? Was it mere foolery, or something much worse?

She turned to regard her husband; unspeakable suspicions were beginning to distort the sweetness of his face (or was it something in her own thoughts that was making his beauty ugly to her eyes?). *That which sweetest tastes of all may be changed to bitter gall. Apollo can a Gorgon be, and songs of love—cacophony.*

Giggling hollowly she plucked her husband's sleeve and said to him, "This is but a mad jest; it is his peculiar way." Turning desperately to Carlo, she cried, "Tell him it is only a foolish verse, brother!"

Carlo was no longer laughing. He looked icily down upon her. "Nevermore call *me* your brother." He pointed to Ramon. "Use that name upon this other."

"No!" she shouted, hoarse with disbelief. "Ramon my brother? This is your silly fancy!"

Ramon howled, "It cannot be!" But he had grown pale. Now, rising, staggering under the full implication of Carlo's words, he upset the table, sending chalices of wine clanging to the marble floor, their crimson contents gushing like sanguinary floods. "I am here of my own volition!" he cried to Carlo. "You could never have foreseen my coming!" His eyes glazed with a new thought and he reeled away from Carlo, saying, "And yet . . ."

Fiammetta now spoke, her voice blanched by dawning horror. "And yet did you not say tales reached your ears of a maiden whose beauty . . ." She broke off, her voice strangled in her throat, her ivory bosom heaving with the pound of her heart. "Oh, God! Those who spread the tales—they must have been his accursed couriers!"

Ramon's whole frame was shaking. He took Fiammetta's terror-stricken face in his hands, and studied it, and looked into her eyes as he said, in a voice all groan and whimper: "You do not resemble him . . .you are closer to *me* in likeness . . .to *me*!"

Carlo had wandered out, onto the parapet, and was now standing with head thrown back and arms outspread, looking aloft into the blood-red sky. In a frenzied, declamatory voice, he addressed an apostrophe presumably to the spirit of his hated uncle:

"Slayer of my mother, see—I avenge that infamy! See your son and daughter wed, sharing a corrupted bed; see her swollen by his seed, soon to spawn a loathesome breed! Thus Ramon and Fiammetta consummate my sworn vendetta!"

His insane laughter echoed along the canals.

The rest, Bobbie, you can guess, or most of it. Ramon, driven by justified rage as well as by the dictates of *pundonor*, killed Carlo (or Carlos) and Fiammetta, and, finally, himself.

This treble tragedy grows even starker when we consider the distinct possibility that Carlo's little disclosure may have been a figment, made up out of whole cloth, just as Fiammetta fleetingly hoped. His mad mind may have fabricated the whole thing for the first time when he heard Ramon's true account of those childhood horrors. And certain convenient facts relating to the resemblance between Ramon and Fiammetta may have seemed to corroborate Carlo's story.

But have you not seen two

strangers more alike in looks than some siblings you have known? Have you not seen brother and sister quite unlike each other in appearance? And as for the seeming prophecy of the earlier verses, which so terrified Fiammetta when she recalled them, did they really contain secret knowledge or were they no more than crazy Carlos cryptic word juggling, meaningless jingles with obligatory classical allusions? I fear we will never know whether Carlo's mischief was a fiendish plot stretching over many years, or merely a tall tale concocted that fatal night.

My venerable host offers no opinion on this matter. When he left me yesterday, he merely added that Fiammetta's child did not die (as one would assume) but was born at the moment of his mother's death. You, Bobbie, are a physician, and will know if such a thing is possible. He further claims that this child is still alive. And he hints, rather broadly, that this offspring of a possibly unnatural, possibly quite natural union is none other than himself. I will admit he is old enough to be.

Before I close, I must tell you that the great diva, Maria Walkmann, is here in Venice, preparing what will be her last opera season (she is retiring to marry Count Galeazzo Massari; and she has promised to write me a letter of introduction to her friend Verdi, whom I hope to visit soon at his home, Sant' Agata. He is searching for a subject for his next opera, and I propose to recount the above story and perhaps undertake the writing of the libretto—*Ramon e Fiammetta,* or possibly *Carlo, Conte di Venezia,* or better still: *La Vendetta, un dramma di Lord Enrico Stanton, musica di Giuseppe Verdi.*

What do you think? Please write, a good long letter, whenever you are not chattering on your "telephone." And when you do write, please tell me if it is true what I have heard: that the Empress of Brazil has sent our dear Victoria a gown woven entirely of spider web. I prefer to believe it, but my preferences, as you know, have always been for the baroque.

Your friend,

Harry

a DR. COLIN STARR detective story by

RUFUS KING

Jock Fraley confessed that he shot and killed young Ladington. To D.A. Hefferfield it was an open-and-shut case. But to Dr. Colin Starr there were puzzling features: for one thing, the confessed killer didn't remember a single detail—he was "out on his feet" while the murder was being committed; for another, he had no motive to kill Ladington; for still another, Jock Fraley had been smoking marijuana but he hadn't known it; and then there was "the blood pattern."

So all it needed was a detecting miracle—by a doctor detective . . .

THE TENTH CASE OUT OF TEN

by RUFUS KING

THE BULLET WAS LEAD AND had been activated by the comparatively low velocity of a revolver charge—compared, that is, with that of a machine gun, or a rifle. But its job had been thorough.

Dr. Colin Starr listed it for his own satisfaction as a lung wound involving the perforation of a large trunk of the pulmonary vein, with profuse bleeding into the chest cavity, and with death occurring within a few minutes. He felt that the coroner, when he came, would concur.

The bullet's caliber he placed at .38, a "short." Attached to it was what he believed would prove to be a splinter of rib, and he thought that the track would pass uneccentrically through the chest.

The tip of the bullet protruded from the exit hole.

He looked thoughtfully at the pattern and amount of blood which stained the immediate area where the body lay.

He said to Patrolman Brostrom, "Hunt up a reading glass, will you? Try the library. Ask a servant, if you have to, but don't disturb Mrs. Fraley." He saw the damp prelude to nausea on Brostrom's stolid face. "Take a shot of brandy before you come back."

Brostrom left the living room. It was a pleasant room, set in the gracious tranquillity of an earlier day, and unchanged through four generations of Fraleys. Its French windows opened onto lawn and the moist still air of a summer daybreak. Beyond the lawn lay the acres of the Fraley estate, walled off at their western end from the fairways of the Country Club's golf course, and at the east by Ladington Road and the Onega River.

Flanking estates were the Cyrus Ladingtons' on the south and the Eldridge Taylors' to the north, while still farther north stretched the city of Laurel Falls with its eighty thousand Ohioans.

On the floor of the room was the body, naked except for a pair of swimming trunks, lanky with youth, and topped by the lean spiritual face of Dean Ladington. Eleven feet away from it, on the edge of an Aubusson carpet, was the revolver.

Starr looked at the thin perfection of the platinum wrist watch which Bob Chanlind had insisted on giving him after he had solved, last June, the lucifer-match murder of Bob's brother. It was half-past four.

He took the pearl-handled magnifying glass from Patrolman Brostrom—who now looked better—and asked Brostrom to move a reading lamp to the floor beside the body.

Starr adjusted the lamp's shade so that light shafted young Ladington's brown torso. He confirmed his belief that the splinter adhering to the lead bullet was rib bone.

He turned his attention to the entrance wound, and with the delicate application of an instrument from his bag collected some minute bits of cloth. He placed them on a prescription blank, folded the blank, and put it in his pocket.

A siren wailed through the quiet of the night.

"That'll be the boys," Brostrom said . . .

Starr's report to District Attorney Thomas Hefferfield was brief. Aleck Jones, Hefferfield's stenographer, took it down as they stood drinking steaming black coffee in the dining room.

He (Starr said) had been awakened by a telephone call from the Fraley home shortly after half-past three. Mrs. Chesterton

Fraley was on the wire and had told him in a voice broken with hysteria that she had heard a shot. She had got out of bed and run downstairs and into the living room, where the lights were on. She had found her young neighbor, Dean Ladington, on the floor, dead. She had found her son Jock Fraley in the washroom that opened off the main hall, being violently ill. Jock was beside her right then—while she telephoned—in a state of collapse.

Starr had dressed and come—the dressing taking ten minutes, the two-mile ride (in his supercharged foreign convertible job) three. He had reached the Fraley's about ten of four.

Patrolman Brostrom, who covered Ladington Road on a motorcycle, was already there, having been interested in the untimely lights that burned in the Fraley house, and in one shriek from a neurotic maid. Starr had found Mrs. Fraley and her son in the library. She had pulled herself together, but the anguish and worry stamped on her face made her look like death. Jock Fraley was a wreck, mentally and physically.

Jock Fraley had confessed to the crime.

"It's a rotten shame," Hefferfield said. "Letting kids go haywire like that. It's the parents' fault, I say; and still, that boy has to take the rap for it. Maybe if his father were living, things would be different. How old is he anyhow, Colin?"

"He was twenty-two last May."

"What sort of shape is he in now?"

"He's better."

"What was he? Just blind drunk?"

"No, it wasn't entirely liquor. He'd been smoking marijuana."

The D.A. grunted.

"Jock didn't know he was smoking it. He doesn't know where he got the cigarettes."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I think it does, Tom. I think so because there are several things about Dean Ladington's death that make sense just as queerly. There's a bare chance Jock didn't do it."

"Listen, Colin, he *said* he did it. Did you get the idea he was covering for somebody?"

"No, that sort of heroic idiocy just doesn't happen. Jock thinks he did it, all right; but here's the point, Tom: *he doesn't know why!*"

"I get it. Accidental homicide while under the influence of liquor, or else a temporary insanity plea."

"Jock just hasn't got that kind of a mind, and you know it."

"I know he's confessed. I also know a confession isn't worth a damn without corroborative evidence. Well, there's plenty."

"Feel like loosening up?"

"Sure, why not? I'm not trying to railroad the boy, but I've got to use common sense. You examined the body, so you know the wound must have been a contact one, and that the body was naked except for swimming trunks."

"I took some bits of cloth from the entrance wound."

"So has the coroner, and so the gun was fired through cloth, through a coat pocket."

"There's no hole in any pocket of the tuxedo jacket Jock was wearing when I got here."

"I know that. But there is a bullet hole and flame burn in the pocket of a tweed jacket of Jock's that was hanging in his clothes closet."

"You're arguing that he changed his coat just to shoot Dean Ladington?"

"Can you name me, accurately, any seven things a drunk will do when he's out on his feet?"

"No, I can't."

"All right. My bet is that microphotographs of the cloth bits that were taken from the wound will check with the cloth of the tweed jacket."

"And what was the motive?" Starr asked.

"Listen, Colin: people have got tight and shot other people dead for no more than a word or two and done it so often it's a headache. The police blotters in any town of any size crawl with it. Dean Ladington takes a dip in his swimming pool. We know that because his trunks are wet. He comes over here and starts jawing with Jock in the living room, and Jock shoots him. What they jawed about I'll find out when I put the screws on Jock."

"Let me take a crack at him first, will you? I yanked him through pneumonia last winter, and I've glued him together every time he's fallen off his horse. He'll talk to me. Really talk."

"All right, go ahead." Hefferfield stared at Starr sharply. "What's at the bottom of this? What's bothering you?"

"Take a good look at the blood pattern on that carpet," Starr said, "then tell me if it means what I think it does." He went out.

Jock Fraley was lying on his bed. A white tuxedo jacket lay across the back of the chair. His shoes were off. His plain, wholesome young face, topped by a shock of chestnut hair, looked better, but not much. Mrs. Fraley had seen to his jacket and shoes. She sat beside the bed, a quiet frail woman with quiet beautiful hands and tortured deep gray eyes.

"Shall I leave, Doctor?"

"Would you mind, Mrs. Fraley?"

"Of course not."

She looked at Starr for a searching moment, into his thoughtful and alert dark eyes,

at the virile strength of his pleasant features; then she turned toward a window and said, "There's the day."

She left the room.

"Feel any better, Jock?"

"Guess so, Colin."

"Figured out any reason yet for shooting Dean?"

Jock's voice was a sore wound. "I just remember the gun being in my hand when I came to. The sound of the shot must have snapped me out of it. I don't know how long I'd been out on my feet. Ever get that way, Colin?"

"Once, on absinthe, and only once."

"Fierce, isn't it?"

"Terrible. Your best friends all tell you the next day just what you did and just what you said. I know I once blocked traffic for a while by making noises like a cow."

"Sure enough?"

"Yes. My medical student days. Fortunately they preceded the trend toward euthanasia, or I'd not be here now, trying to get you out of this fix."

"Thanks, Colin, but I don't want any temporary-insanity-plea stuff. I want to take what's coming to me. Why wouldn't I? He was Elsa's brother, wasn't he?" The spoken sound of her name itself was enough to start him crying. "I *want* to die, Colin."

"All right. You will in time. What good will it do Elsa?"

"We got engaged last week."

This was news. Elsa Ladington was nineteen, and one of the prettiest kids in town, as well as being in line to inherit one of the largest fortunes in the city.

"You kept it pretty quiet," Starr said.

"Elsa wanted it that way until her folks got back. They're in Switzerland. Nobody knew, only Phil."

"Which Phil?" Starr asked.

"Phil Taylor." Jock turned his face to the wall. "Phil was engaged to her secretly, and she broke it off when she told him about me—about how she suddenly knew it had always been me, only I'd been such a damn clam about it. Phil took it like a brick. . . . How long does it take, Colin? I mean, counting the trial and everything."

"I guess they can make it pretty fast, if you ask them to. Listen, you young fool: you pulled a blank, and some very queer things happened during it, until the sound of a sudden shot snapped you out of it. I'm going to fill that blank in. Blow your nose and get down to business."

"Huh?"

"Was it your revolver?"

"Yes. It's an old one that belonged to Dad."

"Where is it kept?"

"In the desk in the library."

"Who knows that?"

"Anybody in the crowd, I guess. We've used it plenty for target practice."

"Give me the exact setup for last evening."

"From when?"

"From when you started to get stoned."

"That was at Spinelli's."

Spinelli's was the roadhouse currently in vogue among the men and women of the town's youngest set, the set's average age centering around a mature eighteen. It boasted the stickiest band in Ohio.

"Who was there?"

"Everybody, Colin."

"That's fine. Suppose you break them down into small pieces."

"But what's the *use?* Nothing but a miracle could change my having done it."

"All right, we'll look for a miracle. We'll also look for the rat who set the stage. And stop wasting time. Who was there?"

Starr's voice was strengthening, like the bracing feel of cold water when you plunge in sweating on a hot summer's day—and the tension loosed a little on Jock's face.

"Elsa was with me," he said, "and Dean had that new bolt of lightning who's staying with the Atchinsons, and Frank and Polly Atchinson were with us, and Phil joined us, too."

"Phil Taylor?"

"Yes. Eldridge Taylor and Mabel brought him, and Mabel started being resigned and going in for her usual 'that's-right-leave-me-sitting-here-alone' line, and Phil got fed up with it and came over to our table. Eldridge was in one of his moods."

Starr took a moment to straighten it out. The Taylors were Jock's neighbors to the north, just as the Ladingtons were his neighbors to the south. Mabel Taylor was Eldridge's wife, and Phil was Eldridge's younger brother, younger by about twelve years.

Starr knew the Taylors only casually. He had never treated them professionally, and their social sphere rarely extended beyond Laurel Falls' agreeable little group of sophisticates, whose sport and relaxations were bounded by gin-and-tonic and numerous cerebral forms of charades. He understood that Mabel was an adept at the harp, which had always stopped him right there.

He knew Eldridge Taylor as an enormously stout, platter-faced man with a great reputation for intellectual quips, and a bright, detailed mind. He knew that Eldridge, as an architect, was reputed to be slipping, and that he had recently lost out on several important local and State jobs.

He knew Philip Taylor as a leaner edition of his older brother—but otherwise he didn't know him at all.

"What time was all this, Jock?"

"We got to Spinelli's about half-past eleven."

"Were the Taylors at Spinelli's when you got there?"

"No, they came in after."

"How long after?"

"A couple of dances—about half an hour, I guess."

"That takes us to midnight. Now about those marijuana cigarettes?"

"Honest, Colin, I swear I didn't know I was smoking that rotten stuff. I'd rather cut my hand off than do it, Colin."

"What kind were you smoking?"

"The same as I always do."

"Pack or cigarette case?"

"Pack."

"Full or nearly empty?"

"Say!"

"Yes?"

"That could be it, Colin; and she didn't want to be an old maid."

"Who didn't?"

"Lightning. And I could swear there were more than just one in the package when I left the table."

"I want this quite plain, Jock."

"It is. I *know* there were two or three in the pack when we got up to dance."

"Did you keep the pack on the table?"

"Yes, all of us did."

"Just who was at the table right then?"

"Like I said, Colin: Elsa and I, Dean and Miss Luffbart—she's Lightning—and Frank and Polly Atchinson, and Phil."

"Did you all get up to dance?"

"Yes."

"Phil Taylor was an odd man. What did he do?"

"He said he was going out to the bar for a quick one."

"Then you did leave Phil sitting at the table when the rest of you got up to dance?"

"Yes, to be technical about it."

"We've got to be technical. Go on."

"Well, the band quit playing, and we sat down, and Dean ordered another round for us men and ginger ale for the girls."

"Was Phil Taylor at the table when you got back?"

"No."

"Where was he?"

"I don't know."

"Get to the cigarette."

"Just as I said, Colin, I offered the pack to Miss Luffbart, and she said she didn't want to be an old maid because there was only one cigarette in it; so I lit it myself and ordered a fresh pack."

"That was the m a r i j u a n a cigarette. There are two more in your coat pocket."

"There are?"

"Yes. Didn't it taste funny?"

"After six drinks, Colin? Gosh, you could feed me cornsilk."

"That's right. What time was it then?"

"A little after one, I think."

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"Dean getting up, I guess, to go over to the Taylors' table."

"Why?"

"I don't know why. Eldridge Taylor motioned to him, I know, because Polly Atchinson said, 'Royal summons, Dean, don't forget the six steps backward before you turn when you leave.' And Miss Luffbart told him to straighten his plumes. And about then is when I drew a blank—and came to with the gun in my hand, and—oh, *God*, Colin, Dean was dead!"

Colin Starr leaped. He gripped Jock's wrist, forced the razor blade from between his fingers. He landed a beauty precisely on Jock's chin, then lifted the limp body onto the bed, took a hypodermic syringe and shot an injection into Jock's arm. He opened the hall door and said to Mrs. Fraley, who was sitting close to it, as he knew she would be, "I've given Jock a sedative. Stay with him, Mrs. Fraley. And don't worry."

The Taylors had come across lawns: Eldridge, his wife Mabel, and his younger brother Phil. The sirens had wakened them, and they had seen the Fraley lights. They had come over to find out what the trouble was; and if they could help. Starr saw them through the library doorway being intellectually tense with Hefferfield.

He said to Patrolman Brostrom, who was stolidly doing absolutely nothing in a hall chair, "Ask the District Attorney to come out here for a minute, please. Tell him the Chief wants to see him."

"But he don't, Doctor. The Chief's in the living room with the deceased."

"I know he doesn't, Brostrom. I do."

"Oh, I get it. Leave it to me."

Starr led Hefferfield into the dining room. He kept his voice low.

"Are you willing to stick out your neck?"

"What for, Colin?"

"To get a confession within the next hour, and I mean from the rat who really pulled this job."

"I'd be willing to become a giraffe. What's on your mind?"

"Housebreaking."

"What?"

Starr talked quietly, earnestly for several minutes. A queer sort of look settled slowly on District Attorney Hefferfield's face.

"But that's crazy, Colin!"

"Clinically, I think you're right."

Starr joined the Taylors in the library. He thought absently that a harp was the perfect complement to Mabel Taylor's Rosetti glaze. She was a willowy woman, swathed in a dark velvet wrap

over yards of clinging chiffon, and he suspected a supply of assorted neuroses that could be loosed at the drop of a hat.

The drinks at Spinelli's were stamped in the gray of young Phil Taylor's face, giving its normally not unpleasant features a thinly saturnine effect, as if old age had suddenly moved in. Starr noticed that the tips of his fingers were club-shaped, and that he was gripping them in an effort to control their trembling.

Eldridge Taylor, from sheer bulk alone, dominated the scene. He attuned his voice to the accepted pitch for a house where high tragedy reigned.

He said, "I have just been talking to Hefferfield, Doctor. I told him I might have known that Dean Ladington would come over here."

"Why, Mr. Taylor?"

"Because I know the smell of that stuff."

"Marijuana?"

"Yes. One of my assistants in the office used to hit it. I caught him offering one to Phil."

"I didn't take it," Phil said truculently. "I knew what the damn stuff was."

"Naturally, Doctor, I gave the man the boot as soon as I found out, and I mean the boot." Eldridge's plate-shaped face slipped into a quiet smile. "Learned the trick up in the lumber country."

"What made you realize Jock was smoking it, Mr. Taylor?"

"I told you. I smelled it."

"From your table?"

"Certainly not; the odor isn't as definite as that. I smelled it as I passed their table. I called Dean over and told him about it. Pitiful."

"Pitiful?"

"Well, isn't it? I think that's the charitable word. A young chap like Jock, and probably spreading the habit around among those kids!"

"I'm beginning to see."

"I thought you would, Doctor. Dean probably didn't want to break it to Elsa until he'd thought it over. When he got home he couldn't sleep, so he put on his trunks and took a dip in the swimming pool."

"Do you remember what time they left Spinelli's?"

"About one thirty. Mabel and I left right afterward, after we'd resurrected Phil from a crap game with the bouncer."

"What condition would you say Jock was in, or didn't you notice?"

"I notice everything, Doctor. Jock was moving, talking—highly exhilarated, naturally, but utterly unconscious of what he was doing. A walking blank. When we got to the parking lot we saw him drive off in his car alone.

"My reconstruction is this, Doctor: Dean, after his dip, decided to come over and have

it out with Jock. Unquestionably he told Jock that the engagement to Elsa must be broken. So Jock shot him. I repeat, pitiful!"

"A little too pat, Mr. Taylor."

"Pat? Of course it's pat. Life is pat. I daresay the most Jock will get will be ten or twenty years. Hefferfield agrees with me on the entire setup. Intelligent man, Hefferfield; not at all like the ordinary politician. I shall testify for Jock at the trial, of course, as to the extenuating circumstance of his having been out on his feet."

"Mr. Hefferfield *did* agree with you, Mr. Taylor."

"Did?"

"Yes."

A thick, still tension gripped the three Taylors. Chiffon rippled as Mabel stirred slightly in her chair. She said, "He doesn't now, Doctor?"

"No, Mrs. Taylor. The nature of Dean Ladington's wound indicates that he died within a minute or two, and certainly retained no powers of locomotion."

"I fail to see the point, Doctor. Is it thought that he moved about the living room?"

"He wasn't killed in the living room."

The tension thickened—it became, almost, a tangible thing.

"Really? Where was he killed, Doctor?"

"Beside the swimming pool on his own grounds, Mrs. Taylor."

Starr studied the bland, plate face of Eldridge Taylor; the gripped, club fingers of Phil; the tepid glint of something like fear that came into Mabel's violet-shadowed eyes.

"Conjecture, Doctor?" Eldridge Taylor said.

"No, a question of moisture, and the lack of it."

"This is all very strange."

"Not really. Dean's swimming trunks were wet. He was killed beside the swimming pool, which is roughly two or three hundred yards from the living room of this house where his body was found. His body was either brought here in a car or was carried here across a man's shoulders. The only car, when I got here, was Jock's, which is still parked in the driveway.

"If Jock had shot Dean at the swimming pool and then brought his body here in the car, for some fantastically inconceivable reason, there would be a wet patch on the cloth seat of Jock's car. There is none."

Mabel Taylor said softly, "So he carried him, then, Doctor?"

"If he had, Mrs. Taylor, there would be wet places either on Jock's white dinner jacket or on the tweed coat he was supposed to have been wearing when the shot was fired. There are none, and cloth dries very slowly in the humidity of a night like tonight."

"Tweed coat, Doctor?"

"A further elaboration of detail to fasten the crime on Jock, Mrs. Taylor. As the coat isn't wet, I believe that the killer did not wear it, but fired through its pocket, both to implicate Jock and to muffle the shot. Somewhere there is a car, Mrs. Taylor, with a damp patch on its seat, or there is a coat that not only has damp spots, but blood spots as well."

Phil Taylor's voice was no longer truculent; it was thin, and hard. "If Dean was killed beside his swimming pool, how about that shot which wakened Mrs. Fraley from downstairs?"

"The killer fired that with his own gun. He fired it *after* he had placed Jock's gun, with which he had first shot Dean at the pool, in Jock's hand. The scene was an overelaborate stage setting, yes; but it was devised by an overelaborate mind. The definite purpose of that second shot, which wakened Mrs. Fraley and brought Jock to, was to raise the curtain on his play."

The door opened suddenly, almost as if on cue, and Patrolman Brostrom said rapidly, "Mrs. Fraley, Doctor—she's just taken something. The D.A. thinks it's poison—"

Starr ran from the room. He whispered swiftly to Brostrom, "Nice job—beat it, upstairs." He ran back along the hall and joined Hefferfield on the back porch.

"It wasn't the car," Hefferfield said. "It's hanging in the closet."

They sprinted across the grass.

It was a roomy closet racked with a row of suits. Starr stood with Hefferfield in its darkness, getting his breath, hearing Hefferfield getting his breath. They had not long to wait.

The door opened quietly onto paler darkness, a light was snapped on, and a hand fumbled among the suits.

"Is it this coat you're looking for?" Starr asked.

Eldridge Taylor's plate-shaped face quivered. Then he screamed.

The mopping up wasn't nice. Diseases of the mind affronted Starr, even though he understood them. The slipping of Taylor's business onto the shoals of ruin, the bright last hope of recouping through the marriage of his young brother into the Ladington estate, its bitter dashing from his lips through the broken engagement and the ascendency of Jock, the diseased attempt to reverse, by murder and a legal execution, the scene again—one thing alone Eldridge Taylor wanted to know: which facet of his inspired plan had betrayed him—how did Starr know that Ladington had not died where his body was found?

There was, Starr said, the blood, the excess of blood which stained the carpet where the body had been placed. And Taylor, screaming still, insisted it was hu-

man blood, to which Starr agreed, and said it didn't matter whether it were human blood or animal blood or plain red ink: its false message would have been the same.

He indicated the slight outline of a bandage beneath the trouser that hugged Taylor's large plump calf, and Taylor screamed yes, it *was* blood, which he had shed on the carpet in his fervor to set the stage with an accuracy that would defy suspicion; for (he insisted) where a shot man lay, there must be blood.

In nine cases out of ten, Starr said, that would be true. But this had been the tenth case. Apart from the fact that the bullet itself plugged up the wound of exit, the bleeding with that type of injury was, with the exception of a drop or two, internal. So there should have been no blood.

"You'd better let me take care of that cut on your calf, Mr. Taylor."

Taylor stared at him for a long moment, while a graying fear puckered his lips and etched sickening lines in his smooth round face as he viewed, in increasing clarity, that near horizon beyond which nothing lay.

"Does it matter—now?" he said.

Starr felt small pity in his heart.

"I'm afraid it doesn't, Mr. Taylor. Not in the long run."

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by JOHN DICKSON CARR

There is a legend of the late Dorothy Parker that, substituting for Robert Benchley as dramatic critic during an unrewarding theatrical season, she once ended her column with the agonized cry, "Mr. Benchley, please come home! Baby taking awful beating!"

Now nobody could characterize your correspondent as an infant, though some might call him infantile. And this month his already battered carcase has been so kicked around that not one new item can conscientiously be praised. But there is an honorable way out. Again the noble firm of Random House, which I must give the highest praise despite an instinctive wish to favor my own old firm of Harper & Row, has saved me from confessing failure in the search for good sensationalism. Another publisher has also come to the rescue. In one double volume, then, I give you a brace of classic mysteries readily available at your bookshop or at any well-stocked public library. The other two books, here presented for the same reason, constitute halves of the great detective saga which has been enthralling everybody since the year 1887.

In assessing the double volume of *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White,* by Wilkie Collins (Modern Library, $3.95), I shall beg leave to concentrate on the first. *The Woman in White* (1860) is the excellent story of an intrigue craftily spun by those two favorite monsters of nineteenth-century fantasy, the wicked British baronet and the sinister foreign count. But I don't love it as I love *The Moonstone.* There are reasons for this affection.

Edgar Allan Poe is usually and rightly credited with inventing the fair-play detective short story. Yet he himself played strictly fair only once: in a murder tale, *Thou Art the Man,* seldom even mentioned when his accomplishments are listed. Poe failed there because he wrote it with a kind of ferocious waggery that evokes the wrong mood.

It was left for Wilkie Collins in *The Moonstone* (1868) to provide the first triumphant double-twist surprise finale, after carefully displaying *all* the clues throughout a gripping novel.

If this story has no murder, except the retributive murder at the end, your true artist in mystery can achieve the *frisson* he wants without taking a hatchet to anybody. Sensationalism you will

find at every turn, as well as living human beings in a greenhouse of Victorian charm. The hero, Franklin Blake, gives up smoking to please the heroine, long before any television blast at us sinful but unrepentant heavy smokers. The villain is a real s.o.b. And with one feature of his double-twist ending Wilkie Collins anticipated the whole shock effect in a famous mystery novel of the 1920's. You are hereby challenged to read (or reread) *The Moonstone.*

Though it appeared nearly two years ago, *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes, the Four Novels and the Fifty-six Short Stories Complete,* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edited, with an Introduction, Notes, and Bibliography, by William S. Baring-Gould (Clarkson N. Potter, 2 vols., boxed, $25) remains at hand and will remain a landmark.

It is no use arguing about Sherlock Homes; there he stands. He seems as real as the pavement of Baker Street and as unmistakable a personality as Sir Winston Churchill. His few detractors must admit he is a great man even when they deny he is a good detective. There has been nobody quite like him in the whole realm of romance.

To me any edition of the saga may be considered satisfactory if it includes my favorite Holmes short stories, *Silver Blaze* and *The Man with the Twisted Lip,* together with my favorite Holmes novel, *The Valley of Fear.* The present handsome, lavishly illustrated edition has been so well edited by the late William S. Baring-Gould that it enlightens us on several still-disputed points of biography or chronology, and in matters canonical comes as near being the final court of appeal as Holmes himself was the final court of appeal in detecting crime.

Take warning, though. Canonical research, which Monsignor Knox inaugurated in jest, has almost ceased to be a game. Let's not, even in jest, make the flesh-and-blood existence of Sherlock Holmes and John H. Watson an obsession very near religious mania. Being Conan Doyle's biographer, I can't accept him as Dr. Watson's literary agent; he was too indifferent a man of business to have been anybody's agent, including his own. In a gesture of friendship, if you like, he may *perhaps* have served as the amanuensis to whom Watson dictated. After all, the stories are in his handwriting.

But I don't really care how many wives presided at the breakfast table, or where Holmes spent some lost years when the world thought him dead. I am happy enough to hear the gaunt detective expound his methods in that timeless sitting-room, and to see opposite him 'good old Watson,' Watson the glorious, Watson the incomparable, with his stethescope in his hat and his heart on his sleeve.

a *NEW* crime story by

ROBERT TWOHY

"The phone rings at a late hour, a strange and cryptic message comes through, a rendezvous is set up . . . what lies ahead?"

Yes, all that, but with a "difference"—the "difference" we have come to expect from Robert Twohy . . .

What will a man do for money, and for beautiful blondes? For the means to live like a prince? . . . As for passports to paradise, there are different kinds . . .

PASSPORT TO FREEDOM

by ROBERT TWOHY

IT WAS 9:00 P.M.—FOR JAMES Tashlin, the customary long and pointless period before sleep overcomes boredom. He sat alone in his seedy apartment, dully watching a TV detective exchange banter with a beauteous blonde.

The phone rang.

He considered letting it ring. It would be a wrong number. Nobody ever called Tashlin.

But—even answering a wrong number would provide a momoment's diversion. He got up.

A hoarse voice whispered, "Jim Tashlin?"

"Yes?"

"You alone?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Mr. Garrett."

Tashlin's heart pounded. For sixteen years he had existed as one of the many ciphers sitting at desks in the downtown offices of the Garrett Construction Company. What was Garrett calling about? To tell Tashlin he was fired?

Tashling said shakily, "What—what is it?"

"Listen, Tashlin." The whisper was Garrett's all right—Tashlin recognized the voice. "You're the only one I can call on."

"Me?" Garrett had all the money in the world, dozens of friends. He was always going to conventions and social affairs.

"Yes. I need you, Jim."

Jim!

"Listen, I can't tell you on the phone. Can you meet me?"

"Well, I—I—"

"Listen carefully. Walk out of your apartment—it's on Stanley Street, right? Walk due west on Stanley to Thatcher. Wait for me there. I'll pick you up in my car. Be sure you're not observed. Don't ask why—you'll understand when I see you. Right?"

"Well—yes, sir."

"Fifteen minutes, Jim." The phone clicked.

Tashlin switched off the TV, put on his threadbare jacket, paused a moment to inspect his slight drooping form in the fogged mirror by the door. his heart was still racing. What did Garrett want?

Well—it was an adventure. Like with the TV detective. The phone rings at a late hour, a strange and cryptic message comes through, a rendezvous is set up . . . what lies ahead?

Tashlin gave a short burst of erratic laughter. Maybe there'd be a beauteous blonde at the other end . . . Of course, it would turn out to be something mundane, something to do with his job. Still—why the urgency in Garrett's voice? And why call him?

Well, he'd soon know.

He walked three blocks to Thatcher and stood there on the corner. A minute passed, two—then Garrett's gleaming black limousine swept up.

"Get in."

Tashlin hurried in. Garrett's thick, heavy white face was set grimly. He stared straight ahead.

He drove a block, two, a dozen. Twice he took a deep breath, as if he were about to speak. Tashlin waited.

Then Garrett said abruptly, "I just killed a girl."

His voice was harsh, flat. "I hit her with a brass lamp. She went down, lay there . . . she's there now. In her apartment. Nobody knows but you."

Tashlin whispered, "Why—why are you telling me?"

"Because you can help me." Suddenly Garrett swung the car to the curb and cut the ignition. "Let's have a drink." He reached across Tashlin to the glove compartment.

A small bottle of bourbon was thrust into Tashlin's hands. He hesitated.

"Go ahead, drink."

Obediently, Tashlin unscrewed the cap, took a swallow. Garrett plucked the bottle from him; Tashlin watched the thick white throat swell and contract as his employer drank heavily.

Sighing, Garrett took the cap from Tashlin's fingers, screwed it on, returned the bottle to the glove compartment. "I needed that . . . All right, now listen. It happened less than an hour ago.

I had gone up to Mona's apartment. Nobody saw me go in. We sat a few minutes. Then I asked her some questions. About other men. I knew she'd been fooling around on the side. We quarreled. I felt a pressure building up in my head. I wanted to shut up her lying. The brass lamp was near . . . I swung it. It smashed on her temple. She died there on the floor, without a sound."

There was a long silence.

Finally Tashlin said, "Is it advice you want, sir? Because I'd think, under the circumstances—certainly it was unpremeditated—"

"What are you getting at?"

"Well if you turned yourself in—"

"Don't be a fool." Garrett's voice was savage. "I've got a wife, position—sure, they wouldn't electrocute me, but they might as well. I'd just as soon die as lose everything . . . What have *you* got to lose, Tashlin?"

"Sir?"

"Well, what? I mean, you're forty years old, you live in a dingy trap, you scurry off to a third-rate job in my office, scurry home. You've got nobody, nobody cares—you're marking time to the grave, aren't you?"

Garrett's bright cold eyes searched him. "You're in prison already, aren't you? What I'm getting at—if *you* took the rap for this, what's the difference? What have you got to lose?"

It took a few moments to register. Then Tashlin swung his head and stared at his employer in amazement.

"Are you suggesting—?"

"I want you to take this rap for me. I want you to go up to that apartment, pick up that brass lamp, get your fingerprints all over it—I've wiped mine off, so it's clean now. I want you to plant your fingerprints on the bureau, on chairs, doors, everywhere, as if you've been there often. I want you to take your tie off, crumple it, leave it by the bed. I want you to sit at her desk and write a short note, something simple like —'Darling, we can't go on like this. I love you too much to lose you'—and sign it 'Jim.' I want you to do all those things. So that the detectives, when they come, will have plenty of clues to you. I want you to lead them away from me."

Tashlin just sat there, staring at the grim white face. He couldn't believe it.

"Are you serious?"

"I am."

"But it's absurd! It's crazy! Why should I—"

"For freedom."

"Freedom?"

"Money is freedom, Tashlin. A few years in jail—then freedom for the rest of your life."

Garrett's strange cold eyes held

him. "Think of $50,000. A lump sum, $50,000 cash, tax free. What could you do with that? Go to Europe—wherever you want. Maybe five years in prison. Five years, for $50,000, all yours, not a cent for expenses or income taxes. What are you going to have in five years, Tashlin? What have you got now that you didn't have five years ago?"

Tashlin's mind juggled the questions. What *did* he have now that he hadn't had when he was 35? He lived in the same place; his clothes, furniture, TV, were as shabby now as they had been then. Memories? None. Women? None. Nothing. Five years in limbo. He might as well have been in jail.

He heard a ragged laugh. It was his own.

Garrett said, "Well?"

"Look at me. Are you seriously suggesting that I could pass myself off as having been this girl's lover?"

"Why not? Girls like her go for all kinds of men—take my word for it. Look, don't worry about it. Leave the evidence and the police will follow it to you—they'll buy it. Why? Because they want a solution. They always want to write *Case Closed.*"

To his amazement Tashlin found that he was actually thinking about it—as if it might really come about, as if he might really follow through with it.

"How long am I supposed to have known her?"

"Let's say three months. You met in a bar—say, The Tropical Room. You know the place?"

"Yes." It was a downtown bar, not far from the Garrett offices.

"All right, you met her there, let's say in February, bought her a drink, later went to her apartment—"

"Wait a minute. Isn't there too much coincidence here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I work for you, and then I'm having an affair with your girl friend. Won't the police be suspicious?"

Garrett shook his head. "No. The thing is, you had a little conversation with her in the bar, she found out where you worked—so it was *she* who picked *you* up, maybe for a private laugh on me. It's in her character to do something like that. Take my word for it—the police will buy it. Like I said, all they want is a solution."

"What's her name?"

"Mona Weston."

"What does she look like?"

"She's blonde—"

"Blonde?" The TV show he had been watching came back to his mind, and his own conjecture as he left to meet Garrett—maybe a blonde would be at the other end of the adventure.

"She's an ex-showgirl—and a lousy little tramp. You'll see her."

"You mean, if I go up to the apartment."

There was silence as they stared at each other. Tashlin thought of his own apartment, of five more years on TV, of loneliness, silence . . . He thought of the $50,000. He thought of Europe. He thought of blondes—not dead ones, but living, pulsating ones . . .

"Give me details" His voice was thin. "I'm willing to be convinced. Convince me."

Garrett turned the ignition key, put the car in gear. They rolled away from the curb.

Garrett said, "Like I said, there've been other men—plenty of 'em. The police will find letters from them, photos of them in her bureau. There's your motive. She was getting tired of you, that was why you killed her. Jealousy, temporary insanity—what you'll probably get is second-degree homicide. Five years. You could be paroled out in something over three."

"Let's look at the other possibility. Suppose I got twenty years?"

"You wouldn't."

"Suppose I did? Fifty thousand wouldn't be worth that."

"I agree. But you'll have a safety device—so that if the sentence is too stiff you just have to produce it and get off with accessary-after-the-fact."

Garrett reached inside his coat and took out a folded sheet of paper. "I wrote this just before I called you. It'll give you all the security you need."

He stopped under a street light and watched as Tashlin read the note, scrawled in the hand that was familiar to Tashlin from office memos:

> "I, Frank G. Garrett, state that on May 25th, 1968 I killed Mona Weston in her apartment by hitting her with a brass lamp. I made a deal with James Tashlin, offering him a sum of money to take the rap for me. This is the reason for James Tashlin's confession. He never knew Mona Louise Weston and had nothing to do with her death, which was my sole act. (Signed) Frank G. Garrett."

Tashlin said slowly, "You were sure of me all the time, weren't you?"

Garrett shrugged and started the car again. Tashlin folded the note, slipped it into his inside jacket pocket. He felt excitement swelling in him; he dared not look at Garrett, or the exhilaration in his eyes would show.

Garrett had written the note in desperation. Apparently he had failed to realize all the implications. $50,000. The note was

worth many times that! All Tashlin had to do, after he had served his time, was to go to Garrett and demand any sum he wanted. With the note hanging over him how could Garrett refuse?

Three years, five years in jail—then a life of luxury. He could live like a prince . . .

Garrett said, "Tomorrow, first thing, go to a bank, rent a safe-deposit box. Put that note in a sealed envelope and then in the box. Use a false name. Pay them a long time in advance—years—nobody'll disturb it." He pulled out his wallet, one-handed. "Take all the money."

"All of it?"

"Yes. A small down-payment."

There was more than $300. Tashlin inserted the bills in his own thin nondescript wallet.

Garrett had stopped again. They were in a neighborhood of chic apartments. Garrett pointed to a tall building up the street.

"That's it. Address is 450. Her apartment is 37, on the third floor." He handed Tashlin a key. "Keep that. Have it on you when the police pick you up."

"Tell me again just what to do."

"Let yourself in. Pick up the brass lamp, as if you were going to swing it, then set it down. Move around the apartment, putting your fingerprints all around. Leave your necktie near the bed. Sit down at the desk in the living room, write a note hinting at jealousy, sign it 'Jim,' put it in one of the drawers of the desk.

"Then let yourself out, get a cab, and go home. Take tomorrow off from work. Put that note I wrote in a safe-deposit box. After that just wait—for the police.

"When they pick you up, keep quiet for a while—and when you do confess keep it simple. Let them supply the details. Tell them it happened like a dream, as if you were in a daze. Don't say too much. Don't worry, they'll work the whole story out for you."

Tashlin nodded.

"Any other questions?"

"No."

"All right. Well—let's get going."

Tashlin got out. The limousine slid away. Tashlin watched its red tail-lights disappear down the street.

He fingered the note in his pocket—the note that was his passport to freedom and a life of luxury. He took a deep breath, then started walking toward the white slab of Mona Weston's apartment building.

Diagonally across the hall from the self-service elevator was apartment 37. He walked to it, swiftly inserted the key in the lock. He went in, closing the door behind him.

The lights were on in the opulent living room. An overturned coffee table was in the middle of the floor; next to it on the rug lay the brass lamp. And near the brass lamp lay a girl in a filmy pink negligee. She lay on her side. Red-blonde hair tumbled about her face.

He stared, fascinated. Mona Weston. Tomorrow, the day after, headlines would shriek that he, James Tashlin, in the grip of a lover's passion, had killed this girl. People in the office who had scarcely noticed his existence would be thunderstruck. Tashlin? That quiet mousy little guy? Boy, you never know what goes on inside people!

Her jerked himself into action. Do his job and get out—get out fast.

He handled the brass lamp, set it down. Then he moved quickly about the room, planting the fingerprints that would put the police on his trail.

He opened a door that led to the bedroom, removed his necktie, dropped it by the bed. Then more fingerprints . . .

He came back in the living room, went to the desk. As he was pulling a sheet of notepaper in front of him he heard a moan.

His blood froze. Slowly he turned his head.

Mona Weston was sitting up, hands to head.

A dull whining voice said, "I've got a headache."

He sat still. It seemed as if the pounding in his veins must be heard by her.

"That dirty—he hit me. I got a headache." Her eyelids lifted; dim blue eyes focused on Tashlin. "Who the hell are you?"

Tashlin said shakily, "I'm a doctor. You better lie down."

The eyelids drooped; she lay back, muttering, "That dirty—wait till I get him! Wait till I sink my hooks in him. He'll pay, the—he'll pay. A million bucks it'll cost him to keep this out of the courts. A million bucks. I'll show him, the stinking—" She sighed, and seemed to fall asleep.

Tashlin got up and started for the phone. Then he stopped. His hand went to his pocket and touched Garrett's note.

He took a deep breath. Then, briskly, he walked over to the girl, and reached across her for the brass lamp.

a *NEW* spy story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Number 14 in the series about Rand, the Double-C man, head of the Department of Concealed Communications . . . in which Rand attends a twentieth reunion of colleagues from the counterespionage days in Berlin, and of the symbolism of the dead whale . . .

You will find that time is a curious factor in this story: the on-stage action takes place in the 1960's—about events that occurred in the 1940's—told in a way that will remind you of the 1930's . . .

THE SPY AND THE CALENDAR NETWORK

by EDWARD D. HOCH

ON THE MORNING AFTER THE DEAD WHALE WAS WASHED ashore, Rand and Fowler got up early to take a look at it. They were dressed for warmth, because even in May the mornings were chilly along the beaches of Cornwall.

The whale itself was a gigantic sprawl that rested on its back half in and half out of the water. The spectacle had already attracted a number of townspeople, including three small boys who were running and climbing over the great carcass. It was almost white on the bottom, contrasting sharply with the dark gray of its back, and a number of deep ridges ran back from its gaping mouth along the creature's underside.

"Big!" Fowler exclaimed as they came up to it.

"That it is," Rand agreed. There was something majestic about the creature, even in death.

"You know, Rand, the Germans could have beached dead whales during the war with whole broadcasting transmitters inside them. Even rooms full of enemy agents—like in the Bible."

"The Bible?"

"Jonah in the whale—remember?"

A bearded fisherman from the town came up to stand next to them. "Beautiful sight, isn't she? You don't often see them that big any more. I measured her this morning and she goes for thirty-seven feet."

"What kind is it?" Rand asked.

"A humpback, female. Don't often see them beached like this any more. Probably a hundred barrels of oil inside her."

Rand smiled slightly. "More valuable than a radio transmitter."

"What?" the bearded man asked.

"Nothing. Just thinking out loud."

"Goin' to get my grandson to come down and look at it. Don't often see them—"

Rand and Fowler moved away, avoiding the water where the children were splashing. "Look," Fowler pointed out. "Barnacles on his bottom."

"Her bottom," Rand corrected. "Female."

"Her bottom. But barnacles! She must be a hundred years old."

"Barnacles can form fairly quickly, even on whales," Rand observed. "And most whales never reach the age of forty."

Fowler patted the damp, dead fur. "You know the oddest things, don't you?"

"It's my business now."

They turned from the whale and retraced their footsteps through the damp sand. "How are things in Double-C, Rand? Anything like the old days?"

"Nothing like the old days, really. I have my own department now. Concealed Communications is one of the more important arms of the intelligence establishment."

Fowler grunted dejectedly. "And I'm wasting my life selling life insurance."

"You had your moment of glory," Rand reminded him.

Fowler kicked at a piece of driftwood. "Yes, we all did that, didn't we? Our moment of glory." They walked along in silence for a bit and then Fowler asked, "Do you think it was a mistake, Rand? Our holding this twentieth reunion?"

Rand looked at the short, balding man at his side. Fowler was ten years older and forty pounds heavier than Rand—a man now past fifty who would never know the excitement of the service again. A man living in the past—a past that hovered between insurance policies and visits with grandchildren. He was, in his own dull way, not much different from the bearded fisherman who had measured the whale. "No. No, I don't think it was a mistake at all."

Fowler squinted at the morning sun, watching a seagull's progress as it skimmed over the crests of

the waves. "You know, Rand, there are a lot of auks down this way: In the coves, mainly. A whole colony of them, I hear tell. It's beautiful here along the beach, isn't it? Golden sand—really golden!" Then, as if he h a d n ' t changed the subject at all, he said, "The Calendar Network. Twelve of us, Rand. And you're the only one who stayed in intelligence work."

"Well," Rand began, and then stopped. Ahead, someone was running toward them from the hotel. Running, tripping, along the beach. "It's Amy," he said, puzzled.

Amy Sargent was almost 40, but she still ran like a girl in her teens. It had been well worth the trip to Cornwall for Rand to see her again after all these years. "Come quickly!" she shouted when she was close enough.

"What is it?" Rand called back, but his voice barely carried above the surf. "What is it?" he yelled again.

She reached them finally, out of breath. "Mr. Maass—something's happened to him!"

Karl Maass—the only German among them. Rand sucked in his breath. "What do you mean?"

"He's dead!"

Rand and Fowler followed her at a trot, reaching the big old beachfront hotel seconds ahead of her. The others were upstairs, standing in the doorway of Karl's room. They seemed confused and uncertain, as if waiting for Rand to take the lead. He went in, bent briefly over the body, then straightened up somberly.

"He's dead, all right. Murdered."

It had all started in Berlin a long time ago, during those days of airlifts and increasing tensions when networks of agents operated almost insolently in high places both in the Russian and Western sectors of the divided city. Berlin was different in those days before the wall had scarred it forever. Movement between sectors was accomplished with a minimum of difficulty, and the intrigues of the late 1940's were everywhere in evidence.

It was the late Colonel Brantly-Stowe of British Intelligence who had put together the Calendar Network in those dangerous years. Its function was complex, but its mission was simple—to learn as much as possible about German scientists working for the Russians, especially those Germans who had been active under Hitler in the development of chemical and biological weapons.

There were nine persons recruited for the network, functioning in West Berlin and points east. With Brantly-Stowe and his two young clerks back in London, that brought the total number to

twelve. The two young clerks were Rand and Miss Sargent.

Originally, each of the twelve was to be designated, for communication purposes, by a sign of the zodiac. But then it was discovered that the standard British code books contained number groups for the months of the year, but none for the signs of the zodiac. To save the trouble of encoding each letter of each person's name separately, or adopting a special code, the designations for the twelve had been changed to the months of the year, and the Calendar Network was born. "A little like Chesterton's book, *The Man Who Was Thursday,*" Brantly-Stowe had remarked at the time.

But their functioning had been short-lived, and the network was disbanded suddenly less than two years after it was born. Nearly all twelve had drifted into other lines of work, with only Rand going on to make a career of intelligence work.

Brantly-Stowe, who had been January, died of a heart attack in 1955. George Fowler, senior member of the network in West Berlin, was February; he had gone into life insurance. March was a man named Gregor, who had been killed by the East Germans shortly after the network disbanded. April was Bruno Norman, a giant of a man who now ran an import-export business in Liverpool. May was Sir Kenneth Kellman, a retired gentleman with distinguished white hair. June was Karl Maass, the only German in the network, and by far the most successful at gathering information during its brief lifetime.

There were three women in the network: Amy Sargent; Elizabeth Smith, who was July and who later had married George Fowler; and Miss Robinson, who was August and who now lived with her husband and family in New York City. September had been a sickly Frenchman named Ourson—he had died of lung cancer in 1961. October was a man named Carruthers, who had dropped out of sight after the network disbanded. Rand had been November, and Miss Sargent, the youngest of the group, barely 20, was December.

Fowler had attempted to track them all down for the reunion which he planned and had come close to succeeding. He'd showed Rand a chronological list of the names:

January — Colonel Brantly-Stowe (deceased)
February — George Fowler
March — Gregor (deceased)
April — Bruno Norman
May — Sir Kenneth Kellman
June — Karl Maass
July — Elizabeth Fowler (née Smith)
August — Miss Robinson (in New York)

September — Ourson (deceased)
October — Carruthers (missing)
November — Rand
December — Amy Sargent

"I managed to round up seven of twelve," Fowler had told Rand. "That isn't too bad after twenty years. After all, three are dead and Miss Robinson's in America. Carruthers is the only one I couldn't locate."

And so the seven had assembled—with cabled regrets from Miss Robinson—at the little hotel on the Cornwall beach that Fowler remembered fondly from summer vacations with his wife. There were plenty of quaint residents, he assured them, but even he could not have predicted the dead whale on their very first night, swept onto the beach not 200 yards from the hotel . . .

"He's dead, all right," Rand repeated. "Murdered."

Bruno Norman's great bulk moved into the room. "We can see that. Stabbed in the back with a fishing knife."

Rand nodded. The little German was huddled into a corner of room, as if he had been fleeing from his attacker when death caught up with him. "Who found the body?"

"I suppose I did," Mrs. Fowler said. She had aged into a handsome woman, despite a little nervous gesture of her hands. Rand had never known any of the Berlin people well in the old days, since his job was in London with Miss Sargent, but he remembered having liked Elizabeth Fowler—Elizabeth Smith, then—from their first meeting.

"Were you alone?"

"I knocked on his door to see if he wanted to join us for breakfast. The door was ajar, and he was—the way you see him now."

"No one heard any sound of a struggle?" Rand asked.

They all shook their heads. Sir Kenneth Kellman volunteered, "The woman who owns this place has telephoned the police. They should be here soon."

George Fowler had hesitated in the doorway, and now he entered. "I—I think it might be wise if we don't give the reason for our gathering here—the reunion and all that. The newspapers would make too much out of it. Don't you agree, Rand?"

"You're probably right." He walked to the window and stared out of it for a moment, watching the morning crowd near the beached whale. Out over the water a haze of clouds was beginning to bunch. The he turned to them again—to Fowler and his wife, to Amy and Bruno Norman and Sir Kenneth. "One of us killed him, you know. Nobody else here even knew him."

"Robbery," Bruno insisted. "It must have been robbery."

"With the room as neat as this? With Karl obviously opening the door to his killer in the middle of the night or early in the morning? His wallet is still on the table there, untouched."

"One of us *six*?" Amy asked. "Why, that's impossible! None of us has even seen Karl in twenty years."

"I know that," Rand said. "But sometimes a motive for murder can last for twenty years."

They sat down to wait for the police.

It was sometime after noon when Rand found himself alone on the beach with Amy. The police had come, the body had been removed, and the usual questions had been asked. They showed amazingly little interest in the group of friends gathered for a spring vacation at Cornwall, and even less interest in the little German who had been stabbed in the back. Perhaps if he'd been British there would have been more concern.

"Robbery," one of the policemen had decided. "Some noise scared the killer off before he could get the wallet. Don't you worry, we'll find the bloke."

And so Karl Maass had been removed in an ambulance, and all traces of him were blotted out. The police had taken their names and addresses and promised more questions later, but that had been all.

"Perhaps it really was a robbery," Amy said.

"No. Not robbery." Rand sounded positive.

"You're still in this intelligence business. You look at things differently from the way the rest of us do."

"It wasn't a robbery," he said. "Here's why." He removed his hand from his pocket and showed her a torn piece of notepaper. There was one word scrawled on it in pencil. *Taurus.*

"What's that?"

"I found it under Karl's body. I suppose you might call it a dying message."

"The name of his killer?"

"Hardly. But it's enough to point the finger of guilt at the network rather than an outsider."

"But Taurus—the bull?"

"A sign of the zodiac."

"Why didn't you show it to the others or to the police?" she asked.

"I wanted to determine first just what it meant."

"And have you?" Her hair was blowing in the wind, and at that moment he found her quite attractive.

"Not exactly. Originally, the Calendar Network was supposed to use the signs of the zodiac to identify its members."

"I remember now!"

"They were never actually assigned, because Brantly-Stowe decided that the twelve months of the year were easier to encode into messages. But for Karl, in his dying moment, Taurus meant the name of his killer."

"What month is—"

Rand sighed. "That's the problem. Taurus runs from April twentieth to May twenty-first. Was Karl trying to tell us that April or May was his murderer?"

"April or May—" She was running over the old lineup in her mind. "Why, that would be Bruno or Sir Kenneth!"

"Correct."

"But which?"

Rand slipped the torn notepaper back into his pocket. "I don't know."

"No one would leave a dying message that ambiguous."

"Someone did, Karl."

Ahead of them the crowd was still watching the beached whale. The bearded fisherman who had spoken to Rand and Fowler that morning was still on the scene. He walked over to greet them. "Back for more? Should have brought a camera with you. Don't see a sight like this every day."

"No, indeed," Rand agreed.

"What was the excitement at your hotel? We saw the police cars."

"A man died," Rand explained. "He was killed."

"Killed? You mean murdered?"

"Yes."

"Nothing like that ever happens around here."

"It did today," Rand said. "Like the whale."

At dinner that evening George Fowler cleared his throat and addressed them. His face looked lined and troubled, and Rand guessed that the thrill of the reunion had soured for him. "There's no reason to prolong this gathering any longer," he said. "I suggest that we pack up and leave tonight."

But Rand voiced his disagreement. "That's exactly what we can't do now, George. We have to stay together till we've gotten to the bottom of this."

"Are you speaking officially, Mr. Rand?" Elizabeth Fowler asked.

"I can say that I've been in touch with London."

Bruno Norman heaved his bulk out of the chair. "It's been twenty years since the rest of us had to follow London's orders. I say we get the hell out of here before the local police cause us a load of grief."

"Need I remind you that the motive for Karl's murder must lie in the past? In the Berlin of twenty years ago, to be exact?"

After some general grumbling they agreed to remain at least until morning. Rand felt that he had won a small victory. Later,

going upstairs, the white-haired Sir Kenneth cornered him.

"Rand, wait a minute."

"Yes?"

"You really think one of us killed him, don't you? Because of the old network?" Sir Kenneth asked.

"That seems to be the reason."

"Do you know why the Calendar Network was disbanded?"

"No," Rand admitted, "I don't. I never really thought much about it."

"Find out why, and maybe you'll know why Karl Maass was murdered," Sir Kenneth said mysteriously, then continued up the stairs.

Rand paused before Bruno Norman's door and knocked quietly. "May I come in for a moment?" he asked the big man when the door had been opened a crack.

"If you promise not to stab me in the back."

Norman's room was much like his own—drab and very British, with a few odd pieces of furniture. The place was really more of a large boarding house than a true hotel. "I wanted to ask you about the old network," Rand said, seating himself carefully on a dusty-looking wicker chair. "Back in London I never really got to know those of you who worked out of Berlin."

Bruno nodded. "The structure of the thing was such that none of us got to know each other very well. We all reported directly to Fowler, and he reported to the Colonel."

Rand nodded. "A badly organized network, really. Fowler should have had someone else between himself and the men in the field."

"Maass was the only one behind enemy lines to any great extent. The rest of us functioned mainly in West Germany."

"Why was the network disbanded?"

Bruno shrugged his massive shoulders. "Never did know. But we were quite successful in those days—probably got all the information that London needed."

"What about Karl Maass? Did he have any enemies in the network?"

"None I knew of."

"I see," Rand said, but he didn't see anything. A new thought struck him. "Could Maass have been having an affair with one of the girls—with Elizabeth Fowler, for instance?"

"Impossible! They hardly knew each other. Besides, do you think Fowler would have suggested this reunion if his wife had an old lover in the network?"

Rand got out of the wicker chair and walked to the window. It was dark on the beach now, but there was still the glow of flashlights and lanterns down by

the beached whale. What could they be doing to it at this time of the night? Cutting it up for the blubber, perhaps? Inflicting some final indignity on the poor dead creature?

"Why did you go into the import-export business?" Rand asked suddenly.

"Money. Is there ever any other reason?"

"Why didn't any of you stay in intelligence work?"

"I had a famuly back in Liverpool. Spying didn't pay, and my wife never liked the hours."

"The others?"

Bruno Norman shrugged. "You'd have to ask them."

"I will."

"This isn't much of a job for you, is it, Rand? No codes or secret messages."

"No." But Rand was remembering the scrawled word *Taurus*. It was a communication of sorts, from Karl Maass to the rest of them. And just then its meaning certainly was concealed.

He left Norman's room and went up to bed. On the stairs he passed Elizabeth Fowler, and he wondered fleetingly if she might have been listening at the door.

The screaming woke him just at dawn. It came from somewhere downstairs, and he was out of bed in a flash. The first person he saw was Amy, standing on the lower landing with her hands to her mouth. Fowler was there, too, and his wife. They were in front of Sir Kenneth Kellman's door. Rand pushed through and saw the white-haired old man sprawled in a widening pool of blood.

"Is he alive?"

Sir Kenneth lifted his head weakly, and Rand was at his side. He saw at once that although the wound was deep it had gone only into the fleshy part of the left arm. "What happened, Sir Kenneth? Who did it?"

"I—I don't know. Bearded man. Never saw him before. Knocked at the door and said he was you. When I opened he stabbed me—"

"You'll need stitches," Rand said. "Fowler, can you drive him to the hospital? That would probably be the fastest."

Within five minutes they had Sir Kenneth in the car and on his way. Rand breathed a long sigh and sat down.

"You probably should have left him here for the police," Bruno said. "Clues and all."

"And let him bleed to death? Besides, we've got the only clue—a bearded man he didn't know."

"He wouldn't know me if I wore a beard." Elizabeth Fowler observed. "It could have been any of us."

"I think someone is trying to

kill us all," Amy told them. "All the members of the network!"

"After twenty years?" Mrs. Fowler asked. "Don't be foolish."

They waited through breakfast and long after before Fowler finally returned with the wounded man. Sir Kenneth's face was drained of blood, but he showed no other ill effects. He wore his jacket over his shoulders, and a wide white bandage covered most of his upper left arm.

He sipped a cup of tea and told them about it again. "There was this knock that awakened me —someone speaking softly through the door and saying it was you, Rand. I opened it, of course, and this bearded fellow jumped me with a knife. He was dressed in shaby clothes. I'm sure I never saw him before."

"Did he stab you only once?" Rand asked.

"Just once." Sir Kenneth fingered the bandage. "I think something must have scared him off, or he would have finished the job. After he ran out I managed to cry for help and luckily Amy heard me and came running."

"Did you see anything of the bearded man?" Rand asked her. Suddenly it was twenty years ago and she was a clerk in the London office, just out of her teens.

"Not a thing. But I didn't really look down the stairs. I was more interested in Sir Kenneth. When I saw all the blood I'm afraid I screamed."

"It's time we all got out of here," Fowler said glumly. "Not one of us is safe."

"But why should anyone want to kill us?" his wife asked.

No one answered her. Instead, Sir Kenneth interrupted. "I'm afraid we can't leave quite yet. The police questioned me about the wound at the hospital. They're coming here again this afternoon."

Some press photographers arrived to get pictures of the dead whale, and Rand strolled down the beach with Amy to watch them. "This is such a desolate place, really," she told him. "I don't know what we would have done without the whale."

"And the murder."

"Yes, and the murder."

"Fowler thinks it's a beautiful beach."

"Perhaps in summer it is, but not in May."

Rand kicked at a little mound of wet sand. "I suppose in a way the Calendar Network is like that whale—on the beach, finished and done with after its served."

"We're all on the beach," Amy said. "All but you, anyway."

"Did you ever want to stay in intelligence work?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But I got married, and divorced, and then just sort of drifted."

He chuckled at a memory. "I

used to think it was fun that you were December. You were much too pretty to be December. You still are."

"I'm thirty-nine years old," she told him.

"You lied about your age back then. You said you were twenty."

"Girls always lie about their age when they're young," she said. "And when they're old."

They stood in silence for a time, watching the photographers snap pictures and pose small boys on the whale's upturned bottom. Human interest, after all. Otherwise it was just another dead whale.

"Did Maass have any close friends in the network?" Rand asked her on the way back to the hotel.

"I know as much as you do. I was in London too, remember?"

"But you must have heard something."

"He teamed occasionally with Carruthers, our missing October, but of course they both reported to Fowler."

"Why was the network disbanded? Sir Kenneth hinted there was a special reason."

"I don't know. The job was over, I suppose."

"That's what Bruno thought too."

"Bruno." She turned to face him, eyes squinting against the afternoon sun. "I suppose it narrows down to him now, doesn't it? Karl's dying message said *Taurus*. That meant either April or May—and Sir Kenneth was May and he too was attacked."

"Sir Kenneth still is May."

"Bruno with a beard could have stabbed him."

Rand shook his head. "Bruno with a beard would still be Bruno. He couldn't disguise that massive body."

"Maybe Sir Kenneth knows it was Bruno and is just not admitting it."

Rand remembered the old man's mysterious hint about the network as a motive for Karl's death. "It could be. I'm going to talk with him again."

The police came soon after Rand and Amy returned from their walk. This time they had a Scotland Yard Inspector along, to whom Rand identified himself. The hotel's other guests by now were in a panic and a few had packed their bags to leave. The elderly woman who ran the place was busy in the wickered lobby, imploring the guests to stay.

After an inconclusive session with the police Fowler spoke to the other five. "Well, we were going to leave tomorrow anyway, so we might as well stay the night now. It's too late for Bruno to get back to Liverpool tonight anyway."

"Why spoil a perfect reunion?" his wife remarked somewhat icily.

"It's only one more night, Elizabeth," Fowler told her. "And tonight I'm going to have my little pistol out, in the event our bearded friend makes a return visit."

Rand excused himself and sought out Sir Kenneth. "How's the arm?"

"Still throbbing. This is a business for younger men."

"What? Spying?"

"Whatever you call it these days."

"You were good twenty years ago."

Sir Kenneth snorted. "That was twenty years ago."

"Why was the Calendar Network disbanded? Why didn't any of you remain in intelligence work?"

"You did, didn't you?"

"I was different. I was back in London with the Colonel. Did it have anything to do with Gregor's death?"

"March? No, Gregor wasn't killed till later and his death had nothing to do with the network. He had some black market activities on the side."

"What about the breaking up of the network?"

Sir Kenneth sighed. "Come to my room after dinner and I'll tell you what I know."

"You could be dead by then."

"At least I'll have died on a full stomach."

Rand waited until after eight before he made his way to Sir Kenneth's room. Dinner in the hotel's main-floor dining room had been another dreary meal, with the women staring at their plates and not eating or talking. Everyone seemed anxious to get away, to be done at last with the pretense of the jolly reunion which had brought them together. They were different people from the ones they had been twenty years earlier, and no one knew it better than Rand.

Sir Kenneth was cautious about opening his door, even after Rand had identified himself. "All right," he said at last. "Just wanted to make certain it wasn't our bearded friend again."

Rand sat down in a wicker chair near the drawn curtains. "This thing has gone on long enough," he said. "You have to tell me what you know, before anyone else is killed. Why was the network disbanded?" Sir Kenneth seemed to hesitate and Rand added, "After all, I could phone London and put somebody to work going over the dusty files."

"Why don't you?"

"Because it'll be faster if you tell me. What was the secret of the Calendar Network?"

Sir Kenneth closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them again. "The Calendar Network was highly successful in supplying London with information on the Russian chemical and biological

work. It functioned for more than a year. When the end came I was perhaps closer to Colonel Brantly-Stowe than the others, and I learned the true story—as much of it as anyone ever knew."

"Which is?" Rand prompted.

"Which is that almost all the information gathered by the Calendar Network was false. Faked! Counterfeit!"

Rand stood up suddenly. "Do you mean to tell me that—?"

"I mean to tell you that Karl Maass was supplying false information. It could only have been Maass, since he was the most successful."

There was a sudden shout in the hallway, then the trampling of footsteps. Rand ran to the door and threw it open. Fowler was there on the landing, struggling with someone in the dim light. "Grab him, Rand!" he shouted. "It's the bearded man!"

The man broke free at that instant, a look of startled uncertainty on his face. Rand recognized him at once. It was the bearded fisherman they had spoken to twice near the dead whale. The bearded man turned to run up the stairs.

By now Fowler had his pistol out. "Stop, damn it!" he shouted.

Rand made a grab for the gun, but was not quick enough. Fowler fired twice and caught the bearded man in the back and side, halfway up the flight of stairs. The fisherman stopped, twisted, and tumbled down.

"Good shooting," Rand said sarcastically, straightening up from the body. "He's dead."

"That's the man!" Sir Kenneth exclaimed. "That's the man who stabbed me! Let's get a look at him without his beard." He tugged at the whiskers, but they did not come away.

"They're real," Fowler said, putting away his gun. "It took me a while to recognize him behind all the hair, but I know him now."

"Know him? Who is he?"

"Our missing October friend—Carruthers."

It had all begun with Rand and Fowler walking alone on the beach, and it ended the same way. It was early morning the following day when they went for another stroll. A large truck had been driven onto the damp sand, and some workmen in leather aprons were climbing over the whale's body, starting the tedious job of cutting it up and carting it away.

"Like *Moby Dick*," George Fowler remarked. "I suppose whales are always symbolic."

"What did the police say about Carruthers?"

"I'll have to go down and make a full report. There'll be an inquest, of course, but it's only a formality. You know, Rand, I do

think that once he recognized us he was intending to kill us all. Probably would have succeeded, too, if we'd stayed here much longer. A madman, of course. Some grudge from twenty years ago."

Rand said, "Twenty years is a long time for a grudge."

"A long time. I guess the reunion wasn't such a good idea."

Rand bent to pick up some of the golden sand, feeling it run through his fingers. "It was absolutely the worst idea you ever had in your life, George."

Fowler scowled a little. "Because two men died?"

"Because you killed two men, George. Because you killed Maass and Carruthers and wounded Sir Kenneth."

George Fowler said nothing for a long while. Then, when he broke the silence, it was with a simple question. "How did you know?"

"I still don't know everything. I don't know what twisted thinking caused you to do it after all these years. I suppose you were down here at Cornwall with Elizabeth and you recognized Carruthers, even with the beard. That probably gave you the idea. A reunion of the old Calendar Network, and your chance to revenge yourself on Karl Maass after all these years. Because Maass was the one who ruined it for you, wasn't he? Maass was the one who changed your whole life. He was faking information right from the beginning, sending it on to you in West Berlin for transmittal to London. It took Colonel Brantly-Stowe over a year to catch on, but when he did he disbanded the network and barred you all from future intelligence work."

"I was the one who suffered most," Fowler said. "My whole life was ruined, all because of Maass."

"Of course they couldn't arrest him or anything like that. A trial would have revealed too much about British Intelligence operations. So I suppose Maass thought he was perfectly safe when you invited him to the reunion. He thought so right up to the moment the other morning when he saw the knife in your hand. Somehow he had time to scrawl a single word before he died—*Taurus*. He remembered, you see, that the network was originally going to be named after the zodiac."

"The zodiac names were never assigned, though."

"No," Rand agreed. "But you can see from a list of the Calendar Network what they would have been. The Colonel would have been first, and you would have been second, because you were the chief agent in the field. As clerks, Amy and I would have been the last two. But the signs of the zodiac don't begin in January.

Aries is the first sign, in March, and Taurus is the second sign. When Maass scrawled Taurus, he wasn't trying to tell us his killer was April or May, as I originally thought. He was trying to say it was the second man in the network—you, Fowler."

"I didn't see the note."

"He gambled that you wouldn't understand it even if you did see it. But I didn't really need the note to know the truth. Once you killed Carruthers, I saw the whole plan. It was too much of a coincidence to suppose that Carruthers just happened to be living here, of all the places in the world. No, the reunion was held here *because* Carruthers was living here, and since you were the one who organized the reunion and picked the place, that meant you knew he was here all the time."

"Yes," Fowler said.

"You killed Maass, then put on a beard and clothes like the ones Carruthers wore. You stabbed Sir Kenneth, but made certain it wasn't serious—so he'd live to describe his assailant. Then you lured the real Carruthers here somehow. He must already have recognized some of us, of course. Perhaps you merely invited him for a drink, for old times' sake. In any event, you met him on the stairs, started shouting, and killed him. You knew Sir Kenneth would identify him as his attacker—even though he only saw him in dim light for a few seconds. You didn't mind killing Carruthers and framing him for the first murder. After all, he'd been a friend of Maass in the old days. Perhaps they were even in on the document faking together."

"You do understand, Rand?"

"I understand."

"I was on the beach for twenty years. The whole network was on the beach, like that whale—"

"I understand."

"He took away my whole life's work with his cheating and double dealing and there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing except spend twenty years selling life insurance."

They had turned back toward the hotel, and now Fowler's wife was waving to them.

"It's time to go," Fowler said. "The reunion's over."

"Yes."

"Are you ready, dear?" Mrs. Fowler asked.

"I'll be going to London with Mr. Rand, Elizabeth. Perhaps you could take the car home."

"Nothing wrong, I hope."

"No," he said. "Nothing wrong. We just have to wind up some unfinished business about the old network."

The whale was gone by nightfall, and there was no trace of it left on the beach. Nothing but the hint of an impression on the damp sand.

a *NEW* crime story by

JULIAN SYMONS

Tess became the symbol of Don's and Moira's marriage, and of their marriage's deadly routine. No, dull old Tess was not "another woman," but in her own way she was the third angle of the triangle—that is, until the gleaming, exciting, exhilarating Ghiani-Lucia came into Moira's life . . .

Another "serious study of crime" for which Julian Symons has the touch of a contemporary master . . .

LOVE AFFAIR

by JULIAN SYMONS

FROM THE BEGINNING OF THEIR marriage it had always been Don who made the decisions and, as Moira told their friends, this was not because he was aggressive or domineering, it was just that both of them thought it right and natural for things to be that way. When, after a year of marriage, he suggested that it was time they moved from the little flat in Kilburn to a district where you could see a bit more of God's green earth and sky, she agreed at once.

He ticked off on his fingers just what they wanted: a three or four-bedroom house, central heating, a garden big enough to sit in, and of course the whole thing set in a nice place with neighbors who were their own sort.

She agreed with it all. But wouldn't a garden mean a lot of work?

"I'll look after it. Always fancied myself with the old spade and trowel." Tamping down the tobacco in his pipe, not looking at her, Don said, "And you need a bit of garden for the kids."

"But you said we ought to wait."

"Got a bit of news. MacGillivray's retiring. I get a step up next month."

"Oh, Don! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Best not to say anything till you're sure. What you don't know

won't hurt you, that's my motto." He had got his pipe going. "I've been in touch with a few real estate agents already."

It proved more difficult than they had expected to find exactly what they wanted, but when they saw the house at Gainham Woods they knew it was just the thing. It was a new development—you didn't call it an estate any more—but the thing that made this particular house a snip, as Don said, was its position on a corner, so that you faced two ways, had more windows than your neighbors, and a bigger garden as well.

There was an attached garage, which Don said would come in handy as a workshop or playroom since they had no car. Gainham Woods was half an hour from central London by train, but Don worked out that the cost of extra fare would be balanced by the fact that living would be less expensive. And, of course, the house would run itself, so that Moira could keep her secretarial job.

"For the time being," Don said with a smile. "Later on you'll have your hands full."

She did stay in the job until she was nearly three months pregnant. After that she had rather a bad time, with a good deal of morning sickness, so she gave up the job. At six months she had a miscarriage. She was disturbed, partly because she felt it showed her incompetence, but Don was very sympathetic and told her to look on the bright side. Perhaps it would have been a bit soon anyway, and they were still young, they would try again.

When she had her second miscarriage he said that perhaps they weren't meant to have children. She had not gone back to her job because it hardly seemed worthwhile, and after the second miscarriage she found that she didn't really want to work again.

It was at this point that Tess arrived. She was a nice little black sedan, three years old but for that reason a real bargain. Don lifted the hood and expatiated on the cleanliness of what lay inside.

"It's lovely." Then Moira added doubtfully, "But can we afford it?"

"Have I ever bought anything we couldn't afford?" Don asked, and it was perfectly true that he never had. It turned out that he had received another minor promotion and was now an Assistant Personnel Officer in the large corporation for which he worked. He proudly showed her the name "Tess" which he had stuck on to the side of the car with plastic letters. It was one of several names they had talked about for the baby.

There could be no doubt that Tess was a boon and a blessing. They took her occasionally on trips to the seashore, and were

able to visit Don's family on week-ends. His father was a retired bank manager and lived with his wife in a semidetached house in Elmers End, a pleasant enough house but, as Don said every time they left, you couldn't compare Elmers End with Gainham Woods.

Sometimes Don's brother and sister also came to Elmers End. They were both married, and it was a real family party. Moira had no family, or none that was ever mentioned. Her father, a grocer, had gone off with another woman when Moira was in her teens, and after his departure her mother had taken gas. Of course, Moira could not be held responsible for any of this, but she always felt that the Bradburys thought their son had married beneath him.

Don had already passed his driver's test—one of the things Moira had admired about him from their first meeting at the Conservative Club dance was his competence in practical matters; but she couldn't drive. As he said, there was no point in wasting money going to a school when he could easily teach her how. It would be a pleasure, he said, and on the first day that she sat in the driver's seat, with Don beside her explaining the gears and saying that there was nothing to it, not really, but it *was* just a bit tricky going from third down to second gear. She thought it might be a pleasure too, but this did not prove to be the case.

Don was immensely patient—that was another of the things she had always admired in him—but it took her a long time to understand just when and how to shift gears. First gear was close to reverse, and she frequently engaged one when she meant to use the other. And somehow Don's habit of treating every drive as an adventure didn't help.

"You see that Austin up ahead there," he would say. "Just crawling along. We're going to pass that fellow. Get ready now. Up into high, arm out to show you're passing, and away we go! No, steady now, something coming the other way, tuck yourself in behind him—right. Now, road's clear, give her all you've got." And as they passed the car he would beam. "Managed that all right though you went out too far, nearly had us in the ditch."

"I'm sorry."

"Nothing to worry about. Turn down this side road—no, left, not right. And you didn't give an arm signal."

"I shall never be able to do it! There's so *much* to remember."

"Don't worry. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again—as Confucius says. Now, this road takes us back into town and when we're back we'll try some low-gear practise."

After six weeks of lessons he said she was ready to take her test. A day or two before it was due, however, she misinterpreted something he told her, turned left instead of right, and then stalled the engine. When she started up again, she confused reverse with first and drove straight into a tree. While Don got out to look at the damage she sat over the steering wheel and wept.

"Poor old girl." He was addressing the car. "She's had a nasty knock. Buckled her fender." He came back and patted Moira's shoulder. "Never mind. Worse things happen at sea. Shall I drive back?"

She got out. "I never want to drive that bloody car again!"

"Now, now, it's not her fault." He patted the hood, got in, and turned on the ignition. The motor hummed. "She's a good old girl, Tess is."

It proved possible to beat out the buckled fender, and when it was resprayed you couldn't tell that anything had happened. At least, that was what Don said, but she caught him occasionally giving comparative glances at the fenders, and she knew that for him the repaired one was not *quite* the same color as the rest of the car. When he mentioned her taking the test she shook her head. "No, I won't take it. I don't want to drive that car, ever—I hate it!"

"You're being hysterical." It was his severest term of condemnation. "But perhaps it would be a good thing to delay taking the test for the time being."

"I shall never drive it again."

Four years had passed since then and Moira had kept her word. They still had Tess—who was getting, as Don said, a bit long in the tooth but was a gallant old girl. He spent a good deal of time with the car, cleaning it inside and out every week, making adjustments in the carburetor, checking the spark plugs. She was in beautiful condition, except that the gears had become a little dicky. They had a tendency to slip, and there were even a couple of occasions when Don himself had shifted into reverse instead of into first, although he always caught himself in time. He was shocked when she suggested that they should buy another car.

"Get rid of Tess, you wouldn't want to do that! There's a lot of life in her yet, before she's ready to be put on the junk heap."

But although Moira had not driven Tess again, she had passed the driving test. She saved a pound a week of the money Don gave her every month for household expenses, took lessons at a neighborhood driving school, and passed the test the first time. She never told him about this, partly because he would have been upset, partly because—well, she couldn't have said exactly

why, but it was a thing she had done entirely on her own and she wanted to nurse her feeling of achievement.

It was after this small achievement that she found herself looking at her husband with a more critical eye. She became conscious of the fact that his sandy hair was rapidly thinning, and what had once appeared to her as profound or witty remarks now seemed obvious clichés, and his devotion to doing everything in a certain way ("there's one right way and a thousand wrong ones") which she used to admire so much, now seemed to her a childish insistence on routine. Why, for example, did he always come home on the 6:15 train, she asked, why not sometimes take an earlier one? He assumed what she regarded as his wounded expression.

"There's work to be done, my dear. A.H. himself never leaves before five thirty."

"Just sometimes—say, once a month. You can't tell me A.H. would mind that?" A.H. was Head of Personnel.

"I daresay not. But it wouldn't be quite the thing."

"Or catch a later one then—have a drink with the boys."

"I don't see the point. The next one's the six forty-seven, and the six fifteen's a better train. Mind you, if there's a reason why I should get off earlier one day I can manage it—no problem there. Did you have something in mind?"

"No, no, nothing at all. It doesn't matter."

You've become middle-aged at thirty, she thought, and I'm still young at twenty-seven. The mirror, which showed a neat little figure and a pretty, slightly discontented, and somehow unused face, did not contradict her. She had hair which Don had called titian when they first met, and a white milky skin.

In Gainham Woods, where she saw nobody except the neighbors, most of whom had children, these things were being wasted, but when she suggested that they might move nearer to London he was astounded. It was healthy out here, the neighborhood was pleasant, you could see green things growing. They would never get a place with such a good garden. He had become devoted to gardening and had recently bought a whole set of gleaming new chromium-headed tools, including a special hoe and a rake whose sharp tines shone like silver. These tools hung neatly on the rear wall of the garage, just behind the car. What was the point of moving? he asked. Besides, they couldn't afford it.

"What about when you get moved up to become A.H.'s deputy?" Two years earlier he had told her that this was likely.

"Yes, well." He hesitated.

"You'll get more money then." He said nothing. "You mean you won't get the job?"

"Salisbury's had a step up."

Salisbury was another Assistant Personnel Officer, and Don's deadly rival.

"He's been made Deputy?" she persisted.

"In a way. There's been a reorganization."

"But he's moved up and you stay where you are."

"At the moment. I think A.H. may have something special in mind for me. In my position you're really dealing with people, man to man. That's my strength, as A.H. says. Salisbury's really just an administrator."

"But he gets more money?"

"I tell you, there may be something special ahead for me. In a year or two."

He looked away as he spoke and she knew that there was nothing special ahead for him, that he was a nonentity who had climbed the short way he would ever go up the ladder of success. When he added that he would get his yearly increase and that the corporation had a wonderful pension scheme, she had a vision of herself in Gainham Woods forever, seeing the same people, being driven in Tess every other Sunday to see Don's father and mother, going to the pictures once a week, having sex once a month, going in Tess to an English seaside resort for a holiday once a year. The car seemed the symbol of this terrible routine.

"When shall we get rid of that car?"

"Tess? She may need a new battery soon, but she's running beautifully now I've tuned up the motor."

"Shall we still have her when you're pensioned off? Perhaps she'll outlive us and come to the funeral?" She began to laugh on a high note.

"If that's meant to be funny I think it's a very poor joke."

A few weeks later Moira had a letter from a solicitor telling her that her father had died out in New Zealand. It seemed that he had done rather well out there, and although he had married the woman he went off with and she got most of his money, he had remembered Moira in his will to the tune of £3000.

She spoke to Don again about moving, saying that they could use her money as deposit on a new house. He positively refused. It was her money, and he wouldn't think of using it for any such purpose.

"After all, I'm the breadwinner, my dear, and that's how it should be. I'm quite able to support us both."

He had taken to calling her "my dear" lately, but she did not say how middle-aged it made her

feel, or how much it irritated her.

"Couldn't we at least use the money, some of the money, to get another car? A new one."

His mouth turned down in the expression that she had once thought conveyed strength of character. Now it just seemed to her to show weak, p o u t i n g obstinacy.

"I shouldn't think of getting rid of Tess."

"I could buy a car of my own."

He looked at her in astonishment. "Where should we keep it? I couldn't turn Tess out of the garage. And anyway, my dear, your driving—"

He did not finish the sentence. It was on the tip of her tongue to say that she had passed her test with flying colors, but what was the use? It was true they had only a one-car garage, and if she bought a car it would not be allowed to stand in the road.

So she said nothing further. Don read all the financial columns to discover the safest forms of investment, and consulted Mr. Bradbury who advised putting the inheritance into National Savings. It stayed on deposit in the bank.

Twice a year Don went away on group study courses to which the corporation sent their personnel officers. The courses lasted five days, and it was during one of his absences that she went to Marjorie Allenden's party. Marjorie had been to school with Moira, and they had met in a department store when Moira went up to London to do some shopping. Marjorie worked on a fashion magazine and was married to Clive who worked in some editorial capacity on a glossy weekly.

The Allendens had a flat just off Earl's Court Road. It was furnished with brightly colored sofas and eccentrically shaped chairs. There were lots of paintings on the walls, most of them abstracts. Moira was very impressed. It was just the kind of place she would have liked, although she did not say so. The mantelpiece was quite bare except for a large Victorian teapot, and Marjorie drew the attention of all her visitors to this.

"Clive picked it up in the Portobello Road for thirty bob," she said in the high emphatic voice she seemed to have acquired. "Don't you think it's too fascinatingly hideous?"

"Just hideous," a voice behind Moira murmured. It belonged to a dark young man of about her own age who wore narrow light-blue trousers, a dark-blue jersey, and the small gold-rimmed spectacles that she knew were the latest thing. When he smiled at her she smiled back.

His name was Louis and he was a partner in a photographic agency. While they drank some kind of rather potent reddish liquid they talked—rather, he talked and she

listened. Through the hum of noise she heard that he was an American who had been in London for two years now, and wasn't going back.

"I've always wanted to go to New York," she said.

"Besides London it's just dead, baby."

"It's not your scene," she ventured. It was a word she had often heard used by young people on television; but perhaps she used it wrongly, because he laughed.

"You're wonderful." He looked at her through those fascinating little gold-rimmed glasses. "Look, this is strictly from Deadsville. What do you say we get out of here and eat? I know a nice little place."

His car was parked just outside the house, ignoring the forbidding double yellow lines, and she gasped when she saw it. It was long, sleek, low, and immensely wide, and seemed to be totally enclosed in glass. When she ducked down into the passenger seat she had the double feeling of being almost on the ground because the car was so low, and of being on the bridge of a ship with total visibility all round her. He dropped into the seat beside her, gunned the motor, and she felt the exciting surge of power as they drove away.

She asked what make of car it was and he said casually it was Italian, a Ghiani-Lucia, a make she had never heard of. "Felix Ghiani's a friend of mine, asked me to try it out."

They reached the restaurant and she felt that people were looking at her as they got out of the gleaming monster. Louis was known, a doorman rushed forward to greet him, and inside the restaurant everybody knew him; the head waiter left another table to come over and shake hands.

Afterward she tried to remember what they ate and drank, but although she clearly recalled the long menu and could even see the mauve ink in which it was written, she had not the faintest recollection of any of the dishes or the wines. But she could afterward remember talking about herself, about Don and the boredom of life in Gainham Woods, and possibly—she was not quite sure of this—about her hatred of Tess.

Once or twice she had caught him looking at her through his gold rims with a speculative gaze, as though she were a creature of some new species to whom he was giving coolly sympathetic consideration. At the end of the meal he said, "Coffee at my pad, as you cool young hipsters put it?"

"You're laughing at me," she said happily. She longed to be back inside the Ghiani-Lucia, to feel the exhilarating movement of it beneath her.

The drive was all that she had expected and when they reached

his flat she was a little drunk, just enough to make the outlines of everything seem faintly hazy—but not so drunk that she failed to look forward with excitement to the prospect of making love. Yet in the end the exciting prospect turned into something rather dismayingly practical and even disappointing when he said that he thought every woman should remember the Boy Scouts' motto, "Be Prepared," before going to a party, and then seemed to take for granted a great deal that was strange and uncongenial to her. Afterward she looked at his dark hairy body, thought of the clean metallic power within the Ghiani-Lucia, and shuddered slightly. At the same time it occurred to her that Don might phone home, and she was suddenly eager to be back.

"Okay, I'll ring for a taxi." She had hoped he would take her in the car, but did not say so. "I'd take you myself, but it's been a hard day."

"It's not very far." She wanted very much to ride in the car again.

His gaze was m o c k i n g. "Gainham Woods? Baby, I've never been that far in my life."

On the way back she cried, although she could not have said exactly why. The taxi took her home and she paid the man off at the end of the road. In the house she looked at everything as though it belonged to a stranger, then went out into the garage, turned on the light, and stared at the dull black car. Don did not phone.

She telephoned Louis the next day, not because she particularly wanted to see him, but because she wanted to experience again the excitement she had felt in the car. He said that he was going out of town and wasn't sure when he would be back. "Don't call me, baby, I'll call you," he said. She put down the phone without saying goodbye.

Two days later, on Friday night, Don returned. The group study course had been pretty exhausting, he said, had anything happened in his absence? Yes, she said, she had something to tell him. She showed him her driver's license and he was as surprised as she had expected. He agreed that she could drive Tess, but she sensed his lack of enthusiasm.

On Saturday morning she sat in the driver's seat. But Tess would not start.

Don had the hood up in a flash, but soon closed it. "Battery's almost dead. Perhaps if I push her out she might start. You guide her."

She nodded. It was a small garage and he had to squeeze round to get between the car and the rear wall. The gleaming row of garden instruments was directly behind him. He levered himself against the wall and pushed the car ahead of him two or three

yards, then indicated that she should try again to start it. She turned the ignition and the motor came to life.

Don raised a thumb. "Good old girl. Now back her out."

She put the car into reverse (as she explained to a sympathetic coroner at the inquest) and released the clutch. But it moved forward instead of back. She lost her head, tried to brake, instead pushed the accelerator harder, and then . . .

The sympathetic coroner spared her the necessity of going on. Don was standing directly in front of the rake. He was transfixed by the sharp new tines like a piece of bread on a toasting fork. But if the rake had not been there, the coroner said consolingly, he would undoubtedly have been crushed to death against the wall.

An expert motor-car engineer gave evidence. He said that the car was very old and badly needed new gears. You hardly needed to depress the clutch to move from one gear to another. It was the easiest thing in the world to slip into first instead of into reverse.

Friends and neighbors were very sympathetic, like the coroner. Don Bradbury had made himself known and respected in Gainham Woods, and indeed they were a most devoted couple. "He was a real member of our community," the vicar said to Moira at the funeral.

Afterward she got rid of Tess. As she explained to Marjorie Allenden, she couldn't keep a car that had killed her husband. It was Marjorie who helped her to find a nice little flat in Camden Town, which at least wasn't in the heart of deadly exurbia like Gainham Woods.

And a week after moving in she bought a Ghiani-Lucia.

THE MASKED CRUSADER

by HUGH PENTECOST

(Continued from page 34)

It was about five P.M. when Pierre Chambrun phoned me. It seems that about quarter past four, while I'd been sitting talking to Gillian, the red light on the switchboard flickered, indicating that the receiver had been lifted in my rooms. The operator plugged in with the standard, "Yes, please."

No one spoke but she heard a kind of muffled gasping, then suddenly a man's voice, some distance from the instrument, shouted, "Help!" The switchboard girl signaled Mrs. Veach, the chief operator, who also plugged in, listened, and instantly put in an emergency call to Jerry Dodd. By some miracle she found him on her first ring to his office.

"There's some kind of struggle going on in Room 409," Mrs. Veach told Jerry. "Phone must have been knocked over and we can hear what sounds like fighting—and a man calling for help. It's Mr. Haskell's apartment—."

Jerry didn't wait to hear what Mrs. Veach thought. His own office was in the lobby. He flagged Johnny Thacker, the bell captain, as he raced for the elevators. It was only three or four minutes from the time the cry for help had come over the wire until Jerry and Johnny burst into my apartment.

The living room was a shambles. The card table with Norman's typewriter on it had been overturned. The big overstuffed armchair lay on its back. The telephone on the end table by the couch was on the floor, the receiver off its cradle. The window overlooking the street was wide-open. I think I've said it was a brisk fall day, and by that time in the afternoon the wind through the curtains had a touch of winter's chill in it.

Sprawled in a sitting position under the window, on the floor, was Norman. A little trickle of blood ran out of one corner of his mouth. He looked at Jerry, glassy-eyed as a fighter who has been down for the count. The front of his shirt was ripped and Jerry could see an ugly scratch on his chest, as if he'd been clawed.

Johnny Thacker closed the window and between them they helped Norman to his feet and over to the armchair which Jerry had righted.

"What happened, Mr. Geller?" Jerry asked.

Johnny Thacker put the phone back on its cradle, ending Mrs. Veach's participation.

Norman moved his head from side to side gingerly, as if he wasn't sure it was still attached to his neck. "Some lunatic barged in here—kind of stocking mask pulled over his head—just charged at me. I—I wasn't ready for him—He dragged me over to the window—got it open and started to heave me out."

My rooms are on the fourth floor, but the fourth floor is six levels above the street. You don't get up and walk from that height.

"I—I know a little about karate," Norman said. "I just did manage to clip him one in the throat and that sent him back away from me, choking. I tried to make it to the door but he was on me like a wildcat. I had half a chance now because I was ready, but he was no dummy. He knew the holds too. You—you can see." He waved around the room. "I threw him once and that knocked the telephone loose. I figured I wasn't going to make it, so I started yelling for help, hoping the operator would hear me."

"She did. That's how we got here," Jerry said.

"He pulled me over by the window again," Norman said. "I managed to get in a good kick to his kneecap. I could hear him gasp with pain and he staggered back. I saw the counterpunch coming to my windpipe and I managed to tuck in my chin. His punch was like the kick of a mule and I went down—and partly out, I guess. The next thing—you were coming through the door."

Jerry did all the right things. He notified Chambrun and sent a man looking for Hardy. He sent for Doc Partridge, the house physician. He ordered Johnny to stop handling things in the room. He got a wet towel for Norman to use on his cut mouth and scratched chest.

Chambrun and Hardy arrived together in a few minutes during which time Norman wasn't able to contribute anything more to Jerry. His description of the man was vague—big, powerfully built, strong hands, reasonably gifted in the techniques of karate. He had no look at all at the stocking-covered face.

Chambrun was solicitous: "You're not badly hurt, Norman?"

"Nothing broken—I think," Norman said. "I'm one solid ache, I don't mind saying."

"How did he get in?" Hardy asked.

"Through the door. I was sitting at my typewriter and he just barged in."

"Door wasn't locked?"

"Of course it was locked,"

Norman said. His eyes widened. "Sure it was locked. I was keeping people out of here. That's a joke, son."

"Did you hear someone turning a key in the lock?" Hardy asked.

"No-o," Norman said. "But I was typing pretty steadily—redoing a page of dialogue. If he was quiet about it I—I might not have heard. I was concentrating—"

Hardy looked at Jerry Dodd. "Hotel thief?" he asked.

"Not ever," Jerry said. "A guy standing outside the door with a passkey, let's say, would hear the typewriter going. A thief wouldn't come into a room he knew was occupied."

"He was no thief," Norman agreed. "He was out to get me. I was supposed to get heaved out the window."

"Why?" Hardy asked.

"I've been thinking," Norman said. "Boy, have I been thinking!"

"With what results, Norman?" Chambrun asked patiently.

"If I went out the window—and there was a little note in my typewriter saying I killed Frank Hansbury and couldn't face it any longer—well, a lot of people would be off a great big hook, wouldn't they?"

Hardy's face was grim. "Could it have been Robert Saville?" he asked.

Norman shook his head. "Not tall enough. Saville's quick and wiry. This man was square and all power."

"Brimsek, the athlete-lawyer?"

Norman grinned and winced. Smiling hurt his mouth. "Not George," he said. "He taught me all I know about karate. I couldn't begin to handle him."

It didn't take long for Hardy to get up a full head of steam. He and Chambrun went quickly to Saville's suite on the nineteenth floor, leaving Norman to gather the scattered pages of his script.

Saville was definitely not alone. Paul Drott, the Network vice-president, was there, and Brimsek, and Sally Bevans busy at a typewriter, and a young man who was introduced as Walter Cameron. Saville had already got in his new writer and they were deep in what is called a "story conference."

"I just can't stop to talk to you now, Lieutenant," Saville said. "We're revising the script. It has to be ready by Monday. Unless it's absolutely necessary—"

"It is," Hardy said.

"Does Norman know he's not the writer any more?" Chambrun asked.

"There's always more than one writer," Saville said. "If Norman comes up with something good, fine. But we can't risk it. Wally, here, is—"

"What about Richter?" Chambrun asked. "Doesn't the director

usually sit in on story conferences?"

"Nuts to Karl," Saville said impatiently. "He's always trying to work in Significance! This is a straight adventure series. It doesn't have any message except good is good and evil is evil."

"Someone just tried to murder Norman," Chambrun said, as casually as if he were commenting on what a nice afternoon it had been. It was a neat little bombshell. "Evil is evil," Chambrun added.

"Who did it?" the vice-president asked in a small voice.

"It could have been The Masked Crusader," Chambrun said. "Stocking mask over his head and skilled in karate. He tried to throw Norman out the window."

"Knock it off," Saville said angrily. "I'm not interested in gags, Chambrun."

"It's not a gag," Chambrun said. "It just happened—half an hour ago."

A broad smile lit George Brimsek's face. He glanced at his watch. "It is now 5:33," he said. "We began this conference at about three o'clock. Not one of us has been out of this suite since then—not even out of this room except to go to the john. Will that speed you on your way, gentlemen? We have work to do."

"I have been in this business a long time," Hardy said in a harsh voice. "I don't think I've ever run across such callous attitudes as I've found in this room. Don't you even want to know whether or not your writer is hurt?"

"Of course we want to know," Sally Bevans said quickly.

"He was pretty badly beaten up but he's all right," Hardy said. He fixed Brimsek with a cold stare. "You're the karate expert around here, Brimsek."

"I've just told you, Lieutenant, none of us has been out of this suite since three o'clock."

"Geller has already told us it wasn't you or Saville. Man was a different build and not so expert as you, Brimsek."

"Well, bully for Norman," Brimsek said.

"Why would anyone want to hurt Norman?" Sally asked.

"The suggestion," Chambrun said, "is that the man who attacked him intended to throw him out the window and leave a suicide note in Norman's typewriter, confessing to the murder of Hansbury. That would have ended the murder investigation, got you all off any sort of hook you may be on, and allow *The Masked Crusader* to be born, unhampered by unpleasant publicity."

"So it didn't work. But how do you tie us into it, Chambrun? We were here. Our hands are clean."

"There is enough money in-

terest in this room to hire a hundred assassins," Chambrun said.

"Oh, my God!" the vice-president said. "I think I better call T.J."

"You just sit tight, Paul," Saville said. "This whole story sounds as if it just came out of Norman's typewriter."

Hardy gave the actor a disgusted look. "It wasn't his typewriter that slugged him in the jaw and clawed his chest," he said. "I'm sending a police stenographer in here to take individual statements from each of you, stating that you didn't leave this suite between 3:00 and 5:30 P.M."

"We don't have to sign statements, do we, George?" Saville asked.

The muscular lawyer shrugged. "Here or at the precinct station house," he said. "Please, let's get it over with as quickly as possible, Lieutenant. We're running out of time on a very important project."

Just about the time I got back from Gillian's apartment, Chambrun, Hardy, and Jerry Dodd had returned to the great man's office.

Jerry was reporting. "I've checked out the floor maids, the housekeeper for that area, bellhops, elevator operators. No one saw anyone come to or leave Mark's apartment—no reason anyone should have particularly. Certainly the guy took off his mask before he came out of the apartment. Nothing to make him stand out from anyone else."

"Except a limp," Chambrun said. "Norman gave him a flying kick in the kneecap. Norman knows how. The man is lucky his leg wasn't broken."

"I've still got to round up that fellow Richter," Hardy said. He was studying his notebook.

"He's in the Trapeze Bar," Jerry said, "or was about fifteen minutes ago. Been in and out of there most of the afternoon. According to Mr. Del Greco, the captain in the Trapeze, he must have taken on quite a snootful by now. Not showing it, though."

Chambrun is Chambrun. He didn't ask me a single question about my visit with Gillian while Hardy was there.

"We'll have to move your friend somewhere, Haskell," Hardy said. "I'd like to turn my boys loose in your living room. Geller's attacker must have left a few fingerprints around."

"He can use Miss Ruysdale's office until your men are finished with Mark's place," Chambrun said.

"I'll get him," Jerry Dodd said. "I'd like to ask him some more questions. He didn't see the man's face on account of the mask, but there are other things he might remember now that the excitement's over. There could have been something distinctive about

the hands—a scar, a broken finger, the color of the hair growing on them. There might have been a smell—the hair tonic he used. And the suit. What color? What kind of material? Shoes? We might begin to build a picture."

"Go ahead," Hardy said. "I'll have Richter brought up here. He may have some ideas."

"Oh, yes, he'll be full of ideas," Chambrun said. He walked over to the sideboard and filled a demitasse cup from the Turkish coffee machine.

Jerry and Hardy took off.

"Well?" Chambrun said to me.

I gave him a blow-by-blow of my talk with Gillian. He listened, eyes hooded, sunk back down in his desk chair.

"The alibi doesn't quite make it for Norman," he said when I'd finished. "Six until a little past eight."

"He was at his apartment."

"You've asked him?"

"No. I came straight here. How is he?"

"He'll do," Chambrun said. "Gutsy little guy. From the looks of things he fought like a tiger."

"Somebody is trying to pin the tail on the donkey—Norman," I said.

"It has all the earmarks," Chambrun agreed.

Hardy was suddenly back with a couple of typewritten sheets of paper in his hand.

"How do you like this for apples?" he said. "Something we missed in Geller's room—1927. Camera picked it up. Wheel marks on the carpet in the room."

"Come again," Chambrun said.

"Wheel marks! Narrow, rubber-tired wheel marks. A wheel chair!" Hardy said. "There was a wheel chair in that room carrying weight. Someone riding in it."

We had Norman in there fast. He looked a little pale and disheveled. He kept blotting at the corner of his mouth with a bloodied handkerchief.

"We've come up with something," Hardy told him. "Yesterday afternoon, while you were still in your room, did Saville come to see you?"

Norman shook his head slowly. "They wore out the telephone but I wasn't letting anyone in. I was trying to finish."

"Saville didn't come to see you in his wheel chair?"

"You mean that gimmick he uses for going out through the crowds? No."

"Some other time that day?"

"No. He wouldn't have to disguise himself to come and talk to me. What's up?"

Hardy showed Norman the homicide report. "There was a wheel chair in your room since the last time the maid cleaned and vacuumed."

Norman's face was blank.

"Certainly not while I was there," he said. Then his eyes widened. "Do you suppose that's the way they brought Frank's body into my room?"

For the first time since Frank Hansbury's body had been found in Norman's closet we had a break in the case. It came as a result of Hardy's efficient homicide team which had detected the wheel marks on the carpet, and Jerry Dodd's dogged legwork. Jerry found a witness on the hotel staff—Mrs. Kniffin, the housekeeper on the nineteenth floor.

Mrs. Kniffin is a motherly type who has worked in the Beaumont as far back as the memory of anyone connected with the hotel. In those years Mrs. Kniffin has encountered all the "unexpecteds." Jerry brought her to Chambrun's office where she had a story for us.

"Mrs. Kniffin saw the wheel chair go into Room 1927," Jerry said.

Mrs. Kniffin's plump face showed wrinkles of distress. "I hope I didn't do wrong not reporting it, Mr. Chambrun," she said. "It—it seemed perfectly all right."

"I'm sure your judgment was perfectly sound, Mrs. Kniffin," Chambrun said. "Just tell us what you saw."

Mrs. Kniffin's arthritic fingers twisted the apron of her housekeeper's gray uniform. "That whole corridor was kind of exciting, Mr. Chambrun. Actors and actresses, writers, big-time advertising executives, all scurrying back and forth between the rooms. And, of course, specially Robert Saville. I mean, things were more interesting than usual."

"Robert Saville is a favorite of yours, Mrs. Kniffin?"

Mrs. Kniffin giggled. "I'm too old to admit it," she said. "Spencer Tracy stayed on my floor once. It was a little bit like that."

"For God's sake get to the wheel chair, woman," Hardy said.

"Let her tell it her own way, Lieutenant," Chambrun suggested, giving Mrs. Kniffin an encouraging smile.

"It was last night," Mrs. Kniffin said, "just before I went off duty."

"Which is when, Mrs. Kniffin?" Chambrun asked for Hardy's benefit.

"Eight o'clock. I always go off at exactly eight. Mrs. Lawler, who takes over, is never late. I guess it must have been about ten minutes to eight. I was in the hall and the door of Mr. Saville's suite opened and they brought him out in that wheel chair."

" 'Him'?"

"Mr. Saville," Mrs. Kniffin said. "I'd seen him before in the wheel chair. It's wonderful what

he can do with make-up. He wears a gray hairpiece and black glasses and his overcoat collar turned up around his chin—black hat. You'd never dream it was him. He gets wheeled right by people and they don't even look at him. A regular Lon Chaney, if you know what I mean."

"I think I do," Chambrun said. "Naturally, you were fascinated when you saw him being wheeled out of his suite last night."

Mrs. Kniffin lowered her eyes. "I have to admit I pretended being busy about something near the linen closet when I really wasn't."

"Quite natural," Chambrun said. "After all, Mr. Saville is a kind of hero to you. Who, by the way, was pushing the chair, Mrs. Kniffin?"

"Why—why one of his people, I suppose," she said.

"You suppose?"

Mrs. Kniffin looked positively kittenish. "I really didn't notice," she said. "A man wearing a raincoat and a hat, I think. But I really didn't notice, Mr. Chambrun. I—I was so interested in Mr. Saville and how he managed his—his disguise."

"So they came out of Mr. Saville's suite. You're sure of that?"

"Of course, sir. I thought they'd be going past me to the elevators, the way they always do when Mr. Saville wants to get out through the lobby without being noticed. But instead they stopped at the door of Room 1927." She glanced at Norman who was leaning forward in his chair, handkerchief pressed to his mouth. "Mr. Geller's room, sir."

"And then?"

"They went in," Mrs. Kniffin said. "Then I went into the linen room and Mrs. Lawler was there waiting to relieve me. I went right home."

"Let's not go home quite so fast, Mrs. Kniffin," Chambrun said, his smile gentle. "You say they went into Room 1927. Did Mr. Saville knock on the door or ring the bell?"

"Oh, no, sir," Mrs. Kniffin said. "I was watching him every second. He never moved a muscle. Have you ever watched him in that wheel chair, Mr. Chambrun? He sits there like a statue. It must take wonderful physical control."

"So the other man—the one you don't remember—either knocked or rang the bell?"

"I suppose so," Mrs. Kniffin said. "I—I don't think I ever took my eyes off Mr. Saville. I mean—"

"I understand, Mrs. Kniffin," Chambrun said. His patience bordered on the miraculous. "So someone opened the door and let them in?"

"The door opened and they went in," Mrs. Kniffin said.

"Did you see who opened it, Mrs. Kniffin? Was it Mr. Geller?"

She frowned. "I—I didn't actually see who opened it," she said.

"And you didn't actually see the man in the raincoat knock or ring the bell?"

"I have to admit I didn't," Mrs. Kniffin said.

"Could he have opened the door with a key, Mrs. Kniffin?"

Mrs. Kniffin stared at Chambrun. "I—I don't honestly know, sir," she said. "Only later, as you may know, Mrs. Lawler let Mr. Saville and his secretary into Mr. Geller's room. They thought something might have happened to Mr. Geller. They didn't have a key then, sir. Mrs. Lawler used her passkey. Mrs. Lawler said she was all goose bumps, standing right next to Mr. Saville, talking to him."

Chambrun picked up the phone on his desk. "Please ask Mr. Cardoza to come to my office at once," he said.

Mr. Cardoza is the Captain in the Grill Room where Robert Saville had, in theory, been having dinner at ten minutes to eight last night. Chambrun put down the phone and leaned back in his chair. He made a little gesture of resignation to Hardy. He, personally, was finished with Mrs. Kniffin.

"Try to think hard, Mrs. Kniffin," Hardy said. "Can't you describe the man who was pushing the wheel chair a little better than just a raincoat and a hat?"

"I know it's romantic and foolish," Mrs. Kniffin said, "but I just couldn't take my eyes off Mr. Saville."

"You're sure it *was* Mr. Saville in the wheel chair?"

Mrs. Kniffin smiled at the Lieutenant as though he were a backward child. "That is something I couldn't possibly be mistaken about, Lieutenant," she said.

"Thank you, Mrs. Kniffin," Chambrun said.

The old woman hesitated. "I hope I haven't gotten Mr. Saville into any kind of trouble," she said. "I'd—I'd never forgive myself for that."

"Comfort yourself that you've done your job as a member of the staff and as a good citizen, Mrs. Kniffin," Chambrun reassured her.

Mrs. Kniffin, twisting her apron, retired.

Hardy made a growling noise deep in his throat. "Now we got something to twist that fancy creep's arm with," he said.

"Meaning Saville?" Chambrun said, looking at the Lieutenant through a pale cloud of cigarette smoke.

"Who else?" Hardy said.

"That may be the crucial question," Chambrun said. "Before you go too far out on a limb, Hardy, I suggest we hear what Mr. Cardoza has to say." His eyes

moved past Hardy to the door.

Mr. Cardoza is dark and very elegant. He looks as if he might be the pretender to the Spanish throne. He is more than a head waiter. He presides over the Grill Room and the Blue Lagoon night club in the hotel. Real princes and kings speak nicely to him to get reservations. I know he rates with the top half dozen indispensables on Chambrun's staff.

He arrived promptly. At the Beaumont when you get a summons from the second floor you hop to it.

"Thank you for coming at once, Cardoza," Chambrun said.

"My pleasure," Cardoza said. He nodded to me and Hardy, whom he knew from other investigations. Chambrun introduced Norman, and Norman got the faint classic bow.

"Last night Robert Saville and some of his entourage had dinner in the Grill Room?" Chambrun asked.

One of Cardoza's eyebrows rose. "Indeed he did."

"Could you estimate the approximate time, Cardoza?"

"It would be exact on my table chart," Cardoza said. "They arrived a few minutes after seven and left about twenty-five minutes to nine."

"Any comings and goings?" Chambrun asked.

"How do you mean, Mr. Chambrun?"

"I won't play games with you, Cardoza. We are trying to account for Robert Saville's whereabouts between say half-past seven and a little after eight."

"He was with me—God help me," Cardoza said.

"Why do you need God's help, Cardoza?"

"He is an insatiable demander," Cardoza said. "Nothing is ever quite right. He drives my waiters crazy and he treats them like cattle."

"So he was with you from a little after seven till twenty-five minutes to nine. But he probably left the room at some point?"

"He did not," Cardoza said.

"Not at any time?"

"Not at any time."

"How many people does your Grill Room seat, Cardoza?" Hardy asked.

"The fire laws limit us to two hundred and twenty-six people."

"Were you filled up last night?"

"We are always 'filled up,' Lieutenant."

"And you're trying to tell me that with over two hundred people in the room, all of them needing attention, you can say positively that Saville never left the room? Not even to go to the john?"

"I am telling you that," Cardoza said blandly.

"I don't buy it," Hardy said. "I don't buy it because we have an eyewitness who says he was somewhere else."

"Your eyewitness is mistaken," Cardoza said. He smiled, and it was just slightly patronizing. "If you were having dinner there, Lieutenant, I might not be able to swear that you hadn't left the room at some point. You are a pleasant, undemanding, reasonable guest. You would never produce unwanted publicity for the hotel. You could go to the john, as you call it, without creating a sensation.

"But Robert Saville can't push back his chair to stand up without six foolish women trying to rip the sleeve out of his dinner jacket. We have to protect him as best we can from autograph seekers and drooling ladies. Every moment he's in the room is potentially explosive. So in the case of Mr. Savillle I know very definitely whether he leaves the room to go to the john or anywhere else. He is never quite out of the perimeter of my vision. Last night Mr. Saville did not leave from the moment he and his party arrived a little after seven until he and his party left at twenty-five minutes to nine."

"What about the others—the people with him?"

"The girl—Saville's secretary—made several trips to the telephone booths in the foyer. Mr. Drott, whom I know well as a regular customer—the Network has an account with us—also made several phone calls. The big man, the lawyer, went to the washroom once. But Robert Saville never left the table."

"Thank you, Cardoza," Chambrun said.

Cardoza bowed. "Any time, Mr. Chambrun," he said, and left.

"He's wrong or Mrs. Kniffin is lying!" Hardy said, his anger boiling.

"I think you can be quite certain that Cardoza is right," Chambrun said. "As for Mrs. Kniffin, she wanted it to be Robert Saville in that wheel chair and so she saw Robert Saville in that wheel chair. A man wearing a gray wig, black glasses, with his face hidden by a hatbrim and a turned-up coat collar doesn't present a sharp picture. Even I might look like Robert Saville in that get-up, slumped in a wheel chair, to someone who wanted me to be Robert Saville."

"So much for eyewitnesses," Hardy muttered.

"I think you can depend on Cardoza as a completely accurate witness," Chambrun said.

"Then exactly who was in the wheel chair? And who was pushing it?"

"Norman's suggestion still interests me," Chambrun said. "It could have been Frank Hansbury on his way to be dumped in Norman's closet. He sat there 'like a statue,' Mrs. Kniffin said. Might that not describe a dead man, Lieutenant?"

"And the man in the raincoat and hat—since you're guessing?" Hardy asked with some bitterness.

"In Mrs. Kniffin's ecstatic state, which makes her totally worthless as a witness, the man in the raincoat and hat could have been a woman."

"What makes you think so?"

"Nothing." Chambrun said, smiling. "I just say it could have been for all the solid facts we have. But you do have a new starting point, Lieutenant."

"Like what?"

"Like Robert Saville," Chambrun said. "Mrs. Kniffin isn't all that worthless to you, Lieutenant. One thing you can be sure of. She *did* see *someone* in a wheel chair, disguised in Saville's wig and glasses. She *did* see *someone* pushing the chair. She *did* see them go into—or be let into—Norman's room. So now you go to Saville and ask him who used his wheel chair and his makeup kit while he was having dinner. Where are those items now? That's a starting point, my friend."

Hardy straightened his shoulders. "This time Pretty Boy is going to sit down and dish it out for me if it takes all night," he said.

"Remember, Brimsek told us that after they had gone into Norman's room with the housekeeper at a qarter to ten, Saville went out in the wheel chair looking 'for action.' Namely, a poker game. Did he find his wig and glasses where they should have been? Was the wheel chair where it ought to have been?"

"There could still be fingerprints on those items," Hardy said hopefully.

Chambrun shook his head. "Mrs. Kniffin didn't say so but I'd make a small bet the man in the raincoat wore gloves."

Hardy started for the door.

"Just a minute, Lieutenant," Norman said in a small tired voice. "I was lucky this last time. I might not be lucky if they come looking for me again."

Hardy nodded. "You're right. You'll have to stay here till we've given Mark's place a thorough going-over. I'll send a man in here to stand by with you. Detective named Salinger. He's a hundred percent reliable. You want your typewriter in here?"

Norman's smile was pale. "I think I'm pretty fed up with The Masked Crusader," he said. "He got a little bit too real up there in Mark's place."

Hardy took off for his confrontation with Saville. Norman didn't move out of his chair. He lowered his head and covered his face with his hands.

"I—I think things are beginning to catch up with me," Norman said. "Poor Frank. Do you really think he might have been in that wheel chair?"

"It was your idea," Chambrun said.

Norman shuddered. "But I didn't really believe it," he said.

Chambrun lit one of his flat Egyptian cigarettes. "I think we'd better bring you up to date, Norman," he said. "Mark has been to see Mrs. Hansbury."

Norman's head jerked up. "So help me, Mark, if you've dragged her into this—"

"She hasn't been dragged anywhere," Chambrun said. "Mark is very much concerned about you. He's a good friend, Norman. He felt someone is trying to frame you and that you'd almost certainly need the alibi that Mrs. Hansbury could give you. He wanted to make certain she'd come forward if she was needed."

"And of course she said she would," Norman said. "But that would mean—"

"It may not be necessary for her to come forward," Chambrun said. "There's a small hitch, though. Mrs. Hansbury told Mark you got to her place a little after eight. You told us you left here about six. Obviously she can't provide you with an alibi for that stretch of time in between—six to eight. That could be the crucial time, Norman."

"I went to my apartment—near Gramercy Park," Norman said. "I hadn't picked up mail for days and I needed some fresh clothes."

"Did anyone see you there?"

Norman frowned. "I can't honestly be sure," he said. "It's a self-service building. I—I wasn't trying to set up an alibi, you know."

"Let's hope it isn't too important," Chambrum said. He watched the smoke rise from the end of his cigarette. "We're left a little bit high and dry, Norman. Take a look at what we know. Hansbury was in Saville's suite arguing about your payments when they went down to dinner leaving him there. That was a few minutes past seven. Hansbury was still alive then—Sheri Southworth saw him. He made a phone call to Mrs. Hansbury, trying to find you. Now Saville, Brimsek, Drott, and Miss Bevans are all in the clear for the next hour and a half. At ten minutes to eight Mrs. Kniffin saw a phony Saville go into your room. That *may* have been Frank Hansbury, dead, wheeled into your room by Mr. X. If it was Hansbury he wasn't killed by Saville or Brimsek or Drott—or Miss Bevans. I'm disinclined to believe that Miss Sheri Southworth is a man-killer—in the literal sense."

Chambrun smiled faintly, then went on. "So that brings me to the key question, Norman. Who else in this entourage could have got into an angry argument with Hansbury and chopped him down? Because that seems to me to be what happened. Not a plan-

ned killing—an explosive, unplanned moment of violence."

"Only Sheri was in the suite," Norman said.

"We don't know that," Chambrun said. "Hansbury was there and Sheri was in her room. If someone rang the doorbell Hansbury could obviously have let that someone in."

Norman nodded, moistening his lips. "Frank was furious with everyone. But the person he hated most in the whole setup was Karl Richter," he said.

"Oh?"

"Richter was the one who was really fouling up the script," Norman said. "Karl and his bloody 'significances.' Just when we'd get Saville and the rest of them to agree about a sequence, Karl would blow it for us. He's a crazy egomaniac. He doesn't care about anyone's ideas but his own. He thinks directors are the only important people in show business. If he happened to turn up while Frank was there in the suite they could certainly have got in an argument."

"He wasn't in the hotel," I said.

"He *says* he wasn't in the hotel," Chambrun said. He looked at Norman. "Is he a karate expert, Norman?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Norman said.

"Mark, it might be worth having a casual conversation with Richter," Chambrun said. "If he's still in the Trapeze Bar and he isn't too stoned you might be able to find out where he was last night between seven and eight without his thinking he was talking to the police. Use your best diplomatic technique."

The Trapeze Bar is suspended in space over the foyer to the Beaumont's Grand Ball Room. Its walls are a kind of Florentine grillework, and some artist of the Calder school has decorated them with mobiles of circus performers working on trapezes. They sway slightly in the movement of air from a cooling system, giving the unusual effect that the whole place is swaying slightly. It's an extremely popular rendezvous for the famous and the near-famous before the lunch and dinner hours.

It was nearly six o'clock when I got there and the room was crowded to the doors. I flagged Mr. Del Greco, the Captain, and he pointed out Richter at a corner table.

"I was about to give him the polite heave-ho," Del Greco said. "He has to be potted to the eyes. He's been here for nearly four hours taking in one after another—Dutch gin on the rocks."

Richter wasn't alone. The attractive Sally Bevans was with him.

"Well, well, well," Richter said when I joined them. "The Beau-

mont's barker." He was deathly pale but he seemed in control.

Miss Bevans smiled at me. "I finally got that martini," she said. "On the run."

"Sorry I couldn't have hosted it for you," I said

"Join us, by all means," Richter said as I pulled up a chair. "I have been summoned by the Mafia—my name for Saville and Company. I have been explaining to Sally that I'm not exactly in tip-top condition to involve myself in a story conference."

"They need you, Karl," Sally said. "Wally Cameron has come up with a whole new opening sequence."

"Convey the word that I need a little time for rehabilitation," Richter said. "A lot of hot coffee, a lot of cold shower—shall we say, after they've had dinner?"

"I'll report," Sally said. "But I have the feeling they'll descend on you *en masse* when Lieutenant Hardy is through with them."

"So the Law is still chasing its tail," Richter said. "Running in circles can last a long time—long enough for a lot of cold showers. Convey the word, Sally, my dear. Richter will come when Richter is damned good and ready."

Sally made a little moue and stood up. "I'll report," she said.

"Do so," Richter said. "And then rejoin us, my dear, and I'll persuade you to desert the Mafia and become a Rhinemaiden." He watched her go, moistening his thin lips. "A really lovely gal," he said. "How is it they so seldom recognize the genuine male as opposed to the counterfeit?" He looked up at the waiter standing by the table. "Once more, please, and whatever Mr. Haskell's little heart desires."

I saw the waiter was about to deliver an ultimatum from Del Greco and shook my head. One more couldn't do that much damage. I looked at Richter. All that was missing was the Heidelberg scar to make him the perfect Prussian prototype.

"This is a wonderful, a magical bar," he said. "I've sat here all afternoon and the grapevine entwines itself around my ears and bit by bit I am completely up on current events. I hear the rumor that someone tried to throw little Norman out the window."

"It's not a rumor," I said. "It was a near thing." I found myself looking at his well manicured nails and wondered if they could have clawed at Norman's chest.

"The police seem unwilling to accept expert help," Richter said. He looked at me hard, as though he had difficulty focusing. I expect he did. "I told you the Mafia would stop at nothing to keep the finger pointed away from them. Your square policeman seems to have rejected that idea."

"Alibis," I said. "The Mafia,

as you call them, left Hansbury alive in Saville's suite when they went to dinner. He was dead, according to the Medical Examiner, by the time they got back. They were all accounted for the entire time. You weren't in the hotel," I added, slipping it in as casually as I could.

"That's correct," he said. "I was not in the hotel. I was on the other side of town having dinner with my cameraman and my set designer—at Sardi's." His eyes narrowed. "Were you trying to get me to provide myself with an alibi, Mr. Haskell?"

"Why should I?" I said, trying to look fatuous.

"Well, no matter. I have one. But I very much wonder about the Mafia. Conspiracy, conspiracy. They say they left Hansbury alive. They *say*."

"Sheri saw him alive after they left. He made phone calls."

"That pet poodle will say anything she is told to say," Richter said. "She's got the bruises to prove it. Conspiracy, my dear fellow. The Mafia is expert at it."

I wondered how much I should tell him. His theory had little needles pricking my spine. "At ten minutes of eight somebody wheeled a man out of the suite wearing Saville's wig—his invalid disguise—and into Norman's room. We wonder if that was Hansbury's body."

"Now you're getting interesting," Richter said.

"But they were all in the Grill Room," I said. "So who did the wheeling?"

"My dear innocent," Richter said, obviously enjoying himself, "it is perfectly simple. There are presidents and vice-presidents at their beck and call. They phone. 'We have had a little accident,' they say. 'We have killed Frank Hansbury. We need to plant his body in Norman's room. Please send someone around to wheel him in.' 'Yes, sir. Right away, sir.' And so they go to dinner, cool as the cliché cucumber. Help arrives. Miss Sheri admits him. Frank Hansbury is dumped. Kaput."

"Hansbury made a phone call after they were in the Grill Room," I said. "We know that for a fact."

"Do you, Haskell?" His smile was twisted. "The Mafia includes among its cohorts actors, mimics. Is the person who got the phone call absolutely sure the voice wasn't an imitation?"

I almost said she ought to know—she was his wife. I didn't. What I did say was: "It's an interesting idea."

"But hard for the square policeman to absorb, or prove, I imagine."

I tried the fatuous smile again. "While we're setting up alibis, where were you at four thirty

when someone was trying to toss Norman out my window?"

Richter laughed. He waved toward the bar. "Check with your elegant Captain over there. He's been hating me since two o'clock this afternoon." He looked at the drink the waiter had brought him and shuddered. "I think I have overestimated myself," he said.

At that point Sally Bevans returned from the phones in the foyer. "I'm sorry," she said. "The words are 'urgent,' 'immediate,' 'pronto.'

His pale eyes looked her up and down as though he could see through the chic beige dress. "What a pity," he said. "You could provide the one sure way to revive me, my dear." He stood up abruptly and I just managed to stop his chair from toppling over. "Do you think I might avail myself of your steamroom and shower baths up at the squash courts?" he asked me.

"Be my guest."

"Thanks." He laughed. "Remember, the Mafia is all-powerful, Haskell." He walked away, stiff-legged, a little uncertain.

"Can I buy you that martini now?" I asked Sally.

She sat down beside me. "I always feel I'm being manhandled when he just looks at me," she said.

I signaled the waiter. Something told me I ought to stop playing detective, but Richter, drunk as he was, had suggested something not out of the realm of possibility. I wondered if this cool chick beside me could be sitting on the truth about a murder. I wanted to call Gillian to ask her if she was quite sure it was Frank who had talked to her on the phone, but I also thought I might not have another chance to catch Sally Bevans off guard.

"Richter isn't very friendly to your boss," I said.

"Karl is a Grade-A louse," she said. "He is also a Grade-A director. This business is full of talented louses—or is it lice?"

I gave the waiter the order for two very dry vodka martinis on the rocks.

"Richter keeps trying to point us toward your boss and his friends," I said.

She looked at me, frowning. "It's absurd, you know. We all have alibis for both times—the time Frank was killed and this afternoon when Norman was attacked. You know that, Mark."

"Richter thinks we may not be asking about the right times," I said.

"What other times are there?" she asked. She didn't seem remotely disturbed. The waiter brought our martinis, and we clicked glasses and sipped.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" I said.

"Ask away," she said.

"When you all went down to dinner last night Hansbury *was* in Saville's suite?"

"You want me to be very precise, don't you, Mark?"

"Yes, I do."

"I went downstairs ahead of Bob and the others—to make sure about the table reservation in the Grill Room. Frank was there when I left, arguing with Bob and George and Paul Drott."

"How much later did they come down to the Grill Room?"

"Oh, fifteen minutes," she said without hesitation. Then her clear gray eyes contracted. "Are you suggesting that something happened to Frank during that time?"

"Richter suggests it."

"That worm," she said.

"He calls your outfit the Mafia."

"I know." She sipped her drink. "You halfway buy it, don't you?"

"When you're trying to put a puzzle together and there's no glimmer of light—" I shrugged.

"From what I've seen of you, Mark, I write you down as a very nice guy," she said. "The way you've stood by Norman."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"And you're not simple-minded, Mark. You couldn't be and hold your job with Chambrun, who's certainly not simple-minded. You know something about the importance of public relations and publicity. That's your job. Nobody who isn't in the business can quite understand what the wrong kind of publicity can do to a man in Bob Saville's position. Or how important good publicity is to him and everybody connected with him."

"He's the golden egg layer for a lot of people," I said.

"He is that," she said.

"He plays it pretty dangerously," I said, "carting Miss Sheri Southworth around the country with him."

Her lips compressed. "Richter *has* been talking to you," she said.

"Well, she is a little risky, isn't she?"

Sally sat very still, turning her cocktail glass round and round in her fingers.

"I understand the kind of special love affair that girls have with the boss," I said, "even though it isn't for real. But let's face it. Saville's practising a kind of brinksmanship, wouldn't you say? When something serious, like Frank Hansbury's murder, comes on the scene he's got to think of covering up so much else."

"I suppose you could say that I love Bob Saville," she said. "I've been with him for nine years—first as a script girl and then as his personal secretary. I know all the good things about him, and all the bad things. I know all his weaknesses and strengths, all his fears, all his dreams. They total up to something, Mark. If he wasn't al-

ways in technicolor, always in the public spotlight, he'd be just another ordinary guy with ordinary weaknesses and fears. And dreams. That's how I see him, working with him every day. Would it surprise you if I told you I'd cut off my right arm for him if he asked it?"

"Knowing you, even as slightly as I do, it would," I said.

"What did Richter tell you about Sheri?"

"I don't think you're old enough to have it repeated," I said, grinning at her.

"Whatever he told you, it isn't true," she said.

"Since you don't know what he told me, how can you be sure?"

"I know Karl," she said. "Louse is too kind a word." She glanced at her small jeweled wrist watch. "Oh, brother, I was supposed to report back on Richter's availability. Would you excuse me a moment?"

She went off to the phones in the foyer again.

I signaled the waiter and asked him to bring a phone to the table. I'd written down Gillian's number when I got her address out of the phone book. When the waiter brought the phone and plugged it in I dialed Gillian. She answered at once.

"Mark Haskell here," I said. "I have to ask you something in a hurry, Gillian. Are you *sure* it was Frank who called you last night asking for Norman?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"It's been suggested that it might have been someone imitating Frank's voice." She was silent for so long that I said, "Are you there, Gillian?"

"Yes, I'm here. I was trying to remember what he said. He asked me if Norman had got here yet. I said no. He said to tell Norman he wanted to talk to him. And then, in that snide way of his, he said, 'And have fun, baby.' Yes, it was Frank."

"Well, thanks anyway," I said. "I'll explain it to you when I see you."

I saw Sally coming toward me from the foyer. So much for a faked phone call. But the question of times was still complicated. Maybe, after that, Frank had had his fatal argument with someone who had not yet gone to dinner. It could have happened that way. Sheri's testimony that she'd been alone with him could be part of the conspiracy.

"It's a good thing I called," Sally said as she rejoined me. "Lieutenant Hardy wants you up there in Bob's suite. Shall we go?"

I was playing cops and robbers and I was in love with it. But I was an amateur. I was full of important suggestions for Hardy. It didn't cross my mind that if Hardy wanted me he would have found me direct, through Chambrun who knew where I was.

It didn't cross my mind until five minutes later when I walked into Saville's suite with Sally and saw that Hardy wasn't there.

"I'm sorry, Mark," Sally said quietly. "I had to get you up here."

Saville faced me, looking pale and tense. As the door closed I was aware that the muscular George Brimsek was standing behind me. Paul Drott, the vice-president, was standing over by the windows, looking down at the East River lights. It was now dark outside.

Sally walked over to the center table and got herself a cigarette. Saville held his lighter for her.

"Thanks, Sally," he said, his voice low and unsteady.

"Call me Mata Hari," she said, and turned away from him. "You've managed to make me hate myself, Bob."

"I'm sorry," he said. He turned to me. "I'm sorry, too, that I got you here under false pretenses, Haskell."

"No harm done," I said, trying to sound like the leading man in a soap opera. "I'll just take off."

"Not so fast, buster," Brimsek said. He was leaning casually against the door. He pasted on his white smile. "The so-called Mafia is now running the show."

Richter's nickname for them suddenly didn't sound so funny.

"Sally called up from downstairs to say that Karl Richter had been filling you full of it," Saville said. He was really trying the line of apologetic charm. Brimsek's muscular bulk against the door rather negated it. I like to be free to accept or reject apologies. "We're in a very tight spot, Haskell. We can't allow you and your friend Chambrun to get your hotel off the hook by throwing mud at us."

"I wasn't aware—"

"Hotels don't thrive on the news that guests are murdered and stuffed into closets and that attempts are made to throw other guests out of windows," Saville said. "But if you can dump it all in our laps nobody will remember where it happened—just that it was us. There's too much at stake to let you play games with us."

"So I go out the window?" I asked, returning to my jaunty soap-opera role.

"Don't be absurd," Saville said. "We are going to convince you, once and for all, of the truth."

"Under the circumstances I might be easily convinced," I said.

The doorbell rang. Brimsek moved away and unlocked the door. Karl Richter stood outside looking pink and well scrubbed. The steamroom and shower had done wonders for him.

"Ah, the delight of being wanted!" he said, sauntering into the room. Brimsek closed the door

and its lock snapped shut. Richter smiled at me. "Have you now also become a story expert, Haskell?"

It happened so fast I had no time to make even a joking answer. Brimsek swung Richter around and hit him flush on the mouth with a pile-driving right. Blood spurted like juice out of a grapefuit. Richter landed on a small straight-backed chair that crumpled under him like matchwood. He sat on the floor, his eyes blurred, fumbling at his shattered mouth.

"You jerk," Brimsek said, massaging his right fist gently. He had forgotten to take off his smile. There was now something obscene about it.

"You can begin, Karl," Saville said, "by telling Haskell the truth about Sheri."

Richter muttered something unintelligible. Brimsek reached down, caught him by the coat lapels, and dragged him up onto his knees. Then he hit him again, flush on the bleeding mouth. Richter screamed.

I moved in. "All right, tough guy," I said. "That's enough."

I didn't get as far as Brimsek. Saville moved deftly. My right arm was suddenly bent behind me in an anguishing twist lock. "You are here just to listen, Haskell," Saville said. "Go on, Karl. Tell him about Sheri."

Both murderous hatred and fear were reflected in Richter's pale eyes.

"One more, Karl, just for openers?" Brimsek asked, reaching for him.

"No!" Richter's voice was thick.

"Then tell the man about Sheri," Brimsek said.

Richter moved his bloody mouth. "Sheri is Saville's sister," Richter said. "The only way he can keep her out of trouble—"

"And out of the newspapers," Brimsek interpolated.

"—is to keep her under his thumb every minute." Richter touched his mouth. "What I told you is a rumor I've never bothered to correct—up to now."

Brimsek yanked him up to his feet again.

"No!" I heard Sally say.

"Now about a conspiracy to pin a murder on Norman," Brimsek said. He hit Richter again, a vicious uppercut that seemed to come almost from the floor. Richter literally went up and through the air and fell in a crumpled heap against the wall.

"You'll kill him, George!" Sally said.

"Too good for him," Brimsek said. He started across the room toward Richter.

The doorbell rang.

"Ignore it," Brimsek said.

He reached Richter, dragged him up to his feet, began to cross-slap him—back of his hand to

one side of the face, front of his hand to the other—whack, whack, whack, whack.

The door opened. My heart did a great big thud against my ribs.

Jerry Dodd was the first one into the room, a passkey in his hand. Chambrun, Hardy, and Norman were behind him. Jerry got to Brimsek and managed to spin him around. Richter sank to the floor. Brimsek and Jerry faced each other, Jerry about half the muscleman's size. I can't tell you exactly what happened but suddenly Brimsek went through the air in a complete somersault and landed against the wall. Jerry stood over him.

"Don't move, big boy," Jerry said, "or I'll kick in your teeth."

Brimsek's smile was still there. "That was real good," he said. "How did you do it?"

"You, I suspect, are only a Brown Belt," Jerry said. "I'm a Black Belt. Take the lessons and you'll find out. Now what the hell's going on here?"

It poured out of me. Richter had given me a lead. There was a way to make the time schedule fit the killing of Frank Hansbury. I dished it out, chapter and verse.

"It's an interesting theory," Chambrun said. "I thought about it without Mr. Richter's assistance. But other facts—" He turned, and for the first time I noticed that Hardy had Norman's arm in a firm grip. "You see, Norman forgot to cancel his milk delivery."

"Milk delivery!" I figured the great man had lost his grip on things.

"The time Norman had to account for was between six and a little after eight last night," Chambrun said. "He said he went to his apartment for his mail and clean clothes. I thought I'd have Jerry check it out. Norman needed that alibi. Well, there were four bottles of milk outside Norman's door and four days' collection of mail slipped under it. Norman certainly wasn't there last night."

I looked at Norman. He was staring at the rug pattern.

"We brought Norman here to have him confront your sister, Mr. Saville," Chambrun said.

"My sister!" Saville said.

"I've always known Miss Southworth was your sister," Chambrun said. "We have our own way of discovering facts about our guests. The information is on your file card. What happened last night is something like this. When you all went down to dinner and left Hansbury here, he did try to reach Norman on the phone. He called his ex-wife because he knew Norman was headed there. But Norman hadn't arrived. He took a chance and called Norman's room. I've checked that out with the call slips at the switchboard.

"He found Norman still there,

and asked him to come down the hall to this suite. Norman protested, but he came. Sheri was in her room and couldn't hear. Hansbury and Norman got into an argument. Hansbury wanted Norman to stay here till you came back. Norman was to tell you he wouldn't write another word and was withdrawing his material—the original idea of *The Masked Crusader*. Norman refused. Hansbury was his agent, so Hansbury should handle it. Besides, he was already late for a date with Mrs. Hansbury." Chambrun turned to Norman. He was almost gentle. "Then what happened, Norman?"

"He—he laughed at me," Norman said. "He said he'd been with Gillian a couple of nights ago. He said she wouldn't be eager for me to get there—not after the master had been with her. I—I hit him. Without thinking I clipped him on the back of the neck. He fell down on the floor. He was dead—just like that!"

"No plan, no murderous intent. It just happened," Chambrun said. "Then Norman panicked. He could have called Jerry, told his story, and at the worst got off with a manslaughter charge. But he panicked. He has a quick mind, Norman. He knew if Hansbury were found here, all the others were alibied. They were in the Grill Room. The trail might quickly lead to him. If he could get the body out of here—somewhere else—

"Then he remembered Saville's wheel chair and his makeup equipment—the wig, glasses. He found them in the next room. He decked Hansbury out in the disguise and wheeled him out into the hall. I think he probably meant to dump Hansbury in the linen room or in a cleaning closet. Right, Norman?"

Norman nodded. "But that damned woman was out there—Mrs. Kniffin—drooling at what she thought was Saville. So I had no choice. I unlocked my door and wheeled Frank in there. Then I had my bright idea." His laugh was mirthless. "If they found Frank there it could be made to look as if somebody was trying to frame me. So I put him in the closet. I brought the chair and the makeup stuff back here. Then I hightailed it for Gillian's and stayed there.

"This morning I hunted up Mark with my story about needing a place to work. I didn't want to be the one who found Frank's body. So I asked for things to be brought from my room, including my slippers. I knew that whoever went for the slippers in the closet would find Frank's body."

"Hold everything," I said. "Maybe all this happened. But you're not going to say that Nor-

man tried to throw himself out my window? Who was the man in the stocking mask?"

Chambrun's smile was wry. "The Masked Crusader," he said. "I suggested it once, not believing it. There was no one. A product of Norman's fiction writer's mind. Norman set the stage—overturned the furniture, opened the window. He cracked himself in the mouth. He clawed his own chest. Hardy's man has just taken some stuff from under Norman's fingernails to the lab. The result will almost certainly show bits of Norman's skin."

"I did it," Norman said. "I—I wanted to make absolutely sure you were convinced there was someone else."

"When the stage was set Norman took the telephone off the hook and yelled for help," Chambrun said. He turned to Saville. "We came here in the hope that your sister just might have seen Norman coming in or going out or returning. It isn't too important, but Hardy likes to have his cases nice and tidy."

"If you could leave her out of it—" Saville said huskily.

"What about this mess?" Jerry asked, nodding toward the battered Richter. "Assault with something damn near like a deadly weapon."

Brimsek was on his feet. "Ask him," he said, always smiling. "Ask him if he'd like to bring charges. When I get through telling what I know about him in open court—"

"Forget it," Richter said in a voice that sounded as though it came from the bottom of a well.

Norman turned to me. "Would you try to explain to Gillian, Mark? I know she loved Frank. I didn't mean to kill him. But I couldn't bear it when he made those cheap cracks about her."

"I'll explain to her, Norman."

Saville moved forward. "Before you take Geller away, Lieutenant, could we talk to him a few minutes about his property—*The Masked Crusader?* I think we'll still want to use it."

Hardy looked at him, his eyes puzzled. "Don't you ever think about anything else, Saville?"

Saville's dark eyebrows rose. "Why should I, Lieutenant? It's my business."

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