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THE saint DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Edited by LESLIE CHARTERI

Two Were Missing
by HUGH PENTECOS

Bird With the Broken Wing
by AGATHA CHRISTI

Poggioli and the Fugitive
by T. S. STRIBLIN

Lady in Shadow
by WALT SHELDO

An Ounce of Curiosity
by CLARENCE B. KELLAN

THE QUESTING TYCOON
A NEW SAINT STORY by LESLIE CHARTERIS

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

A KING-SIZE PUBLICATION

Don't let me kid you: I still get a kick out of seeing my own contribution in the special box on the cover of this magazine, and this time I shall unblushingly celebrate my comeback by listing myself first.

This looks like Famous Characters Month. Let's glance at our stories from that angle:

The Saint becomes involved in the strange search of THE QUESTING TYCOON. This is a brand-new Saint story about a theme of incalculable antiquity: witchcraft. In this case, specifically, Haitian voodoo. And I would like to say here that the voodoo I describe was not made up out of my own fevered brain. I spent several weeks in Haiti making a first-hand study of the subject, and the rites you will read about are absolutely authentic.

Inspector Luke Bradley has appeared in countless hard-cover books and smooth-paper magazines. TWO WERE MISSING, by Hugh Pentecost, a complete short novel, presents him in a spine-tingling study of coldblooded murder.

Professor Henry Poggioli, T. S. Stribling's famous psychological criminologist, has been with us here before, but now for the first time we have the honor of introducing his latest and never-before-published case, POGGIOLI AND THE FUGITIVE, in which his detecting is done in the Florida keys.

Scattergood Baines is probably Clarence Buddington Kelland's best known and best loved creation, and should need no introduction. You'll find him as delightful as ever in AN OUNCE OF CURIOSITY.

Inspector Geichi Nikkiyama, of the Tokyo Police, is the creation of Walt Sheldon. and LADY IN SHADOW is his second appearance in these pages. We might mention that the author himself lives near Tokyo and is married to a beautiful Japanese girl, so that this is another yarn in which you can be assured that there is nothing bogus about the background.

Mr. Quin and *Mr. Satterthwaite* are another combo that is playing a return engagement under our roof. In THE BIRD WITH THE BROKEN WING, Agatha Christie writes their material with her usual felicitous ingenuity.

There are, of course, other interesting and able characters on the bill. But we think the foregoing is a pretty distinguished list of stars to put up on the marquee.

Cleve Charleston

THE saint DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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the questing tycoon

by . . . Leslie Charteris

The red Carib moon and the *Voodun* drums chilled Templar. But even more unnerving was Theron Netlord's darkly devious design for murder.

IT WAS INTOLERABLY hot in Port-au-Prince; for the capital city of Haiti lies at the back of a bay, a gullet twenty miles deep beyond which the opening jaws of land extend a hundred and twenty miles still farther to the west and northwest, walled in by steep high hills, and thus perfectly sheltered from every normal shift of the trade winds which temper the climate of most parts of the Antilles.

The geography which made it one of the finest natural harbors in the Caribbean had doubtless appealed strongly to the French buccaneers who founded the original settlement. But three centuries later, with the wings of Pan-American Airways to replace the sails of a frigate, a no less authentic pirate could be excused for being more interested in escaping from the sweltering heat pocket than in dallying to admire the anchorage.

As soon as Simon Templar had completed his errands in the town, he climbed into the jeep he had borrowed and headed back up into the hills.

Knowing what to expect of Port-au-Prince at that time of

THE SAINT TILTS AT CRIME IN A NEW CHARTERIS SAGA HIS HALO SET AGLEAM BY THE SPELLS OF HAITIAN MAGIC

year, he had passed up the ambitious new hotels of the capital in favor of the natural air-conditioning of the Chatelet des Fleurs, an unpretentious but comfortable inn operated by an American whom he had met on a previous visit, only about fifteen miles out of the city but five thousand feet above the sea-level heat.

He could feel it getting cooler as the road climbed, and in a surprisingly short time it was like being in another latitude. But the scenery did not seem to become any milder to correspond with the relief of temperature: the same brazen sun bathed rugged brownish slopes with few trees to soften their parched contours. Most of the houses he passed, whether a peasant's one-room cottage or an occasional expensive chateau, were built of irregular blocks of the same native stone, so that they had an air of being literally carved out of the landscape. But sometimes in a sudden valley or clinging to a distant hillside there would be a palm-thatched cabin of rough raw timbers that looked as if it had been transplanted straight from Africa.

And indisputably transplanted from Africa were the straggling files of ebony people, most of them women, a few plutocrats adding their own weight to the already fantastic burdens of incredibly powerful little donkeys, but the majority laden fabulously themselves with great baskets balanced on their heads, and bustling cheerfully along the rough shoulders of the road.

He came into the little town of Pétionville, drove past the pleasant grass-lawned square dominated by the very French-looking white church, and headed on up the corkscrew highway towards Kenscoff. And six kilometers further on he met Sibao.

As he rounded one of the innumerable curves he saw a little crowd collected, much as some fascinating obstruction would create a knot in a busy string of ants. Unlike other groups that he had passed before where a few individuals from one of the ant-lines would fall out by the wayside to rest and gossip, this cluster had a focal point and an air of gravity and concern that made him think first of an automobile accident, although there was no car or truck in sight.

He slowed up automatically, trying to see what it was all about as he went by, like almost any normal traveler; but when he glimpsed the unmistakable bright color of fresh blood he pulled over and stopped, which perhaps few drivers on that road would have troubled to do.

The chocolate-skinned young woman whom the others were gathered around had a six-inch gash in the calf of one leg. From the gestures and pantomime of

her companions rather than the few basic French word-sounds which his ear could pick out of their excited jabber of Creole, he concluded that a loose stone had rolled under her foot as she walked, taking it from under her and causing her to slip sideways down off the shoulder, where another sharp pointed stone happened to stick out at exactly the right place and angle to slash her like a crude dagger. The mechanics of the accident were not really important, but it was an ugly wound, and the primitive first-aid efforts of the spectators had not been able to stanch the bleeding.

Simon saw from the tint of the blood that no artery had been cut. He made a pressure bandage with his handkerchief and two strips ripped from the tail of his shirt; but it was obvious that a few stitches would be necessary for a proper repair. He picked the girl up and carried her to the jeep.

"*Nous allons chercher un médecin,*" he said; and he must have been understood, for there was no protest over the abduction as he turned the jeep around and headed back towards Pétionville.

The doctor whom he located was learning English and was anxious to practice it. He contrived to keep Simon around while he cleaned and sewed up and dressed the cut, and then conveniently mentioned his fee. Simon paid it, although the young woman tried to protest, and helped her back into the jeep.

His good-Samaritan gesture seemed to have become slightly harder to break off than it had been to get into; but with nothing but time on his hands he was cheerfully resigned to letting it work itself out.

"Where were you going?" he asked in French, and she pointed up the road.

"*Là-haut.*"

The reply was given with a curious dignity, but without presumption. He was not sure at what point he had begun to feel that she was not quite an ordinary peasant girl. She wore the same faded and formless kind of cotton dress, perhaps cleaner than some, but not cleaner than all the others, for it was not uncommon for them to be spotless. Her figure was slimmer and shapelier than most, and her features had a patrician mould that reminded him of ancient Egyptian carvings. They had remained mask-like and detached throughout the ministrations of the doctor, although Simon knew that some of it must have hurt like hell.

"*Là-haut,*" she repeated.

He drove up again to the place where he had found her. Two other older women were sitting there, and they greeted her as the jeep stopped. She smiled and answered, proudly displaying the

new white bandage on her leg. She started to get out.

He saw that there were three baskets by the roadside where the two women had waited. He stopped her, and said: "You should not walk far today, especially with a load. I can take you all the way."

"Vous êtes très gentille."

She spoke French very stiffly and shyly and correctly, like a child remembering lessons. Then she spoke fluently to the other women in Creole, and they hoisted the third basket between them and put it in the back of the jeep. Her shoes were still on top of its miscellany of fruits and vegetables, according to the custom of the country, which regards shoes as too valuable to be worn out with mere tramping from place to place, especially over rough rocky paths.

Simon drove all the way to the Chatelet des Fleurs, where the road seems to end, but she pointed ahead and said: *"Plus loin."*

He drove on around the inn. Not very far beyond it the pavement ended, but a navigable trail meandered on still further and higher towards the background peaks. She expected it to become impassable at every turn, but it teased him on for several minutes and still hadn't petered out when a house suddenly came in sight, built out of rock and perched like a fragment of a medieval castle on a promontory a little above them. A rutted driveway branched off and slanted up to it, and the young woman pointed again.

"La maison là."

It was not a mansion in size, but on the other hand it was certainly no native peasant's cottage.

"Merci beaucoup," she said in her stilted schoolgirl French, as the jeep stopped in front of it.

"De rien," he murmured amiably, and went around to lift out the heavy basket.

A man came out on to the veranda, and she spoke rapidly in Creole, obviously explaining about her accident and how she came to be chauffeured to the door. As Simon looked up, the man came down to meet him, holding out his hand.

"Please don't bother with that," he said. "I've got a handy man who'll take care of it. You've done enough for Sibao already. Won't you come in and have a drink? My name's Theron Netlord."

Simon Templar could not help looking a little surprised. For Mr. Netlord was not only a white man, but he was unmistakably an American; and Simon had some vague recollection of his name.

II

It can be assumed that the birth of the girl who was later to be called Sibao took place under the very best auspices, for

her father was the *houngan* of an *houmfort* in a valley that could be seen from the house where Simon had taken her, which in terms of a more familiar religion than voodoo would be the equivalent of the vicar of a parish church; and her mother was not only a *mambo* in her own right, but also an occasional communicant of the church in Pétionville. But after the elaborate precautionary rituals with which her birth was surrounded, the child grew up just like any of the other naked children of the hills, until she was nearly seven.

At that time, she woke up one morning and said: "Mama, I saw Uncle Zande trying to fly, but he dived into the ground."

Her mother thought nothing of this until the evening, when word came that Uncle Zande, who was laying tile on the roof of a building in Léogane, had stumbled off it and broken his neck. After that much attention was paid to her dreams, but the things that they prophesied were not always so easy to interpret until after they had happened.

Two years later her grandfather fell sick with a burning fever, and his children and grandchildren gathered around to see him die. But the young girl went to him and caressed his forehead, and at that moment the sweating and shivering stopped, and the fever left him and he began to mend. After that there were others who asked for her touch, and many of them affirmed that they experienced extraordinary relief.

At least it was evident that she was entitled to admission to the *houmfort* without further probation. One night, with a red bandanna on her head and gay handkerchiefs knotted around her neck and arms, with a bouquet in one hand and a crucifix in the other, she sat in a chair between her four sponsors and watched the *hounsis-canzo*, the student priests, dance before her. Then her father took her by the hand to the President of the congregation, and she recited her first voodoo oath:

"*Je jure, je jure,* I swear, to respect the powers of the *mystères de Guinée,* to respect the powers of the *houngan,* of the President of the Society, and the powers of all those on whom these powers are conferred."

And after she had made all her salutations and prostrations, and herself had been raised shoulder high and applauded, they withdrew and left her before the altar to receive whatever revelation the spirits might vouchsafe to her.

At thirteen she was a young woman, long-legged and comely, with a proud yet supple walk and prematurely steady eyes that gazed so gravely at those whom she noticed that they seemed never to rest on a person's face

but to look through into the thoughts behind it. She went faithfully to school and learned what she was told to, including a smattering of the absurdly involved and illogical version of her native tongue which they called "French." But when her father stated that her energy could be better devoted to helping to feed the family, she ended her formal education without complaint.

There were three young men who watched her one evening as she picked pigeon peas among the bushes that her father had planted, and who were more impressed by the grace of her body than by any tales they may have heard of her supernatural gifts. As the brief mountain twilight darkened they came to seize her; but she knew what was in their minds, and ran.

As the one penitent survivor told it, a cloud suddenly swallowed her. They blundered after her in the fog, following the sounds of her flight: then they saw her shadow almost within reach, and leapt to the capture, but the ground vanished from under their feet. The bodies of two of them were found at the foot of the precipice; and the third lived, though with a broken back, only because a tree caught him on the way down.

Her father knew then that she was more than qualified to become an *hounsis-canzo,* and she told him that she was ready. He took her to the *houmfort* and set in motion the elaborate seven-day ritual of purification and initiation, instructing her in all the mysteries himself. For her *loa,* or personal patron deity, she had chosen Erzulie; and in the baptismal ceremony of the fifth day she received the name of Sibao, the mystic mountain ridge where Erzulie mates with the Supreme Gods, the legendary place of eternal love and fertility.

And when the *houngan* made the invocation, the goddess showed her favor by possessing Sibao, who uttered prophecies and admonitions in a language that only *houngans* can interpret, and with the hands and mouth of Sibao accepted and ate of the sacrificial white pigeons and white rice; and the *houngan* was filled with pride as he chanted:

Les Saints mandés mangés.
Genoux-terre!
Parce que gnou loa nan govi
pas capab mangé,
Ou gaingnin pour mangé
pour li!

Thereafter she hoed the patches of vegetables that her father cultivated as before, and helped to grate manioc, and carried water from the spring, and went back and forth to market, like all the other young women; but the tale of her powers grew slowly and surely, and it would have been a reckless man who dared to molest her.

Then Theron Netlord came to Kenscoff, and presently heard of her through the inquiries that he made. He sent word that he would like her to work in his house; and because he offered wages that would much more than pay for a substitute to do her work at home, she accepted. She was then seventeen.

"A rather remarkable girl," said Netlord, who had told Simon some of these things. "Believe me, to some of the people around here, she's almost like a living saint."

Simon just managed not to blink at the word. "Won't that accident this afternoon shake her pedestal a bit?" he asked.

"Does a bishop lose face if he trips over something and breaks a leg?" Netlord retorted. "Besides, *you* happened. Just when she needed help, you drove by, picked her up, took her to the doctor, and then brought her here. What would you say were the odds against her being so lucky? And then tell me why it doesn't still look as if *something* was taking special care of her!"

He was a big thick-shouldered man who looked as forceful as the way he talked. He had iron-gray hair and metallic gray eyes, a blunt nose, a square thrusting jaw, and the kind of lips that even look muscular. You had an inevitable impression of him at the first glance; and without hesitation you would have guessed him to be a man who had reached the top ranks of some competitive business, and who had bulled his way up there with ruthless disregard for whatever obstructions might have to be trodden down or jostled aside. And trite as the physiognomy must seem, in this instance you would have been absolutely right.

Theron Netlord had made a fortune from the manufacture of bargain-priced lingerie.

The incongruity of this will only amuse those who know little about the clothing industry. It would be natural for the uninitiated to think of the trade in fragile feminine frotheries as being carried on by fragile, feminine, and frothy types; but in fact, at the wholesale manufacturing level, it is as tough and cut-throat a business as any legitimate operation in the modern world. And even in a business which has always been somewhat notorious for a lack of tenderness towards its employees, Mr. Netlord had been a perennial source of ammunition for socialistic agitators.

His long-standing vendetta against organized labor was an epic of its kind; and he had been named in one Congressional investigation as the man who, with a combination of gangster tactics and an ice-pick eye for loopholes in union contracts and government regulations, had come closest in the last decade

to running an old-fashioned sweatshop. It was from casually remembered references to such things in the newspapers that Simon had identified the name.

"Do you live here permanently?" Simon asked in a conversational way.

"I've been here for a while, and I'm staying a while," Netlord answered equivocally. "I like the rum. How do you like it?"

"It's strictly ambrosial."

"You can get fine rum in the States, like that Lemon Hart from Jamaica, but you have to come here to drink Barbancourt. They don't make enough to export."

"I can think of worse reasons for coming here. But I might want something more to hold me indefinitely."

Netlord chuckled. "Of course you would. I was kidding. So do I. I'll never retire. I *like* being in business. It's my sport, my hobby, and my recreation. I've spent more than a year all around the Caribbean, having what everyone would say was a nice long vacation. Nuts. My mind hasn't been off business for a single day."

"They tell me there's a great future in the area."

"And I'm looking for the future. There's none left in America. At the bottom, you've got your employees demanding more wages and pension funds for less work every year. At the top, you've got a damned paternalistic Government taxing your profits to the bone to pay for all its Utopian projects at home and abroad. The man who's trying to literally mind his own business is in the middle, in a squeeze that wrings all the incentive out of him. I'm sick of bucking that setup."

"What's wrong with Puerto Rico? You can get a tax exemption there if you bring in an employing industry."

"Sure. But the Puerto Ricans are getting spoiled, and the cost of labor is shooting up. In a few more years they'll have it as expensive and as oragnized as it is back home."

"So you're investigating Haiti because the labor is cheaper?"

"It's still so cheap that you could starve to death trying to sell machinery. Go visit one of the factories where they're making wooden salad bowls, for instance. The only power tool they use is a lathe. And where does the power come from? From a man who spends the whole day cranking a big wheel. Why? Because all he costs is one dollar a day—and that's cheaper than you can operate a motor, let alone amortizing the initial cost of it!"

"Then what's the catch?"

"This being a foreign country, your product hits a tariff wall when you try to import it into the States, and the duty will knock you silly."

"Things are tough all over,"

Simon remarked sympathetically.

The other's sinewy lips flexed in a tight grin.

"Any problem is tough till you lick it. Coming here showed me how to lick this one—but you'd never guess how!"

"I give up."

"I'm sorry, I'm not telling. May I fix your drink?"

Simon glanced at his watch and shook his head. "Thanks, but I should be on my way." He put down his glass and stood up. "I'm glad I needn't worry about you getting ulcers, though."

Netlord laughed comfortably, and walked with him out on to the front veranda. "I hope getting Sibao back here didn't bring you too far out of your way."

"No, I'm staying just a little below you, at the Catelet des Fleurs."

"Then we'll probably run into each other." Netlord put out his hand. "It was nice talking to you, Mr. —"

"Templar. Simon Templar."

The big man's powerful grip held on to Simon's. "You're not —by any chance—that fellow they call the Saint?"

"Yes." The Saint smiled. "But I'm just a tourist."

He disengaged himself pleasantly; but as he went down the steps he could feel Netlord's eyes on his back, and remembered that for one instant he had seen in them the kind of fear from which murder is born.

III

In telling so many stories of Simon Templar, the chronicler runs a risk of becoming unduly preoccupied with the reactions of various characters to the discovery that they have met the Saint, and it may fairly be observed that there is a definite limit to the possible variety of these responses. One of the most obvious of them was the shock to a guilty conscience which could open a momentary crack in an otherwise impenetrable mask. Yet in this case it was of vital importance. Uniquely vital, in fact.

If Theron Netlord had not betrayed himself for that fleeting second, and the Saint had not been sharply aware of it, Simon might have quickly dismissed the pantie potentate from his mind; and then there might have been no story to tell at all.

Instead of which, Simon only waited to make more inquiries about Mr. Netlord until he was able to corner his host, Atherton Lee, alone in the bar that night.

He had an easy gambit by casually relating the incident of Sibao.

"Theron Netlord? Oh, yes, I know him," Lee said. "He stayed here for a while before he rented that house up the hill. He still drops in sometimes for a drink and a yarn."

"One of the original rugged individualists, isn't he?" Simon remarked.

"Did he give you his big tirade about wages and taxes?"

"I got the synopsis, anyway."

"Yes, he's a personality all right. At least he doesn't make any bones about where he stands. What beats me is how a fellow of that type could get all wrapped up in voodoo."

Simon did not actually choke and splutter over his drink because he was not given to such demonstrations, but he felt as close to it as he was ever likely to.

"He what?"

"Didn't he get on to that subject? I guess you didn't stay very long."

"Only for one drink."

"He's really sold on it. That's how he originally came up here. He'd seen the voodoo dances they put on in the tourist spots down in Port-au-Prince, but he knew they were just a night-club show. He was looking for the McCoy. Well, we sent the word around, as we do sometimes for guests who are interested, and a bunch from around here came up and put on a show in the patio.

"They don't do any of the real sacred ceremonies, of course, but they're a lot more authentic than the professionals in town. Netlord lapped it up; but it was just an appetizer to him. He wanted to get right into the fraternity and find out what it was all about."

"What for?"

"He said he was thinking of writing a book about it. But half the time he talks as if he really believed in it. He says that the trouble with Western civilization is that it's too practical—it's never had enough time to develop its spiritual potential."

"Are you pulling my leg or is he pulling yours?"

"I'm not kidding. He rented that house, anyway, and set out to get himself accepted by the natives. He took lessons in Creole so that he could talk to them, and he speaks it a hell of a lot better than I do—and I've lived here a hell of a long time. He hired that girl Sibao just because she's the daughter of the local *houngan,* and she's been instructing him and sponsoring him for the *houmfort.*

"It's all very serious and legitimate. He told me some time ago that he'd been initiated as a junior member, or whatever they call it, but he's planning to take the full course and become a graduate witch-doctor."

"Can he do that? I mean, can a white man qualify?"

"Haitians are very broadminded," Atherton Lee said gently. "There's no color bar here."

Simon broodingly chain-lighted another cigarette. "He must be dreaming up something new and frightful for the underwear market," he murmured. "Maybe he's planning to top those perfumes that are supposed to con-

tain mysterious smells that drive the male sniffer mad with desire. Next season he'll come out with a negligée with a genuine voodoo spell woven in, guaranteed to give the matron of a girls' reformatory more sex appeal than Cleopatra."

But the strange combination of fear and menace that he had caught in Theron Netlord's eyes came back to him with added vividness, and he knew that a puzzle confronted him that could not be dismissed with any amusing flippancy. There had to be a true answer, and it had to be of unimaginable ugliness: therefore he had to find it, or he would be haunted for ever after by the thought of the evil he might have prevented.

To find the answer, however, was much easier to resolve than to do. He wrestled with it for half the night, pacing up and down his room; but when he finally gave up and lay down to sleep, he had to admit that his brain had only carried him around in as many circles as his feet, and gotten him just as close to nowhere.

In the morning, as he was about to leave his room, something white on the floor caught his eye. It was an envelope that had been slipped under the door. He picked it up. It was sealed, but there was no writing on it. It was stiff to his touch, as if it contained some kind of card, but it was curiously heavy.

He opened it. Folded in a sheet of paper was a piece of thin bright metal, about three inches by two, which looked as if it might have been cut from an ordinary tin can, flattened out and with the edges neatly turned under so that they would not be sharp. On it had been hammered an intricate symmetrical design.

Basically, a heart. The inside of the heart filled with a precise network of vertical and horizontal lines, with a single dot in the center of each little square that they formed. The outline of the heart trimmed with a regularly scalloped edge, like a doily, with a similar dot in each of the scallops. Impaled on a mast rising from the upper V of the heart, a crest like an ornate letter M, with a star above and below it. Two curlicues like skeletal wings swooping out, one from each shoulder of the heart, and two smaller curlicues tufting from the bottom point of the heart, on either side of another sort of vertical mast projecting down from the point and ending in another star—like an infinitely stylized and painstaking doodle.

On the paper that wrapped it was written, in a careful childish script:

Pour vous protéger.
Merci.

Sibao.

Simon went on down to the

dining room and found Atherton Lee having breakfast. "This isn't Valentine's Day in Haiti, is it?" asked the Saint.

Lee shook his head. "Or anywhere else that I know of. That's some time in February."

"Well, anyhow, I got a valentine." Simon showed him the rectangle of embossed metal.

"It's native work," Lee said. "But what is it?"

"That's what I thought you could tell me."

"I never saw anything quite like it."

The waiter was bringing Simon a glass of orange juice. He stood frozen in the act of putting it down, his eyes fixed on the piece of tin and widening slowly. The glass rattled on the service plate as he held it.

Lee glanced up at him.

"Do you know what it is?"

"Vêver," the man said.

He put the orange juice down and stepped back, still staring.

"Vêver," he reiterated.

Simon did not know the word. He looked inquiringly at his host, who shrugged helplessly and handed the token back.

"What's that?"

"Vêver," said the waiter. "Of Maîtresse Erzulie."

"Erzulie is the top voodoo goddess," Lee explained. "I guess that's her symbol, or some sort of charm."

"If you get good way, very good," said the waiter obscurely. "If you no should have, very bad."

"I believe I dig you, Alphonse," said the Saint. "And you don't have to worry about me. I got it the good way." He showed Lee the paper that had enclosed it. "It was slid under my door sometime this morning. I guess coming from her makes it pretty special."

"Congratulations," Lee said. "I'm glad you're officially protected. Is there anything you particularly need to be protected from?"

Simon dropped the little plaque into the breast pocket of his shirt.

"First off, I'd like to be protected from the heat of Port-au-Prince. I'm afraid I've got to go back down there. May I borrow the jeep again?"

"Of course. But we can send down for almost anything you want."

"I hardly think they'd let you bring back the Public Library," said the Saint. "I'm going to wade through everything they've got on the subject of voodoo. No, I'm not going to take it up like Netlord. But I'm just crazy enough myself to lie awake wondering what's in it for him."

He found plenty of material to study—so much, in fact, that instead of being frustrated by a paucity of information he was almost discouraged by its abundance. He had assumed, like any

average man, that voodoo was a primitive cult that would have a correspondingly simple theology and ritual: he soon discovered that it was astonishingly complex and formalized.

Obviously he wasn't going to master it all in one short day's study. However, that wasn't necessarily the objective. He didn't have to write a thesis on it, or even pass an examination. He was only looking for something, anything, that would give him a clue to what Theron Netlord was seeking.

He browsed through books until one o'clock, went out to lunch, and returned to read some more. The trouble was that he didn't know what he was looking for. All he could do was expose himself to as many ideas as possible, and hope that the same one would catch his attention as must have caught Netlord's.

And when the answer did strike him, it was so far-fetched and monstrous that he could not believe he was on the right track. He thought it would make an interesting plot for a story, but he could not accept it for himself. He felt an exasperating lack of accomplishment when the library closed for the day and he had to drive back up again to Kenscoff. But he refused to be depressed.

He headed straight for the bar of the Chatelet des Fleurs and the long relaxing drink that he had looked forward to all the way up. The waiter who was on duty brought him a note with it.

Dear Mr. Templar,

I'm sorry your visit yesterday had to be so short. If it wouldn't bore you too much, I should enjoy another meeting. Could you come to dinner tonight? Just send word by the bearer.

Sincerely,
Theron Netlord.

Simon glanced up. "Is someone still waiting for an answer?"

"Yes, sir. Outside."

The Saint pulled out his pen and scribbled at the foot of the note:

Thanks. I'll be with you about 7. S. T.

He decided, practically in the same instant in which the irresponsible impulse occurred to him, against signing himself with the little haloed stick figure which he had made famous. As he handed the note back to the waiter he reflected that, in the circumstances, his mere acceptance was bravado enough.

IV

There were drums beating somewhere in the hills, faint and far-off, calling and answering each other from different directions, their sound wandering and echoing through the night so that it was impossible ever to be cer-

tain just where a particular tattoo had come from. It reached inside Netlord's house as a kind of vague vibration, like the endless thin chorus of nocturnal insects, which was so persistent that the ear learned to filter it out and for long stretches would be quite deaf to it, and then, in a lull in the conversation, with an infinitesimal re-tuning of attention, it would come back in a startling crescendo.

Theron Netlord caught the Saint listening at one of those moments, and said: "They're having a *bruler zin* tonight."

"What's that?"

"The big voodoo festive ceremony which climaxes most of the special rites. Dancing, litanies, invocation, possession by *loas*, more dances, sacrifice, more invocations and possessions, more dancing. It won't begin until much later. Right now they're just telling each other about it, warming up and getting in the mood."

Simon had been there for more than an hour, and this was the first time there had been any mention of voodoo.

Netlord had made himself a good if somewhat overpowering host. He mixed excellent rum cocktails, but without offering his guest the choice of anything else. He made stimulating conversation, salted with recurrent gibes at bureaucratic government and the Welfare State, but he held the floor so energetically that it was almost impossible to take advantage of the provocative openings he offered.

Simon had not seen Sibao again. Netlord had opened the door himself, and the cocktail makings were already on a side table in the living room. There had been subdued rustlings and clinkings behind a screen that almost closed a dark alcove at the far end of the room, but no servant announced dinner. Presently Netlord had announced it himself, and led the way around the screen and switched on a light, revealing a damask-covered table set for two and burdened additionally with chafing dishes, from which he himself served rice, asparagus, and a savory chicken stew rather like *coq au vin*. It was during one of the dialogue breaks induced by eating that Netlord had caught Simon listening to the drums.

"*Bruler*—that means 'burn,' " said the Saint. "But what is *zin?*"

Netlord was quick to reply.

"The *zin* is a special earthenware pot. It stands on a tripod, and a fire is lighted under it. The *mambo* kills a sacrificial chicken by sticking her finger down into its mouth and tearing its throat open." Netlord took a hearty mouthful of stew. "She sprinkles blood and feathers in various places, and the plucked hens go into the pot with some corn. There's a chant:

Hounsis là yo, levez, nous
domi trope;
Hounsis là yo, levez, pour
mous laver yeux nous:
Gadé qui l'hue li yé.

Later on she serves the boiling food right into the bare hands of the *hounsis*. Sometimes they put their bare feet in the flames too. It doesn't hurt them. The pots are left on the fire till they get red hot and crack, and everyone shouts, *'Zin yo craqués!'* "

"It sounds like a big moment," said the Saint gravely. "If I could understand half of it."

"You mean you didn't get very far with your researches today?" Netlord asked.

Simon felt the involuntary contraction of his stomach muscles, but he was able to control his hands so that there was no check in the smooth flow of what he was doing.

"How did you know about my researches?" he asked, as if he were only amused to have them mentioned.

"I dropped in to see Atherton Lee this morning, and asked after you. He told me where you'd gone. He said he'd told you about my interest in voodoo, and he supposed you were getting primed for an argument. I must admit, that encouraged me to hope you'd accept my invitation tonight."

The Saint thought that that might well qualify among the great understatements of the decade, but he did not let himself show it. After their first reflex leap his pulses ran like cool clockwork.

"I didn't find out too much," he said, "except that voodoo is a lot more complicated than I imagined. I thought it was just a few primitive superstitions that the slaves brought with them from Africa."

"Of course, some of it came from Dahomey. But how did it get there? The voodoo story of the Creation ties up with the myths of ancient Egypt. The Basin of Damballah—that's a sort of font at the foot of a voodoo altar—is obviously related to the blood trough at the foot of a Mayan altar. Their magic uses the Pentacle—the same mystic figure that medieval European magicians believed in. If you know anything about it, you can find links with eighteenth-century Masonry in some of their rituals, and even the design of the *vêvers*—"

"Those are the sacred drawings that are supposed to summon the gods to take possession of their devotees, aren't they? I read about them."

"Yes, when the *houngan* draws them by dripping ashes and corn meal from his fingers, with the proper invocation. And doesn't that remind you of the sacred sand paintings of the Navajos? Do you see how all those roots must go back to a

common source that's older than any written history?"

Netlord stared at the Saint challengingly, in one of those rare pauses where he waited for an answer.

Simon's fingertips touched the hard shape of the little tin plaque that was still in his shirt pocket, but he decided against showing it, and again he checked the bet.

"I saw a drawing of the *vêver* of Erzulie in a book," he said. "Somehow, it made me think of Catholic symbols connected with the Virgin Mary—with the heart, the stars, and the 'M' over it."

"Why not? Voodoo is pantheistic. The Church is against voodoo, not voodoo against the Church. Part of the purification prescribed for anyone who's being initiated as a *hounsis-canzo* is to go to church and make confession. Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are regarded as powerful intermediaries to the highest gods. Part of the litany they'll chant tonight at the *bruler zin* goes: *Grâce, Marie, grâce, Marie grâce, grâce, Marie grâce, Jésus, pardonnez-nous!*"

"Seriously?"

"The invocation of Legbas Atibon calls on St. Anthony of Padua: *par pouvoir St-Antoine de Padoue*. And take the invocation of my own patron, Ogoun Feraille. It begins: *Par pouvoir St-Jacques Majeur. . . .*"

"Isn't that blasphemy?" said the Saint. "I mean, a kind of deliberate sacrilege, like they're supposed to use in a Black Mass, to win the favor of devils by defiling something holy?"

Netlord's fist crashed on the table like a thunder-clap.

"No, it isn't! The truth can't be blasphemous. Sacrilege is sin invented by bigots to try to keep God under contract to their own exclusive club. As if supernatural facts could be altered by human name-calling! There are a hundred sects all claiming to be the only true Christianity, and Christianity is only one of thousands of religions, all claiming to have the only genuine divine revelation. But the real truth is bigger than any one of them and includes them all!"

"I'm sorry," said the Saint. "I forgot that you were a convert."

"Lee told you that, of course. I don't deny it." The metallic gray eyes probed the Saint like knives. "I suppose you think I'm crazy."

"I'd rather say I was puzzled."

"Because you wouldn't expect a man like me to have any time for mysticism."

"Maybe."

Netlord poured some more wine.

"That's where you show your own limitations. The whole trouble with Western civilization is that it's blind in one eye. It doesn't believe in anything that can't be weighed and measured or reduced to a mathematical or

chemical formula. It thinks it knows all the answers because it invented airplanes and television and hydrogen bombs.

"It thinks other cultures were backward because they fooled around with levitation and telepathy and raising the dead instead of killing the living. Well, some mighty clever people were living in Asia and Africa and Central America, thousands of years before Europeans crawled out of their caves. What makes you so sure that they didn't discover things that you don't understand?"

"I'm not so sure, but—"

"Do you know why I got ahead of everybody else in business? Because I never wore a blinker over one eye. If anyone said he could do anything, I never said, 'That's impossible.' I said, 'Show me how.' I don't care who I learn from, a college professor or a ditch-digger, a Chinaman or a Negro—so long as I can use what he knows."

He nodded, refilling his glass.

The Saint finished eating and picked up his glass. "And you think you'll find something in voodoo that you can use?"

"I *have* found it. Do you know what it is?"

Simon waited to be told, but apparently it was not another of Netlord's rhetorical questions. When it was clear that a reply was expected, he said: "Why should I?"

"That's what you were trying to find out at the public library."

"I suppose I can admit that," Simon said mildly. "I'm a seeker for knowledge, too."

"I was afraid you would be, Templar, as soon as I heard your name. Not knowing who you were, I'd talked a little too much last night. It wouldn't have mattered with anyone else, but as the Saint you'd be curious about me. You'd have to ask questions. Lee would tell you about my interest in voodoo. Then you'd try to find out what I could use voodoo for. I knew all that when I asked you to come here tonight."

"And I knew you knew all that when I accepted."

"Put your cards on the table, then. What did your reading tell you?"

Simon felt unwontedly stupid. Perhaps because he had let Netlord do most of the talking, he must have done more than his own share of eating and drinking. Now it was an effort to keep up the verbal swordplay.

"Your reading—" Netlord prodded.

"It wasn't too much help," he said. "The mythology of voodoo was quite fascinating, but I couldn't see a guy like you getting a large charge out of spiritual trimmings. You'd want something that meant power, or money, or both. And the books I got hold of today didn't have much factual material about the darker

side of voodoo—the angles that I've seen played up in lurid fiction."

"Don't stop now."

The Saint felt as if he lifted a slender blade once more against a remorseless bludgeon.

"Of course," he said, and meant to say it lightly, "you might really have union and government trouble if it got out that Netlord Underwear was being made by American zombies."

"So you guessed it."

V

Simon Templar stared.

He had a sensation of utter unreality, as if at some point he had slipped from wakeful life into a nightmare without being aware of the moment when he fell asleep. A separate part of his brain seemed to hear his own voice at a distance.

"You really believe in zombies?"

"That isn't a matter of belief. I've seen them. A zombie prepared and served this dinner. That's why he was ordered not to let you see him."

"Now I really need the cliché: this I have got to see!"

"I'm afraid he's left for the night," Netlord said matter-of-factly.

"But you know how to make 'em?"

"Not yet. He belongs to the *houngan*. But I shall know before the sun comes up tomorrow. In a little while I shall go down to the *houmfort*, and the *houngan* will admit me to the last mysteries. The *bruler zin* afterwards is to celebrate that."

"Congratulations. What did you have to do to rate this?"

"I've promised to marry his daughter, Sibao."

Simon felt as if he had passed beyond the capacity for surprise. A soft blanket of cotton wool was folding around his mind. Yet the other part of him kept talking.

"Do you mean that?"

"Don't be absurd. As soon as I know all I need to, I can do without both of them."

"But suppose they resent that."

"Let me tell you something. Voodoo is a very practical kind of insurance. When a member is properly initiated, certain parts of a sacrifice and certain things from his body go into a little urn called the *pot de tête*, and after that the vulnerable element of his soul stays in the urn, which stays in the *houmfort*."

"Just like a safe deposit."

"And so, no one can lay an evil spell on him."

"Unless they can get hold of his *pot de tête*."

"So you see how easily I can destroy them if I act first."

The Saint moved his head as if to shake and clear it. It was like trying to shake a ton weight. "It's very good of you to tell me all this," he articulated mechanically.

"But what makes you so confidential?"

"I had to know how you'd respond to my idea when you knew it. Now you must tell me, truthfully."

"I think it stinks."

"Suppose you knew that I had creatures working for me, in a factory—zombies, who'd give me back all the money they'd nominally have to earn, except the bare minimum required for food and lodging. What would you do?"

"Report it to some authority that could stop you."

"That mightn't be so easy. A court that didn't believe in zombies couldn't stop people voluntarily giving me money."

"In that case," Simon answered deliberately, "I might just have to kill you."

Netlord sighed heavily. "I expected that too," he said. "I only wanted to be sure. That's why I took steps in advance to be able to control you."

The Saint had known it for some indefinite time. He was conscious of his body sitting in a chair, but it did not seem to belong to him.

"You devil," he said. "So you managed to feed me some kind of dope. But you're really crazy if you think that'll help you."

Theron Netlord put a hand in his coat pocket and took out a small automatic. He leveled it at the Saint's chest, resting his forearm on the table.

"It's very simple," he said calmly. "I could kill you now, and easily account for your disappearance. But I like the idea of having you work for me. As a zombie, you could retain many of your unusual abilities. So I could kill you, and, after I've learned a little more tonight, restore you to living death. But that would impair your usefulness in certain ways. So I'd rather apply what I know already, if I can, and make you my creature without harming you physically."

Netlord narrowed his eyes.

"That's certainly considerate of you," Simon scoffed.

He didn't know what unquenchable spark of defiance gave him the will to keep up the hopeless bluff. He seemed to have no contact with any muscles below his neck. But as long as he didn't try to move, and fail, Netlord couldn't be sure of that.

"The drug is only to relax you," Netlord said. "Now look at this."

He dipped his left hand in the ashtray beside him, and quickly began drawing a pattern with his fingertips on the white tablecloth —a design of criss-cross diagonal lines with other vertical lines rising through the diamonds they formed, the verticals tipped with stars and curlicues, more than anything like the picture of an ornate wrought-iron gate. And

as he drew it he intoned in a strange chanting voice.

"Par pouvoir St-Jacques Majeur, Ogoun Badgaris nèg Baguidi, Bago, Ogoun Feraille nèg fer, nèg feraille, nèg tagnifer nago, Ogoun batala, nèg, nèg Ossagne malor, ossangne aquiquan, Ossangne agouelingui, Jupiter tonnerre, nèg blabla, nèg oloncoun, nèg vanté-m pas fie'm. . . . Aocher nago, aocher nago, aocher nago!"

The voice had risen, ending on a kind of muted shout, and there was a blaze of fanatic excitement and something weirder than that in Netlord's dilated eyes.

Simon wanted to laugh. He said: "What's that—a sequel to the Hutsut Song?" Or he said: "I prefer *'Twas brillig and the slithy toves.'* " Or perhaps he said neither, for the thoughts and the ludicrousness and the laugh were suddenly chilled and empty, and it was like a hollowness and a darkness, like stepping into nothingness and a quicksand opening under his feet, sucking him down, only it was the mind that went down, the lines of the wrought-iron gate pattern shimmering and blinding before his eyes, and a black horror such as he had never known rising around him. . . .

Out of some untouched reserve of will-power he wrung the strength to clear his vision again for a moment, and to shape words that he knew came out, even though they came through stiff clumsy lips.

"Then I'll have to kill you right now," he said.

He tried to get up. He had to try now. He couldn't pretend any longer that he was immobile from choice. His limbs felt like lead. His body was encased in invisible concrete. The triumphant fascinated face of Theron Netlord blurred in his sight.

The commands of his brain went out along nerves that swallowed them in enveloping numbness. His mind was drowning in the swelling dreadful dark. He thought: "Sibao, your Maîtresse Erzulie must be the weak sister in this league."

And suddenly, he moved.

As if taut wires had snapped, he moved. He was on his feet. Uncertainly, like a thawing out, like a painful return of circulation, he felt connections with his body linking up again. He saw the exultation in Netlord's face crumple into rage and incredulous terror.

"Fooled you, didn't I?" said the Saint croakily. "You must still need some coaching on your hex technique."

Netlord moved his hand a little, rather carefully, and his knuckle whitened on the trigger of the automatic. The range was point-blank.

Simon's ear-drums rang with the shot, and something struck him a stunning blinding blow

over the heart. He had an impression of being hurled backwards as if by the blow of a giant fist; and then with no recollection of falling he knew that he was lying on the floor, half under the table, and he had no strength to move any more.

VI

Theron Netlord rose from his chair and looked down, shaken by the pounding of his own heart. He had done many brutal things in his life, but he had never killed anyone before. It had been surprisingly easy to do, and he had been quite deliberate about it. It was only afterwards that the shock shook him, with his first understanding of the new loneliness into which he had irrevocably stepped, the apartness from all other men that only murderers know.

Then a whisper and a stir of movement caught his eye and ear together, and he turned his head and saw Sibao. She wore the white dress and the white handkerchief on her head, and the necklaces of threaded seeds and grain, that were prescribed for what was to be done that night.

"What are you doing here?" he snarled in Creole. "I said I would meet you at the *houmfort.*"

"I felt there was need for me."

She knelt by the Saint, touching him with her sensitive hands. Netlord put the gun in his pocket and turned to the sideboard. He uncorked a bottle of rum, poured some into a glass, and drank.

Sibao stood before him again. "Why did you want to kill him?"

"He was—he was a bad man. A thief."

"He was good."

"No, he was clever." Netlord had had no time to prepare for questions. He was improvising wildly, aware of the hollowness of his invention and trying to bolster it with truculence. "He must have been waiting for a chance to meet you. If that had not happened, he would have found another way. He came to rob me."

"What could he steal?"

Netlord pulled out his wallet, and took from it a thick pad of currency. He showed it to her.

"He knew that I had this. He would have killed me for it." There were twenty-five crisp hundred-dollar bills, an incredible fortune by the standards of a Haitian peasant, but only the amount of pocket money that Netlord normally carried and would have felt undressed without. The girl's dark velvet eyes rested on it, and he was quick to see more possibilities. "It was a present I was going to give to you and your father tonight." Money was the strongest argument he had ever known. He went on with newfound confidence: "Here, take it now."

She held the money submis-

sively. "But what about—him?"

"We must not risk trouble with the police. Later we will take care of him, in our own way. . . . But we must go now, or we shall be late."

He took her compellingly by the arm, but for a moment she still held back.

"You know that when you enter the *sobagui* to be cleansed, your *loa,* who sees all things, will know if there is any untruth in your heart."

"I have nothing to fear." He was sure of it now. There was nothing in voodoo that scared him. It was simply a craft that he had set out to master, as he had mastered everything else that he made up his mind to. He would use it on others, but it could do nothing to him. "Come along, they are waiting for us."

Simon heard their voices before the last extinguishing wave of darkness rolled over him. . . .

He woke up with a start, feeling cramped and bruised from lying on the floor. Memory came back to him in full flood as he sat up. He looked down at his shirt. There was a black-rimmed hole in it, and even a gray scorch of powder around that. But when he examined his chest, there was no hole and no blood, only a pronounced soreness over the ribs. From his breast pocket he drew out the metal plaque with the *vêver* of Erzulie. The bullet had scarred and bent it, but it had struck at an angle and glanced off without even scratching him, tearing another hole in the shirt under his arm.

The Saint gazed at the twisted piece of tin with an uncanny tingle feathering his spine.

Sibao must have known he was unhurt when she touched him. Yet she seemed to have kept the knowledge to herself. Why?

He hoisted himself experimentally to his feet. He knew that he had first been drugged, then over that lowered resistance almost completely mesmerized; coming on top of that, the deadened impact of the bullet must have knocked him out, as a punch over the heart could knock out an already groggy boxer. But now all the effects seemed to have worn off together, leaving only a tender spot on his chest and an insignificant muzziness in his head. By his watch, he had been out for about two hours.

The house was full of the silence of emptiness. He went through a door to the kitchen, ran some water, and bathed his face. The only other sound there was the ticking of a cheap clock.

Netlord had said that only the two of them were in the house. And Netlord had gone—with Sibao.

Gone to something that everything in the Saint's philosophy must refuse to believe. But things had happened to himself already that night which he could only

think of incredulously. And incredulity would not alter them, or make them less true.

He went back through the living room and out on to the front veranda. Ridge beyond ridge, the mysterious hills fell away from before him under a full yellow moon that dimmed the stars; and there was no jeep in the driveway at his feet.

The drums still pulsed through the night, but they were no longer scattered. They were gathered together, blending in unison and counterpoint, but the acoustical tricks of the mountains still masked their location. Their muttering swelled and receded with chance shifts of air, and the echoes of it came from all around the horizon, so that the whole world seemed to throb softly with it.

There was plenty of light for him to walk down to the Chatelet des Fleurs.

He found Atherton Lee and the waiter starting to put out the lights in the bar. The innkeeper looked at him in a rather startled way.

"Why—what happened?" Lee asked.

Simon sat up at the counter and lighted a cigarette. "Pour me a Barbarncourt," he said defensively, "and tell me why you think anything happened."

"Netlord brought the jeep back. He told me he'd taken you to the airport—you'd had some news which made you suddenly decide to catch the night plane to Miami, and you just had time to make it. He was coming back tomorrow to pick up your things and send them after you."

"Oh, that," said the Saint blandly. "When the plane came through, it turned out to have filled up at Ciudad Trujillo. I couldn't get on. So I changed my mind again. I ran into someone downtown who gave me a lift back."

He couldn't say: "Netlord thought he'd just murdered me, and he was laying the foundation for me to disappear without being missed." Somehow, it sounded so ridiculous, even with a bullet hole in his shirt. And if he were pressed for details, he would have to say: "He was trying to put some kind of hex on me, or make me a zombie." That would be assured of a great reception.

And then the police would have to be brought in. Perhaps Haiti was the only country on earth where a policeman might feel obliged to listen seriously to such a story; but the police were still the police. And just at those times when most people automatically turn to the police, Simon Templar's instinct was to avoid them.

What would have to be settled now between him and Theron Netlord, he would settle himself, in his own way.

The waiter, closing windows and emptying ashtrays, was singing to himself under his breath:

"Moin pralé nan Sibao,
Chaché, chaché, loléo—"

"What's that?" Simon asked sharply.

"Just Haitian song, sir."

"What does it mean?"

"It mean, *I will go to Sibao*—that holy place in voodoo, sir. *I take oil for lamp,* it say. *If you eat food of Legba you will have to die:*

Si ou mangé mangé Legba,
Ti ga çon onà mouri, oui.
Moin pralé nan Sibao—"

"After spending an evening with Netlord, you should know all about that," Atherton Lee said.

Simon downed his drink and stretched out a yawn. "You're right. I've had enough of it for one night," he said. "I'd better let you go on closing up. I'm ready to hit the sack myself."

But he lay awake for a long time, stretched out on his bed in the moonlight. Was Theron Netlord merely insane, or was there even the most fantastic possibility that he might be able to make use of things that modern materialistic science did not understand?

Simon remembered that one of the books he had read referred to a certain American evangelist as *un houngan insuffisament instruit;* and it was a known fact that that man controlled property worth millions, and that his followers turned over all their earnings to him, for which he gave them only food, shelter, and sermons. Such things *had* happened, and were as unsatisfactory to explain away as flying saucers. . . .

The ceaseless mutter of the distant drums mocked him till he fell asleep.

"Si ou mangé mangé Legba,
Ti ga çon onà mouri, oui!"

He awoke and still heard the song. The moonlight had given way to the gray light of dawn, and the first thing he was conscious of was a fragile unfamiliar stillness left void because the drums were at last silent. But the voice went on—a flat, lifeless, distorted voice that was nevertheless recognizable in a way that sent icy filaments crawling over his scalp.

"Moin pralé nan Sibao,
Moin pralé nan Sibao,
Moin pralé nan Sibao,
Chaché, chaché, lolé-o. . . ."

His window overlooked the road that curved up past the inn, and he was there while the song still drifted up to it. The two of them stood directly beneath him—Netlord, and the slender black girl dressed all in white. The girl looked up and saw Simon, as if she had expected to. She raised one hand and solemnly made a pattern in the air, a shape that somehow blended the outlines of a heart and an ornate letter M, quickly and intricately, and her

lips moved with it: it was curiously like a benediction.

Then she turned to the man beside her, as she might have turned to a child and gently touched his hand.

"*Venez,*" she said.

The tycoon also looked up, before he obediently followed her. But there was no recognition, no expression at all, in the gray face that had once been so ruthless and domineering; and all at once Simon knew why Theron Netlord would be no problem to him or to anyone, any more.

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lady in shadow

by... Walt Sheldon

In Tokyo a shadow may sit cross-legged—in a dead man's kimono.

IT WAS NOT at all like Inspector Nikkiyama to be late, and so Master Sergeant Benjamin Harrison Johnson, Office of Special Investigation, fidgeted somewhat, scowling up and down the busy Tokyo thoroughfare called Yodobashi Avenue. With the sergeant was a young lady in quiet, neat dress: a smartly cut suit of blue gabardine with a frothing of crisp lace at the neck. She was dark-haired; her eyes were soft and large. There was restrained anxiety in them this afternoon, and her white-gloved hands worked in agitation upon a large blue leather handbag.

Ben Johnson said, "I know you must be impatient, Mona. As for me—I'm hungry. But let's give him three more minutes."

"All right," said Mona Kingsley.

They stood in front of a cottage-like building that had little banners with Japanese characters on them hanging over its entrance. A small sign in English

Walt Sheldon lives in Nippon, a half hour out of Tokyo. He is married to a beautiful Japanese girl and believes that post-war Japan is a restful haven for a writer. To hear him praise the rose-petaled serenity of the landscape you'd almost think that he is not himself a man of violence. We mean, of course, violence in a literary sense, with mystery trading punches with gusty adventure as in this, his newest story.

said: BEARDED TEMPURA—TOKYO'S BEST. ALSO AMERICAN HOT DOG.

All around there were other restaurants and shops, and a few private dwellings. There were trolley tracks in the street. Autos of various makes and nationalities passed by, along with an occasional three-wheeled bicycle rickshaw. Directly across the street a large group of Japanese school children, the boys in black uniforms and peaked caps, the girls in middy blouses, were clustered around a bulky and garishly decorated cart.

A candle and translucent silk screen had been rigged atop this cart, and a wrinkled old man in a white beard and gaudy kimono was making shadow pictures with hands and tiny puppet heads upon the screen.

Ben could hear him take the puppets' roles in rapidly changing voices, ranging from a squeaky falsetto to a thundering bass. The children were all thoroughly spellbound.

"Well," Ben finally said to the young woman, "let's go inside and order. Nikki will find us if and when he gets here."

In the *tempura* restaurant they sat at a counter, received warm towels and small cups of green tea and ordered the golden fried shrimp with the dripping batter called "the beard" that constituted this justly famous Japanese dish.

"It's probably just as well Inspector Nikkiyama didn't come," Mona Kingsley said. "The less people who know about this—well, what I mean is, I know I can trust *you,* Ben."

"You can trust Nikki, too." Ben Johnson blew upon his hot smoky tea to cool it. "He's a terrific guy, Mona. He's one of the last practitioners of the art of *ninjitsu* in Japan. That, by the way, is the complete science of spying, originally worked out by the old *samurai,* who were always fighting wars with each other. People who study *ninjitsu* are trained from early childhood in all kinds of things: judo, underwater swimming, disguises, woodcraft, mountaineering, secret communication—I can't even remember half of them."

"Yes." She spoke absent-mindedly.

It was clear to Ben she wasn't listening closely. He could hardly blame her. He knew her trouble, and it was no small one.

He shifted a little uncomfortably on the stool. He was big for the stool, as he was for all Japanese furniture. He was a big, tough man with a mashed nose and scarred brows and a soft voice he seldom raised. He had been a cop on a beat, then a detective in an American West Coast city before he had decided to make a career as a military investigator.

"Mona, maybe you better tell

me the rest of this thing pretty quick now," he said.

"All right, Ben." She seemed to hold back a shudder. She stared straight ahead, over her cup of tea, as she began. "I told you over the phone it had to do with Larry. And, as you sensed quickly, I couldn't give you the details over the phone. I didn't know who might overhear them. I was immensely relieved, Ben, when you suggested we meet at this little restaurant and talk it over."

She hesitated now, and Ben said, "Is it something to do with Larry's—well, his record?"

"That's just it. I'm not sure."

Ben said, "Go ahead, Mona. Tell it."

Some time ago Ben had accidentally come across Air Force Sergeant Larry Kingsley and his wife, Mona, here in Tokyo. It had rather surprised Ben, because a number of years ago, in California, he had hauled Larry Kingsley in for house burglary, PC 459. It was a first offense, and he'd known right away Kingsley wasn't a hardened professional. He'd interested himself in the case, helped the boy get a relatively light sentence, later arranged a job for Mrs. Kingsley while Larry served his time.

Upon finding Larry now an Air Force noncom in Tokyo he'd learned Larry had done well in the service and so far managed to conceal that he'd once served time. Larry had meant to tell about it when he enlisted, then couldn't bring himself to do it.

Somehow the fingerprint check hadn't uncovered the fact. Ben knew this could easily happen through administrative error in an undertaking as vast and complicated as military screening. He urged Kingsley to correct his own record, even if it meant losing his stripes. At the same time he assured him that he, Ben, would never give away the secret.

Mona Kingsley, in her phone call this morning, had hinted that Larry hadn't been home for a couple of nights. Ben had made the appointment to meet her. Then, on an impulse, he'd sent a messenger to Nikkiyama, who had been designated by the Japanese government to cooperate with the U. S. Army's Office of Special Investigation. Ben had been working with Nikki so closely that a case hardly seemed a case without him. Even an unofficial one, like this.

"Last Monday," said Mona Kingsley softly, "Larry got a two week leave. We were going to Kyoto to see the cherry blossom festival. He didn't show up that night. I wanted to call his office —but you know how we've been afraid of drawing attention on ourselves. The least little trouble might bring out Larry's record. He'd lose his stripes, but more

than that, as a Basic Airman he wouldn't be allowed dependents in Japan. I'd have to go home, be separated from Larry. I couldn't stand that, and Larry couldn't either. Then there's little Dicky—"

Her eyes were becoming moist and her underlip was starting to tremble. Ben put a hand on her arm, smiled, and said, "Take it easy, Mona." He spoke quietly to keep her from raising her own voice with her gathering emotion. The stools beside them were all occupied with customers now. The old shadow puppeteer in the gaudy kimono had entered unobtrusively, taken the stool beside them and ordered fried ginger and tea.

"So I waited till next day," said Mona. "I decided if he still didn't show up I'd *have* to report it. I was just about to call his office when a ragged little messenger boy came to the front door and handed me an envelope. It reeked of perfume, and so did the slip of paper inside it. It was a message from Larry."

"You have it with you?"

"Yes." She turned, took her handbag from the counter, and opened it. She fumbled for a moment, frowned, then raised her head suddenly and deepened her frown. "Ben—I was sure I put it here when I left!"

The shadow puppeteer beside Mona cleared his throat. They both looked at him. He was grinning. Ben suddenly began to detect familiar features under the wrinkles, grime and beard.

"*Gomen-nasai*—excuse me!" the man said to Mona. "You are looking for this, neh?" He held up a small envelope.

"Nikki!" said Ben. "What's the big idea?"

Mona Kingsley, in complete bewilderment, and in staring silence, took the envelope.

Inspector Geichi Nikkiyama was a tiny man with an owlish grin that showed two aluminum teeth in front. Ben was aware that now, with the revelation of his identity, he dropped the very manner of his disguise—the entire set of his head, body and shoulders changed, and he became obviously Nikki again, even in that gaudy kimono.

"Please forgiving, Ben-san," Nikki said. "Is precaution, neh? When I getting typewriter note from you, not sure is bona fide and truly. Having many enemies in great criminal fraternity of Tokyo. Maybe is mousetrap, so being careful. That is reason for disguise."

Ben grinned back. "Don't kid me, you slope-eyed Sherlock. You did it for the fun of it, too. Practicing that crazy *ninjitsu* of yours. And I wouldn't be surprised if that isn't why you swiped the note out of Mrs. Kingsley's handbag—just to keep your fingers nimble."

"Ah, so," Nikki admitted cheerfully, and bowed.

"Nikki," said Ben, becoming serious then, "I really think Mona and I can use your help now."

Nikki held up his hand. "Excuse. Overhearing story. Most interesting. Now must knowing what says note from young husband. I can read, please?"

"Give it to him, Mona," said Ben.

The girl handed the message over. Nikki scowled at it for a moment, then gave it to Ben. Ben read silently:

Mona, my darling:

I write this with my heart sick, and my head so mixed-up I think maybe I'm going crazy. I can't see you again, darling. I can't explain, I know you'll be hurt, and I know you must hate me for it. I'm deserting, Mona—it's the only thing I can do. Nobody will ever hear of me again. I'm forced to do this and it's the only course. YOU MUST DESTROY THIS NOTE, TELL NO ONE, IF YOU WANT ME TO LIVE. Maybe some day we'll meet again and I can tell you everything. My life is ruined now. Kiss Dicky for me, and to you, my darling, my deepest, saddest love.

Larry.

Ben assumed a very stern expression and sniffed as if with a cold, though it was autumn and quite warm. Nikki looked blankly at Mrs. Kingsley and said, "Is true handwriting of husband?"

"I'd know it anywhere."

"And you saying little messenger-chyan bring this?"

She nodded. "That's why I feel he must still be somewhere in Tokyo or near it. He didn't have time to go very far, then send a messenger."

"Ah, so," said Nikki. "This young lady have smart head, neh? I thinking she is right. Please observe paper of message."

Ben observed the paper. It was thin, cut in a narrow strip, and edged in speckled gold ink. "What about it, Nikki?"

"I making study one time, Japanese paper. Still in Japan many paper is hand made. Very small place making—only one or two man sometimes. Is not big quantity. So can knowing many times where is coming certain piece of paper."

"Can you identify this one?"

"*Hai.*" Nikki nodded. "This is prayer paper sold only at Meiji Shrine. I see many times there. Have little shop, you buy this paper, write prayer, and drop in box." He smiled a little. "Also better drop ten yen, or maybe prayer not working."

Ben said, "But anybody can buy that paper, can't they?"

"Ah, so. Just the same, we better looking, neh? Most people going shrine near home. Maybe we finding who is buy this paper.

Please observe with nose individual smell of perfume."

Mona said, "Inspector, it's that perfume I don't understand. I—I've never known Larry to be interested in other women before."

"Please not worrying, lady. Maybe perfume smell is best help we have for whole business."

In the interest of economy Ben and Nikki took the Tokyo electric train to Yoyogi Station, from where they could walk easily to Meiji Shrine. This railroad, sometimes underground, runs in a great loop around central Tokyo, so that nearly any point in the city can be reached by it. Nikki had returned to his small office just south of the Emperor's moat to remove his disguise, and to don his usual costume of an ill-fitting black coat and high, starched collar.

He carried a tightly rolled umbrella, though the sun was fiercely shining. It was about mid-afternoon when they started the short walk from the small Yoyogi shopping district toward the park and shrine.

"*Ano-ne,* Ben-san," Nikki said. "Hoping this case not taking too much time. I am being very busy this week."

"Crime wave, Nikki?"

"Maybe you can calling that. We have six, maybe seven gun holdup last month. American style. Bandit going away in fast car. But wearing mask on face—nobody can see face. Only is flowers taking most time."

"Flowers? What have they got to do with the bandits?"

"Not bandit flower. My own. Ueno Park Exhibit for flower arranging pretty soon. I must making entry to win first prize. Hoping this."

"Oh, that." Ben shook his head and grinned. Inspector Nikkiyama considered himself an expert on flower arranging first and a detective last. He had learned this early in his association with the incredible oriental policeman.

"Just the same, Nikki," Ben said. "You can't drop this case on me. We can't let that Mrs. Kingsley down. She's a fine girl. Her kid, Dicky—wonderful kid. And Larry himself. Swell guy. I just can't understand it about Larry. Seems crazy he'd go off and desert now, of all things, just when he's really solid on his feet again."

"When case is most crazy," said Nikki mildly, "is most easy to solve."

"Don't tell me you've figured out this one already."

"Ah, no—not one hundred percent. But have some ideas."

"What are they?"

"Telling you later," said Nikki grinning. "Then if I am wrong, you never finding out."

They reached Meiji Shrine in something under fifteen minutes. It was a huge compound, the size

of a city block, with four ornate teakwood gates at the cardinal points. Within the compound were the entrances to the monks' quarters, tiny stalls that sold prayer paper, and the shrine itself in a long building, open at one end, reached by a flight of about a dozen stone steps.

There was an altar arrangement in the shrine, and a long trough-like box at the open end of the shed. Several worshippers, having washed hands and lips at the tiny spring outside, were already clasping their hands and bowing before this trough, tossing prayers and money into it.

Nikki went directly across the compound to one of the paper stalls. A blind Japanese in a dark blue *yukata,* or summer kimono, was in the stall. Nikki talked with him in Japanese at great length, and at one point handed him the note Mona Kingsley had received. The blind man sniffed it, handed it back, chattered for a while.

Finally Nikki took Ben's arm. "Iki-mashō—let's go," he said.

"Find out anything?"

"He know this perfume, neh? Smell many times when young woman buy paper for prayer. Other man who have eyes tell this man she is very beautiful Japanese girl. Sometimes wear kimono, sometimes wear modern dress."

"What'll we do, stake-out here till we spot her?"

"Oh, no—taking too much time. We better go Police Box in Yoyogi. Here sometimes they are knowing everybody in neighborhood."

Ben and Nikki walked back to the shopping district, and there were two small, efficient looking policemen in the box, a kind of windowed hut situated on a strategic corner, and containing a table, telephone, and maps on the wall. Ben was amazed, as always, that they didn't appear to be at all uncomfortably hot in their black wool uniforms.

Inspector Nikkiyama showed his identification and chattered with them for a while. When he'd finished he turned to Ben and said, "They knowing maybe where this woman live. Name is Kazuko Naira. They want to go, but I think better maybe just two of us, neh? Not looking so much like police."

They walked on again, this time through a succession of streets that grew progressively narrower and muddier. Nikki paused every once in a while to examine the small painted wooden signs on house fronts, fences and alley corners. Ben knew that he was having the usual difficulty finding his way, for Japanese directions are always vague. Streets are not named, except main thoroughfares since the American occupation, and houses are

located by *cho* and *chome,* roughly: areas and blocks.

Presently, however, Nikki paused before a small bungalow surrounded by a head-high fence of split bamboo. There was a tiny garden within the fence and Ben could see the tops of bamboo and pear trees. He could hear, through the thin walls, the sound of a blaring radio. A woman with a strident voice was singing *Straighten Up and Fly Right,* the words in Japanese.

Nikki moved quietly to the other side of the house, and then beckoned. Ben came abreast and saw, next to a rear entrance, a small open shed. A small English Morris sedan was parked in it.

"Okay, Nikki," said Ben, whispering, though with that blaring radio no one within ten feet could have heard him. "What now?"

"Kazuko Nairi is name on door of this house," said Nikki. "Now I making personal appearance. And you have opportunity for observing."

He took Ben back to the front of the house again, then around to the side. He examined the bamboo wall for a while, and presently found what apparently he had been looking for—a crack in the bamboo through which Ben could see the whole of the garden inside. The sun, a little behind their backs, streamed into this garden, filling it with the soft, unreal light of autumn afternoon.

Nikki whispered a few more hasty instructions, and then, before Ben's eyes, he changed his stance, the cast of his shoulders, and the expression on his face. He looked suddenly not at all like an Inspector of Police, but a mousy, apologetic and faintly seedy little man. It was an astounding transformation, considering that neither costume nor make-up was involved.

Ben grinned at him. "Who are you supposed to be now?"

"Ah, how do you do, sir!" said Nikki. "I am Yagumo Takata, representing Rising Sun Insurance Company. You liking to buy policy?"

Ben found it difficult not to laugh aloud. He watched Nikki —or Takatasan, the insurance salesman—scuttle around to the front gate. He heard him rap and call out in the sing-song voice the Japanese use for formal remarks.

He watched through the bamboo.

Presently one of the several paper doors fronting the garden slid open. These Japanese doors of tissue on cross-hatched wooden frames always amazed Ben with their insulating properties. Although they were decidedly thin and translucent he had noticed that they kept out both heat and cold more successfully than doors of glass.

But now, abruptly, he raised his eyebrows—and almost whistled in the way of a wolf, stopping himself just in time. An extraordinarily beautiful Japanese girl came out of the house, slipped her bare feet into wooden clogs, and shuffled to the gate. She was dressed in western style, with a short skirt and a yellow silk off-the-shoulder blouse. She wore rather large, barbaric gold earrings, and with her thick, tumbling black hair she looked not unlike a gypsy waif—Ben recalled the time he'd seen and enjoyed a production of Carmen in Los Angeles.

But the girl, for all her exciting appearance, was not the most interesting of all the sights he now beheld.

She had left the sliding paper door partly open behind her. Ben could see some of the room's interior where the sun poured in. Two occidental men in slacks and sports shirts were sitting cross-legged at a *chabu-dai,* or low Japanese table. One of them wore a holstered pistol just below his armpit.

As Ben watched the man without a pistol—lean, sharp featured and with blond hair barbered too long—leaned over and turned down the little radio that was on the floor. The girl was already at the front gate chattering in Japanese with Nikki, in his role as insurance salesman. The open room was no more than fifteen feet from where Ben stood, and now he could hear the blond man as he spoke to the other.

"Listen, Pierre," he said, in a flat, midwestern English, "that there's the third guy came around for something today. I don't like this joint. Too close in. We got to find a quieter place."

"But this is ver-ee convenient. And I do not think there is danger." The one called Pierre had a French accent. He was dark, stocky and with a brow like the overhang of a wooded cliff.

The other said, "Yeah. That's what you always say. No danger. What do you know about it, anyway?"

"Elmer, my friend," said Pierre, "in Montreal I was considered a most excellent thief."

"Montreal," snorted Elmer. "Small potatoes."

"These jobs I have plan'," asked Pierre mildly, "they are small potatoes?"

"They're okay. But some of your ideas are sure screwy. What are we gonna do with Larry, for instance? *That* was your idea."

"*You* told me about him, my friend."

"But it was your idea. And now we're stuck with him."

Pierre shrugged. "We must get rid of him, then. As soon as we find a way."

"Meantime, he's right in there—" Elmer pointed toward

the next room—"for anybody who comes snoopin' around here to find." With an air of disgust, then, he picked up the Kirin beer bottle on the table and swigged from it. By this time the girl had finished talking with Nikki at the gate, and she was returning. Pierre reached and turned the radio up again.

In a moment Nikki was once more by Ben's side. "Step back a little," Ben whispered. "Council of war." They retired a few dozen yards. Ben said, "Listen, Nikki, Larry's in that house. Prisoner, I'll bet. But more than that, there are two other guys in there and I've got a hunch who they are."

"Deserters, neh?"

Ben's eyebrows rose. "How'd you know?"

"I put four and four together, and achieving forty-four," said Nikki, with some pride. "From what we hearing of this Larry, and from the note he is writing, he is not deserting by own will, neh? Is one thing can make him do this. Somebody coming to say, '*Ano-ne,* kiddo, you doing something for us, or we telling how you are in jail one time.' So. What kind person saying this? Only somebody else, he is deserter, and he is doing criminal thing in Tokyo. Why he wants Larry-san? Because he is needing help for criminal activity. Simple, neh?"

"Now that I know it, yeah. But I think I can confirm it, Nikki." He told the Japanese detective about the two men he had overheard. "The one called Elmer, I'm not sure about him, though I'll bet we find a record of his desertion when we go through the files. The other one —Pierre—the Canadian Army sent us an A.P.B. on him only a couple of months ago. Remember it distinctly. They'd found he had a record for armed robbery, only he was gone by that time."

"Automobile in recent Tokyo robberies," mused Nikki, "is same as one we see in garage."

"It all adds up then—except maybe one thing. They've got Larry a prisoner in there. If he meant it, when he wrote that note—if he was taking part in these robberies—well, maybe we better just find out what the score is."

"Interesting problem," said Nikki. "Thinking now of your report that one man has firearm in possession."

"I was thinking of the same thing." Ben frowned and scratched his large jaw. He was not ordinarily required to be armed in his investigative work for the O.S.I.; Nikki habitually never carried weapons. "I guess we could go back to the police box and get those two eager beavers of yours."

"Taking time," said Nikki. "Worrying for Larry-san—may-

be they find some way to killing him in this time. He is white elephant for them, neh?"

"There's a back entrance to the house," said Ben thoughtfully. "If somebody could attract their attention in front, while I went around the back—"

"I have idea," said Nikki. He began to outline it.

Some minutes later Inspector Geichi Nikkiyama of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police slipped silently and carefully over the top of a bamboo fence and dropped into a small garden. He then gained almost immediately the partial concealment of a pear tree.

As he was doing this Master Sergeant Benjamin Harrison Johnson, O.S.I., was at the rear of this house with one mighty shoulder poised a few inches from a flimsy door. Ben was waiting for the sound of a shot. That would be his signal to break through the door. That is, if Nikki's operation went according to plan, it would be the signal. If Nikki's operation did not go according to plan, it was anybody's guess what might—or might not—happen.

The radio in the small house was still going full blast. The young lady who had been giving tuneful flying instructions in Japanese was no longer in evidence, and another young lady, of more traditional attainments, was singing mournfully to the accompaniment of a samisen, covering not only all the black and white keys within her range, but the cracks between them as well. Ben, at the back door, could hear the occasional murmur of voices, but he could make out no words.

In the garden Inspector Nikkiyama now examined very carefully the angle of the sun's rays. Experimentally he lifted his hand, and observed where its shadow fell, near the bank of sliding paper doors that made up most of the south wall of the bungalow. While he was doing this a man's voice rose in obvious petulance within the house, and called out in English, "Pierre! Get your dame to turn off that wailin' music! It gives me the creeps!"

Pierre shouted something back, but it was not intelligible.

Nikki now busied himself arranging several stalks of thin bamboo into a kind of pyramid almost as tall as himself. He undid his shoe laces and lashed them together with these. Now he removed the gray felt that he always wore perfectly level upon his head and placed it on the narrow stack. He shucked his dark jacket and affixed that under the hat.

He placed the whole device just beyond the shade of the pear tree so that it cast a man-sized shadow fully upon the paper doors. He dropped prone, reach-

ed out with one hand and began to move this dummy shape in a decidedly realistic manner. The shadow on the paper doors was almost a replica of a human shape—in fact, it looked remarkably like the shadow Nikki himself might have cast.

Nikki now called out as loud as he could, "This is arrest! Making surrender!"

There was a pulsebeat of hesitation, a mere drop of silence—and after that three pistol shots came in rapid succession from within the house. The bullets ripped through the translucent tissue, putting holes in the shadow. Some of them struck Nikki's coat where it hung on the bamboo, tugging at the loose cloth viciously.

In the rear of the house Ben Johnson slammed through the flimsy door at the sound of the first shot. He needed only a quick glance to take in every object in the room he now precipitately entered. The stocky Pierre was crouched, backing away from the paper doors, firing with his pistol, and scarcely five feet away from Ben.

The woman, Kazuko, was flattened in terror to the wall on his right. Another sliding door opened to a second room on his left, and the one called Elmer was kneeling by an apparently unconscious man on the floor. Elmer had turned a startled white face toward the commotion.

Ben took care of Pierre first. This called for a quick leap, a kick and a twist, and an agile scooping of the fallen pistol from the matted floor. Elmer had been rushing toward Ben, but when he saw Ben in possession of the weapon he stopped short.

It was perhaps ten seconds later that both men faced Ben with their hands shoulder high. Where she stood against the wall Kazuko began to sob.

"Okay, Nikki—come on in!" called Ben.

Nikki slid a door back and stepped into the room. He looked at everything for a moment, then said, "Ah, so! What General-san call surprise attack, neh?"

"Yeah. And nobody's more surprised than I am," said Ben. He handed the pistol to Nikki. "Cover these creeps a minute, will you, Inspector?" He stepped into the other room. He bent over the prostrate figure there. "Larry! Larry, are you all right? It's Ben Johnson, Larry!"

Air Force Sergeant Larry Kingsley groaned, and opened his eyes with some difficulty. He blinked at Ben. Then he managed to smile stiffly. "Hello, copper. Glad—glad to see you." He breathed heavily, but managed to talk a little more. "They filled me full of some kind of dope. Something the dame got for them. How—how'd you get here?"

"Partly by something called

ninjitsu," said Ben, "but we'll take that up later. Right now I've got a couple of two-bit hoods to run in."

Larry Kingsley nodded dreamily and closed his eyes again. . . .

* * *

At the bearded *tempura* restaurant on Yodobashi Avenue Inspector Nikkiyama was late again. Ben, with Sergeant and Mrs. Larry Kingsley arrived in a wood burning taxi whose furnace flamed and snorted where the baggage compartment should have been. Across the street an old man in a gaudy kimono was giving a shadow play for a group of gaping urchins, and when Ben saw the old man he compressed his lips significantly, and turned to Mona and Larry.

"Nikki's playing tricks again," he said. "Just a minute." He started to cross the street.

It was something of a celebration this evening; it was Larry's treat. It was the first time he'd been able to get away and relax in several days, because there had been considerable activity in connection with the booking of two military deserters, one from the American, one from the Canadian Army. Kingsley had undergone innumerable interviews, signed endless depositions. A dozen other people had given testimony, too, and now it had been well established that the two deserters were indeed the masked bandits who had been eluding the Tokyo Metropolitan Police for some time.

Larry had already explained to Ben how he'd become involved with them. "You see," he'd said, "this Elmer knew about my serving time—he was in the pen when I was. He had plans to spread out, and he needed somebody with him. He threatened to expose my record if I didn't do it. These negotiations went on for a couple of weeks, and I guess I was temporarily crazy or something to agree to go in with him at first. The only way I can explain it is to say I was so scared I couldn't think straight.

"So I wrote that note to Mona, and went out to where Pierre and his girl friend lived, that cottage. Then I guess I came to my senses. I told 'em I'd have no part of it. Next thing I knew they filled me full of dope, and every once in a while when I'd sort of wake up I'd hear them trying to figure out how they'd get rid of the body as soon as they knocked me off."

Ben Johnson was thinking of this as he crossed the street now toward the old puppeteer. Ben was not much of a philosopher, but he couldn't help reflecting how much better it would have been if Larry hadn't tried to conceal his past like that in the first place. And then he reflected that all was well as long as it ended well, because Larry's C.O., learning everything, had decided to

arrange a waiver. Good sergeants, he'd said, were too rare to lose just account of some regulation.

Ben walked up to the old puppeteer, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "All right, Nikki—let's stop playing games. You'll do anything to keep in practice, won't you?"

The puppeteer turned a startled face, stared at Ben. Almost immediately Ben saw that it wasn't, that it couldn't possibly be Nikki.

He whirled, looked back across the street where Larry and Mona were still standing in front of the restaurant. Nikki was with them, and he was grinning at Ben. Nikki wore a greasy golf cap and a spotted cloth raincoat. Ben remembered suddenly that the taxi driver who had brought them here had been dressed like that.

A genius in disguise!

Ben bowed to the puppeteer, said, *"Gomen-nasai* — excuse me!", then turned and crossed the street, slowly shaking his head and sighing, to join once more the incredible Inspector Geichi Nikkiyama.

The famous short story—by one of the world's most gifted writers—from which the motion picture was made

THE FALLEN IDOL

By GRAHAM GREENE

The famed creator of Jim Hanvey has a wonderful gift for new surprises and you'll find it in this new yarn

SWEET MUSIC AND MURDER

By OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

In the next SAINT

---

two were missing

by . . . Hugh Pentecost

Wealth and beauty jostled elbows at the National Horse Show. But between the daring mounts murder pealed, erupting into thunder.

THERE WAS A ROAR of almost deafening applause from the crowd that jammed Madison Square Garden to capacity for the last night of the National Horse Show. The Open Jumping Championship was under way. One by one, the riders took their horses around the difficult, criss-cross course, risking dangerous spills at rail fence and brick wall, triple bars, and chicken coop, in-and-out, and hedge, guarded by water beyond.

"Miss Patricia Prayne, Number Seventy-one, riding Tangerine," droned the announcer.

A young man standing in one of the entries to the arena forgot his cigarette as his blue eyes fastened on the attractive blonde girl who was bringing a tall chestnut gelding through the In Gate.

Tangerine was amazingly quiet. The girl walked him toward the first jump, let him look at it, and then wheeled abruptly back to the starting point. Tangerine broke into an easy lope, and the ride was on. The gelding sailed over the five-barred gate

For two decades Hugh Pentecost has won a continuously increasing and richly deserved fame for his unforgettable stories of criminals so resourceful and deadly they seem always to live—and die—in the shadow of a gallows erected for them alone. But seldom has he written a more chillingly suspenseful crime novel than this, in a setting so ingenious.

without effort, his sleekly groomed neck outthrust.

Around he went with the sure ease of a thoroughbred, over brick wall and triple bar. As he approached the tricky in-and-out, the crowd held its breath. Straight across the diagonal he came, toward the water jump at which a dozen competitors had already balked. His ears pricked forward, but he didn't hesitate. He cleared the jump easily by a good three feet.

Two more to go—brush and chicken coop. The slightest nick, and the coop would topple.

Now the brush was behind the chestnut. His pace increased as he rushed at the red-painted obstacle. Up . . . up! For an instant the obstacle seemed to rise with him. Then a flick of polished hind hoofs, and he was clear.

The rafters shook. It was a faultless performance, the first of the evening.

The young man in the entryway took a handkerchief from his hip pocket and mopped his brow. When he turned away he was confronted by an admiring and excited young couple.

"Hi, Johnny Curtin! That Prayne girl can certainly ride."

"She's okay," said Johnny.

The man grinned. "You used to go for her, didn't you, Johnny—before you started running around with her sister Gloria?"

A muscle rippled along the line of Johnny Curtin's jaw. "Listen," he said angrily: "why don't you—?" He checked himself, pushed past them, and headed for the bar.

"Scotch and soda," he muttered. His fingers had just closed over the glass when a familiar figure came up beside him.

"Hello, Guy," Johnny said, a look of relief coming into his eyes.

"Nice ride of Pat's," said Guy Severied. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with blond hair, which curled. Any reporter could have rattled off that he was forty years old, had one of the largest private fortunes in America and was still unmarried, despite persistent major campaigns by the mothers of ten seasons of debutantes.

"No news, I suppose," said Johnny.

Guy Severied's face clouded. "Not a whisper. I've been every place Gloria would be likely to go. No one has seen her since Wednesday night, when you took her to El Coronado."

"Did you know that Gloria lost her temper and left me flat?"

"She's an expert at picking a quarrel over nothing at all," said Severied. "But three days is a long time to sulk."

Johnny looked at him. "You know, Guy, I've been expecting you to put the slug on me. You're as good as engaged to Gloria. Then I barge in, and—

well, if I had been you . . ." He stopped.

Severied said slowly, "Gloria's an amazing creature. She's turned cooler heads than yours, Johnny. But Pat is quite something, too." Severied's tone was dry. "If I were Pat I would send you packing."

"Guy!" Johnny said. "You think there's a chance she might . . ."

"What she sees in you, Johnny, I don't know. But of course there's a chance."

"Gangway!" said Johnny Curtin.

"Mr. Curtin!" the bartender called after him. "Your drink!"

"It's all right," said Guy Severied. "The drinks are on me."

Johnny, unheeding, pushed through the crowd heading for the basement.

During the week of the National the Garden basement takes on all the color and trappings of an equestrian carnival. Rows upon rows of box stalls, knee-deep in straw, house the most expensive horses that money and breeding can produce. From morning till night the place swarms with horsemen, professional and otherwise.

Into this maelstrom moved Johnny Curtin. He saw his objective, the Prayne Stables. He also saw Pat going toward the dressing-room, and quickly blocked her path.

Eagerness swept Pat's face. "Johnny, you've found Gloria?"

He shook his head. "Gloria can take care of herself. I'm the one who needs a guardian, Pat! I've got to talk to you."

"Johnny, please! There isn't any use . . . Oh, darn it, I suppose if you must you must!" The color was rising in her cheeks. "I'll be driving home alone. You'd better meet me outside the exhibitors' entrance about one o'clock."

"I'll be there," Johnny promised.

And he was—waiting patiently on the sidewalk beside the Prayne's convertible.

It was several minutes past one when Pat appeared, loaded down with two coats, a large silver trophy and a suitcase.

"Be an angel, Johnny," she said, "and put these things in the rumble. I've still got to see Mike." She turned back into the building, pausing an instant to call out, "I won't be long!"

Johnny unlocked the rumble seat, and stood poised on the rear fender for perhaps thirty seconds. Then he slammed the rumble shut and began rapidly piling Pat's stuff into the front of the car. When he had finished he crossed the pavement toward a uniformed policeman.

"Do you know Miss Prayne by sight?" he asked.

"The girl who was just talking to you? Sure."

"Look. Tell her—tell her I couldn't wait." Johnny fumbled in his pocket and took out a bill. "Give her this, and make sure she takes a taxi home."

"Maybe she won't like being stood up," the policeman said.

"Maybe she won't," Johnny said. He went to the far side of the car, jumped in, and drove off toward Ninth Avenue.

II

Inspector Luke Bradley, of the Homicide Division, thrashed restlessly on his bed, and at last opened his eyes. Someone was pounding at the door of his apartment.

Bradley grimaced angrily, and glanced at his wrist watch. Quarter past two! He donned his slippers and dressing gown, and, still grimacing, ambled to the door.

"Hold it!" he said plaintively. "You'll have the house down!" He unfastened the safety chain as he spoke and swung back the door.

Confronting the inspector was an old gentleman, wearing an incredibly high-crowned derby and a long, black overcoat with an astrakhan collar. From the left-hand pocket of the coat a black metal ear trumpet protruded.

"Good evening, Mr. Julius," said Bradley. His mild gray eyes were amused. He looked at Mr. Julius's companion.

"This young fool's name is Curtin . . . Johnny Curtin," said Mr. Julius. "I've known him for a long time. He's discovered a nasty piece of work, and he came to me for advice. It seems he knew I helped you out occasionally. We want to ask you a question."

"Better ask it inside," said Bradley.

Mr. Julius put his hat, umbrella, and ear trumpet on the table, and pre-empted the center of the couch. Johnny Curtin waited by the fireplace looking at Bradley.

"Well?" said Bradley to the old man.

"What's that?" The ear trumpet jutted in Bradley's direction. "Speak a little louder."

Bradley smiled at Johnny. It was a pleasant smile. Despite the deep furrows in his forehead he could have not been more than thirty-five.

"As you know, Mr. Curtin, Mr. Julius has managed to insinuate himself into my life as a sort of amateur assistant. His methods are unique. I know from experience that you cannot force him to come to the point, so it's useless to try."

"Of course, I can come to the point," snapped Mr. Julius, seeming to have heard quite well without the ear trumpet. "I came to ask you a simple technical question. Suppose you answer it straight out."

"I'll do my best," said Bradley.

"The point is this," said Mr. Julius. "Could you be assigned to a homicide case committed anywhere in the city?"

"I could," said Bradley, "if the Commissioner thought I was the right man for the job."

He waited, puzzled.

"Well," said Mr. Julius, "we've got a homicide for you. There are good friends of mine involved. Where do you want the body discovered?"

"Where do I want the body discovered?" Bradley said slowly and incredulously. "You can arrange that?" His gray eyes turned to Johnny, but nothing in that young man's expression suggested that he was being made the victim of a practical joke.

"Suppose," said the inspector, "we start over. Has this homicide been already committed?"

"Naturally."

"And you actually propose to move the body so that it will come under my jurisdiction?" Bradley asked.

"If necessary," said Mr. Julius.

"You know it's a crime to move a body until it's been examined by the proper authorities?"

"Yes. But I never heard of any law against moving the *place* where a body is found."

Bradley drew a deep breath. "Would you mind telling me where the body is now?"

"In the rumble seat of an automobile."

"And where is the car?"

"That," said Mr. Julius," is what we came to find out."

"Mercy," said Bradley, "you came to ask *me* where the car is?"

"No, you fool! We came to ask you where it *should* be if you are to handle the case."

"And where is the car now?" repeated Bradley, spacing his words as if speaking to a child.

"Outside your door," said Johnny Curtin. "Mr. Julius and I drove it here."

III

About three-quarters of an hour before the arrival of Johnny and Mr. Julius at Bradley's apartment, a taxicab drew up in front of a building, on Ninety-first Street, just east of Central Park. It had once been a warehouse, but now the second and third floors had been transformed into apartments, with an entrance of modest dimensions on Madison Avenue.

On the Ninety-first Street side was a wide-arched doorway, and to the right of this second entrance a black-and-gold sign announced that just within was the Crop & Spur Riding School, run by Captain George Pelham and Miss Patricia Prayne.

Pat Prayne got out of the taxi and handed the driver a bill.

"Keep the change," she said. "It's not my money."

Turning swiftly, she walked into the Crop & Spur. Powerful lights hanging from the ceiling projected her shadow against whitewashed walls. Across the empty tanbark ring were two men: Peter Shea, the school's head groom, and Captain George Pelham.

The instant Pelham caught sight of Pat he came toward her. He was a tall, slender man with a heavily lined face, brooding eyes, and a clipped black mustache over a firm mouth.

"You want to get the car in?" he asked.

"George, I've been given the finest standing-up of a lifetime."

Pelham saw that she was close to tears. "What's up?" he asked.

"Johnny!" Pat said. "He was waiting for me after the Show. I carried a lot of junk out to the car for him to put in the rumble while I went to say good-bye to Mike. When I came back, both Johnny *and* the car were gone."

"The pup!" Pelham said. "When I get hold of him I'll . . ."

"George, Johnny can't help being in love." She forced a smile. "Only—I wish he'd make up his mind with whom."

"Put him out of your mind," said Pelham. "Just don't think of him." He slipped an arm around her shoulders. "I haven't had a real chance to tell you how proud I am of you, Kitten. You gave Tangerine the best kind of a ride."

"Thanks, George."

"They have some kind of supper for us upstairs," said Pelham. "Linda's there, too. Come on."

The Prayne's living room was crowded with furniture that had plainly come from a more prosperous period in their lives.

Douglas Prayne sat in an armchair by a coal grate. He was a thin, stoop-shouldered man in his late fifties, with graying hair. He rose as Pat and Pelham came into the room.

"Congratulations, d a r l i n g! You were magnificent."

Pat stared at him. "You were there, Father?"

"Of course I was there. Linda Marsh shared her box with Celia and me. They're out in the kitchen now. But I rather expected to see Gloria."

"It was an awful jam," said Pat hastily. "I'll see if I can help in the kitchen."

Miss Celia Devon, Pat's aunt, was stirring a Newburg, and wore an apron over her dinner dress. Celia had been a beautiful girl, and she was now a strikingly handsome older woman. Though she kept house and did the cooking for the entire Prayne household, she always managed to convey the impres-

sion of simply helping out on the maid's night off.

"We were about to start without you, Pat," she said.

"Nothing of the sort," said Linda Marsh, who was piling sandwiches on a plate. "After your performance, angel, we'd have waited till doomsday!"

Linda Marsh had coal-black hair, a milky skin, and was dressed in clothes of an elegant styling, which wasn't surprising, since she was the sole proprietor of a small dress shop on Fifth Avenue.

"Well, anyhow, we won't wait for Gloria," said Celia Devon. "I can't understand why she has to spend days at a time with Linda when she has a perfectly good home of her own."

"But I love having her," Linda said.

Miss Devon disconnected the chafing dish, and set it on a tray. "Bring the sandwiches, Linda," she said.

The moment the older woman disappeared, Pat spoke to Linda: "No news?"

"Not a word."

"I'm glad you let Father and Aunt Celia think she's with you," Pat said. "But, if she doesn't turn up tomorrow, they'll have to be told."

The telephone in the hall rang shrilly. Pat picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Pat!" The voice was strained, urgent

"Johnny! I was so worried—"

"Pat, *listen!* I can't explain now. It's about Gloria."

"Johnny! You know . . ."

"Yes, Pat." Johnny's voice was grave. "I know where she is. Look, darling, you've got to come downtown right away." He gave her an address on Washington Place. "Ring the bell marked 'Bradley,' " he added. "Have you got that?"

"Yes, Johnny, but . . ."

"Listen, darling. There's been an accident. Hurry!"

Pat turned back to Linda Marsh. Her eyes were wide and frightened. "Linda, that was Johnny. It's about Gloria. He says there's been an accident."

"Pat!"

"I don't want the family to know. Tell them . . . tell them I forgot something at the Garden. I'll slip out the back way."

"Of course, angel," Linda said. "Want me to go with you?"

"Johnny's there," Pat said simply.

IV

Mr. Julius twisted around on the couch as the door of Bradley's apartment opened. Johnny Curtin stood in front of the dead fire, his face as grim as death. Bradley dropped his hat and coat on a chair by the door.

"It's murder, right enough," he said. "She was strangled with a silk scarf, presumably her

own." His gaze went to Johnny. "Why?" he asked. "She's only a kid—twenty-three, or four at the most, and from a decent family. She's not the kind of girl who dies this way."

"The Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady," Mr. Julius said.

"You know why she was killed, Julius?" Bradley asked.

"Certainly," said Mr. Julius. "Because somebody hated her, or because she was dangerous to someone."

"Who?" Bradley's tone was resigned.

"How the devil should I know? That's your job. But she wasn't killed in the car. She was killed somewhere else, and her coat, gloves, purse thrown in on top of her. How long has she been dead?"

"We'll have to wait for a report on that," said the inspector. "But it's been a good many hours. A day or two, perhaps."

He frowned, thoughtfully.

"God!" Johnny said. Bradley eyed him. Johnny moistened his lips. "You see, Inspector, Gloria's been missing since Wednesday. Guy and I—that's Guy Severied, to whom Gloria was practically engaged—have been hunting for her for three days."

"Why didn't you call the police?"

"Gloria was . . . well, sort of scatter-brained, Inspector," Johnny said. "It wouldn't have been unlike her to go off, and forget to tell anyone."

Mr. Julius had closed his eyes, but he opened them now—bright, unblinking eyes like a bird's. "Gloria was a trollop!" he said.

"She was wild," Johnny conceded. "Things were tough for her. The Praynes were really rich until Mr. Prayne's brokerage firm went bust."

"And Douglas Prayne just sat back and whimpered. He was a weakling. I always said so, and to his face," interrupted Mr. Julius.

"Then Pat took hold," said Johnny. "They had horses. She and George Pelham, an ex-cavalry officer, started a riding school. Guy Severied, who is Pelham's best friend, put up the money. They've made a go of it, paid Guy back. But it's still damned hard work, and not much profit. Gloria just couldn't take it. She was accustomed to having everything."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Mr. Julius. "A trollop! Been chasing every eligible man with money in town."

Bradley asked, "And what was your connection with Gloria Prayne, Mr. Curtin? Where did you meet her?"

"I'm in the horse business, too, Inspector. I have a breeding farm in Millbrook. I fell for Pat when she visited the town to look

at a horse. I started coming to New York to see her."

"I asked about Gloria," said Bradley.

The glow from the fire heightened the color that mounted in Johnny's cheeks. "When I met her I lost my head," Johnny said. "She was colorful and exciting."

"I thought she was engaged to Severied," said the inspector.

"Not actually. Until it was announced I had a right to let her know how I felt."

"Then he found the apple had a worm in it," chuckled Mr. Julius.

"And I woke up, Inspector," Johnny said. "I took Gloria to El Coronado last Wednesday night, and told her I'd crawl back to Pat on my hands and knees if she'd have me. Gloria was furious, and walked out. And that was the last time she was seen by any of her friends until tonight."

Bradley's eyes studied Johnny probing, weighing. Finally he said, "All right, Mr. Curtin. Let's go back over tonight. You found Gloria in the rumble seat of the car. Weren't there any policemen about?"

"Yes. I gave one a dollar for Pat in case she didn't have taxi money."

"Didn't it occur to you to report to him what you'd found?"

"I didn't want Pat mixed up in it," Johnny said.

Bradley sighed. "And why did you think of going to Mr. Julius?"

"It . . . it was a hunch. He's a sort of uncle of the Praynes, and he'd told us he'd helped you with that stamp murder last year. He said you were . . . well, intelligent."

"Mercy," said Bradley.

"So I went to Mr. Julius and told him what I'd found. Then we came here."

"You realize, said Bradley, "that you deliberately withheld information from the police until it suited your convenience?"

"Bosh!" said Mr. Julius. "He wanted his girl to get a break, that's all."

"Um," said Bradley. "Do you plan to take a hand in this, Mr. Julius?"

The old man looked belligerent. "I mean to see that Pat is protected."

The doorbell rang. "That'll be Pat, now," Johnny said.

They heard Pat's voice raised in almost hysterical concern as Johnny opened the door. "Oh, Johnny! Where is she?"

They could hear Johnny's voice replying, breaking the news to her gently. Then Johnny led her into the room toward a couch. When she saw Mr. Julius she ran to him, buried her head on his shoulder, and sobbed.

None of them spoke until the storm of emotion had subsided. . . .

"Somebody give me a cigarette," Pat said, at length.

Johnny lit one and handed it to her. Her eyes avoided all their faces. "It's so stupid, so senseless! Gloria hadn't any enemies. Why should someone want to kill her?"

"There has to be a reason, Miss Prayne," Bradley said. "There always is."

Pat looked at Mr. Julius. "I've been so darn' mad at Gloria so often, Uncle Julius. But this . . ."

"Let's get a few essential facts, Miss Prayne," said Bradley. "How did your sister's body get in the back of that car?"

Pat stared at him, helplessly.

"Where has that car been since Wednesday night?" asked Bradley.

"I've had it," Pat said. "We've shown horses all week. I've driven to the Garden each morning about eight, for the exercise periods, and stayed there until the Show closed at midnight. The car's been outside the Garden all day, every day."

"Then you're the only one who's used the car all week?"

"Don't answer that, Pat," Johnny Curtin cautioned sharply. "Somebody put Gloria's body in the car after Wednesday night."

"Please, Curtin, don't pop off," Bradley interrupted, in a tired voice. "I wasn't trying to trap you, Miss Prayne. But I must know when it could have happened, and who had access to the car."

Pat met the inspector's eyes steadily. "The car keys were left on the tackroom," she said. "Anybody could have borrowed them."

"Thousands of people were milling in and out of the Garden stables every day, Inspector," Johnny said. "Anybody in New York could have taken those keys."

Bradley looked down at Mr. Julius, and an understanding glance passed between them.

"Don't be a fool, Johnny," said the old man. "We're dealing with a coldblooded murderer —someone who thought out a very neat way of getting his victim off his hands after he'd killed. Someone who knew where the car was, where the keys were."

Pat's lips began to tremble.

"No use beating around the bush," said Mr. Julius. "It has to be one of the family, or a close friend."

Bradley sighed. "I'm afraid so," he said.

V

An hour or so later, Johnny stepped from the revolving door into the crowded Blue Moon Club, telling himself that if he didn't find Guy here he would go on to the Praynes' without him.

Guy Severied was sitting on a high stool at the bar, and he was drunk. Johnny went up to him and gripped him by the arm.

"Guy!"

"Well, young Lochinvar!" Guy said.

"I've been looking for you everywhere. I've got to talk to you, Guy."

"Positively not," said Guy. "I've given you all the advice I can. Run away, Lochinvar."

"I don't want advice. I want to tell you something—immediately and in private."

"That's different."

Severied peered around the smoke-dimmed room. "This place isn't built for privacy." Then his eyes lit up. "The washroom. Never over a hundred an' ten in the shade."

He took Johnny by the arm, and started. They went down a steep flight of stairs. The washroom was small and, as Guy had predicted, hot. Guy went to a washbasin.

"Listen, Guy," Johnny said. "We've found Gloria."

"In what opium den?" asked Guy, soaping his hands.

"Okay, pal, take it on the chin," said Johnny. "She's dead. *Murdered.*"

Guy spun around, and fell back against the wall. "That's a hell of a way to sober a man up," he said.

"She was strangled. I found the body in the rumble of Pat's car. The police want us all at the Praynes'."

Guy shook his head, like a punch-drunk fighter. "Murder? You're sure this isn't a gag?"

"I wish it were."

Guy dried his hands and glanced in the mirror at his bloodshot eyes. "What a mess," he muttered. "This was meant to be a strictly private binge. But, let's go, Johnny. We got things to do."

They got a cab at the door.

"Ninety-first and Madison," Johnny said.

"No!" Guy contradicted. "Fifty-sixth and Madison. An' don't spare the horses."

"Ninety-first and Madison, driver."

The driver was patient. "Make up your minds, gents."

"If it isn't okay with you, young Lochinvar, you can always take another cab," Guy said.

"Linda's not home," said Johnny. "She's with Pat, at the Praynes'."

"One will get you three she isn't."

"I tell you Linda's with Pat!"

"Don't come if you don't want to," Guy said.

Johnny shrugged and settled back, and two minutes later they were in Fifty-sixth Street in front of Linda Marsh's apartment house.

"Hold it," Johnny told the driver, "we'll be going on."

The night man in the foyer of

the apartment building regarded Guy with suspicion.

"Miss Linda Marsh," Guy said.

"Miss Marsh isn't in."

They went back to the cab.

"Linda Marsh, Inc., Forty-f'th Street and Fifth Avenue," Guy ordered.

"Listen," Johnny said. "It's after three! There's no one at Linda's shop."

"Except Linda," said Guy.

Johnny's eyes measured the distance from his right fist to the point of Guy's jaw. "Look," he said. "If Linda isn't there, will you go to the Praynes'?"

"Word of honor," said Guy. "But she'll be there."

The taxi drew up behind a black sedan at the curb in front of Linda Marsh, Inc. Guy moved under full sail toward the locked and bolted entrance of the dress shop. Johnny followed. Halfway across the sidewalk he heard the sedan door slam, and turned to face a man with a derby hat set squarely on his bullet-shaped head.

"Okay, pals. What d'you want?" said the man.

"Give him a dime for his cup of coffee," Guy said.

The man's head seemed to sink between his shoulder blades like a turtle's. "I'm Sergeant Snyder, of Homicide. Start talkin'."

"Homicide? Are you connected with Inspector Bradley?" Johnny said.

"You're damn' right I'm connected with him. I'm his assistant."

"Oh. My name is Curtin. This is Mr. Severied. He's got a notion that Miss Marsh is here, and that he must see her."

"Oh, yeah? It'll be up to the inspector if anyone sees her. He's with her now."

Meanwhile Guy had been ringing the night bell. Johnny saw a light appear at the far end of the shop. The door opened, and Bradley stood there, pipe between his teeth, hands in the pockets of his trench coat.

Guy made a beeline for the back of the shop.

In the setting Linda Marsh had designed for herself there was no hint of business. Johnny blinked at the thick rug, the deep chairs, the glowing fire. He and the inspector were close enough on Guy Severied's heels to hear him ask Linda, "Have you given it to him yet?"

Linda was standing with her back to the fire. "Guy! Then you know?"

"Have you given it to him?" Guy repeated.

"Not yet, Guy. But I must."

"Not necessarily." Guy wheeled. "Melodramatic rot," he said to Bradley. "It will get you nowhere."

"So you know about the letter, Mr. Severied?" Bradley said, his face thoughtful.

"Why else would I be here?"

"What letter?" Johnny said angrily. "Just what is going on here?"

"I was trying to find out," said Bradley, "when you arrived. Will you begin again, Miss Marsh?"

"Look," Guy said. "This'll just make trouble for innocent people. I'd advise you to go hunt clues, Inspector, and stop prying into a personal matter that doesn't concern you."

"I understand Gloria Prayne was your fiancée, Mr. Severied. You should be able to tell us a good deal."

"Sure, I *could*. If I told you I was relieved when Lochinvar here brought me the news, would you get out your handcuffs?"

"*Are* you telling me that?" Bradley's eyes were steady.

"Why not? I wasn't in love with Gloria, and she wasn't in love with me. But Gloria loved yachts. Catch on?"

Linda interrupted: "I was telling Mr. Bradley about a visit I had from Gloria about two weeks ago. She was nervous, almost incoherent. She talked about making the headlines one of these days. 'Feet first' was the way she put it. She was afraid of someone."

"Did she identify him?"

"No. Frankly, Inspector, I didn't take her seriously."

"Still, you felt she was really frightened."

"Yes. But it's a difficult thing to explain. She was terrified, but I thought she was imagining the danger."

"And the purpose of her visit?" Bradley prodded her.

"She had a letter with her, Mr. Bradley. She asked me to keep it, and if anything happened to her, to turn it over to the police. I put it in my desk, and forgot about it."

"You've had that letter for the last three days and you haven't said anything?" Johnny cried. "If you'd turned it over to the police you might have prevented this!"

"I think not," said Bradley quietly. "The medical examiner is sure Gloria was killed," his eyes moved to Johnny's face, "not long after she left you at El Coronado on Wednesday night, Curtin."

"But, Bradley, that means—"

"Gives a rather unpleasant picture of the killer, doesn't it?" said Bradley. "A man with no nerves. He kept a dead body concealed for at least two days before he transferred it to the Praynes' car tonight."

"I keep trying to explain," Linda said. "Gloria was *always* in some mess. Just now, when she and Guy were about to get married, the Praynes were anxious to avoid any fresh scandal."

Bradley said, "But we're wasting time. The letter, Miss Marsh. It may contain the murderer's name."

Linda went to the desk and pulled out one of the small upper drawers. She brought a thick envelope to Bradley. It was blue, unaddressed, and the flap was secured by three blobs of purple wax into which a signet had been pressed.

Bradley turned the letter slowly in his fingers. He smiled at Linda. "Most women couldn't have resisted opening this."

Her laugh was high. "I've told you Inspector, it didn't seem important until tonight. Then I thought you should see it."

"Quite right," said Bradley.

"Wait," said Guy. "I know what's in that letter, Inspector."

"So?" said Bradley.

"And I know it won't do you any good. It will only harm the innocent. Gloria had a nasty mind . . . oh, very nasty."

"We'll have a look, anyway." Bradley slit the flap at the top, leaving the seals undisturbed. He drew out three sheets of matching note paper, unfolded them, and stood studying them for a moment. Then he handed the pages back to Linda.

"But, Inspector! They're blank!"

Guy sprang to his feet. "Blank!" he shouted, and burst into wild laughter. "She was bluffing! Oh, my God, she was bluffing!" He dropped back into his chair.

Bradley's look was so intent that Guy was forced to raise his head. "You said you knew what was in that letter, Mr. Severied?"

"Wrong, Inspector," said Guy. "I knew what Gloria *said* was in the letter."

"Did you tell anyone about this letter?" Bradley asked Linda.

"No."

"And it's been in that desk ever since she gave it to you?"

"Yes."

"The drawer wasn't locked?" The inspector's face had tightened.

"No."

"Then plenty of people had access to it?"

"Why, I suppose so."

Johnny moved restlessly. "What are you getting at?"

Bradley shrugged. "This may not be the letter Gloria gave to Miss Marsh."

"You mean that somebody substituted those blank pages for the ones Gloria had written?"

"Without breaking the seals?" Bradley shook his head. "No one could have done that. But a complete substitution, yes. A complete substitution would take about five unobserved seconds."

"You're off base, Inspector," said Guy. "It's a magnificent hoax, devised with all of Gloria's schoolgirl ingenuity."

Johnny could stand no more of this. "Linda says Gloria was scared. Well, she had a right to be, didn't she? She's dead! Make

Guy tell you what she was scared of!"

Bradley looked at Guy. "Well, Mr. Severied?"

"No dice, Inspector," said Guy. "Absolutely, positively, no dice!"

"Where do you live, Severied?" Bradley asked unexpectedly.

"Long Island, Riviera, California, and East Sixty-third Street. I've a hole in the wall there, with a change of clothes and a comfortable bed. I'd like to have you come and see me some time, Inspector."

"Thanks," said Bradley. "I'll probably make it soon." He turned to Johnny: "Curtin, I'm going to ask you to take him home, and I want you to come to the Praynes' when the job's done."

Guy's legs buckled when he stood up, so that Bradley and Johnny had to support him out of the shop and into the cab Snyder secured for them.

When they reached Guy's apartment building, the driver helped Johnny assist Guy into the foyer. There the elevator boy, whom Guy called "Mike," took over. Together Mike and Johnny led Guy into his elaborate hole in the wall. In the bedroom Guy collapsed sidewise on the bed. Johnny removed his shoes and undid his collar. Then he hurried out.

The moment the apartment door slammed, Guy sat up, groaning. He turned on the bedside lamp, rubbed his face and scalp vigorously, and got to his feet. From a closet he took a tweed suit, a necktie, and a soft, dark blue shirt. He managed to get into them and then he, too, went out.

VI

Captain George Pelham opened the door of the Praynes' apartment to Johnny. His lined face was yellow and his eyes like holes in a blanket. "Oh, it's you, Johnny."

"Where's Pat?" Johnny asked.

"In Gloria's room with the inspector," Pelham said. "You've been with Guy?"

"Yes. And he's out like a light! How are the others taking it?"

Pelham lifted his shoulders. "The old man folded, as might be expected. Celia and Linda are trying to bring him around."

Johnny went down the corridor to Gloria's bedroom. There he found Pat, Mr. Julius and Bradley. Pat went to him wordlessly. He slipped an arm around her shoulders, and held her tight.

Over the top of her head he saw Mr. Julius. The old man was staring intently around Gloria's room. The pale blue curtains, the canopied bed, the ruffled chaise lounge, the dressing table with

its jars and bottles, all came under his disgusted scrutiny.

Bradley sat at Gloria's fragile Florentine desk. He gave Johnny a quick smile. "Have any trouble with the patient?"

"No," Johnny replied. "He passed out quietly. Anything new?"

"Only this." Bradley indicated a pigeonhole full of blue note paper and a brass pen tray. In the tray were a stub of purple sealing wax and a gold signet ring.

"No doubt," said Mr. Julius, "the letter was prepared here."

"Yes," said Bradley. "Miss Prayne, your sister was mortally terrified. I think she wrote a letter, telling just whom she was afraid of and why. The murderer somehow learned about that letter. He had to get rid of it. So he substituted a second letter, outwardly a duplicate of the original."

Johnny felt Pat shiver. "That means," she said, "that he was at the Garden tonight, and that he'd been in Linda's private office some time recently."

"And here," said Bradley.

"Why here, Inspector? No one could . . ."

Bradley cut her short: "Miss Prayne, he had to come to this room, to get at this particular letter paper, wax and ring."

"Pat, you can't get away from it," Mr. Julius said. "Every step in this thing draws the circle tighter around your own family group."

"It's crazy even to think it was one of us," Pat broke in. "People are always in and out of the house."

"What people?" Bradley asked. "What people in the last two weeks?"

"Well, there's Father and Aunt Celia and myself. Linda . . . Johnny . . . George Pelham . . . and Guy. Those are the ones who *couldn't* have done it."

"And those who could?" asked Bradley.

"Well, there's Peter Shea, our groom. And Melissa."

"Who's Melissa?"

"She's a colored cleaning woman who comes in once a week. But it's silly to consider her or Peter." Pat's face was flushed.

"I'm still waiting for the ones who could have done it," Bradley said.

"Well, you see, I'm not home much during the day, Inspector. And this last week, the Show . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"I see," said Bradley gravely.

Pat's lips were trembling. "Mr. Bradley. I love these people we've talked about. I'd trust them with my life. Accusing one of them is unthinkable, *and I won't think it!*"

Johnny said, "Hasn't Pat been through enough, Bradley?"

Bradley didn't answer. He crossed the room, and slid open the closet door. Presently he

turned to Pat. "Miss Prayne, had your sister any private source of income?" he asked.

"No."

He took a report from his inside pocket.

Gloria was wearing an expensive evening dress, a silver fox wrap, and a sapphire ring. "For a girl whose family is supposed to be broke, that's fancy equipment. And this . . ." he added, gesturing toward the closet.

"But," Pat explained, "Linda's in the dress business. She gave Gloria a lot of clothes and always let us buy from her at cost."

"Another peculiar thing," Bradley said. "The labels had been cut out of the clothes she wore. Also, they are gone from the things in that closet. Why?"

Pat shook her head. "I don't know."

"How much did your sister have for clothes?"

"Why, about a hundred a month, I think, for everything."

"Could she have acquired that wardrobe, even at cost prices, for that?"

"I . . . I don't suppose so."

"Pat, stop stalling!" commanded Mr. Julius. "You don't need a crystal ball, Bradley. Gullible family were told clothes came from Linda, and they wanted to believe it. She cut out the labels in case anyone checked."

"And where *did* she get them?" Bradley asked.

"Do I have to spell it out for you? She was engaged to one of the richest men in America. Guy bought 'em."

Bradley had taken a red tobacco tin from his pocket. "Probably," he said absently. He filled his pipe. "I'm afraid I can't put off talking to your family any longer, Miss Prayne. Will you and Curtin get them together for me? Julius and I will be along in a moment."

"Well," said Mr. Julius, when Pat and Johnny had gone, "what's eating you?"

Bradley looked at him, unsmiling. "What does the average citizen do when he thinks his life is in danger?"

"Runs like hell," said Mr. Julius.

"Yes, to the nearest police station."

"Unless he doesn't like policemen."

"Usually people who don't like policemen have something shady in their own lives."

"So."

"So Gloria Prayne didn't ask for protection. She left evidence that would implicate the murderer only *after* she was dead!" Bradley sighed. "I'd like to bet that she, herself, told the murderer where she'd left that letter."

The old man glared. "Stick to facts."

"Blackmail is a nasty business," said Bradley.

"Blackmail! You think so?"

"Isn't it obvious? Clothes, jewels, furs. Taking no chances on her family's finding out where they came from."

"But I tell you, Severied . . ."

"If Severied gave them to her, why should she hide it?" Bradley asked. "Is there anything shameful about taking presents from your intended husband?" He got up and walked into the living room, Mr. Julius following.

Bradley knew everyone in the room but Douglas Prayne. The dead girl's father looked frail and tired. His skin was the color of alabaster and his eyes squinted as if the light were painful. Miss Celia Devon, her lips compressed, rocked back and forth opposite her brother-in-law. Steel needles on which she was knitting a dark-blue sock clicked in her fingers. Johnny and Pat sat side by side on the couch. George Pelham stood by the sideboard, highball glass in his hand.

"I've told them about the letter," said Linda Marsh, "and why I didn't tell sooner." She was seated in a wing chair, her head tilted back.

"While the subject is fresh in your minds," Bradley said, moving farther into the room, "perhaps we can simplify things. The murderer must have visited Miss Marsh's office during the last two weeks. If those of you who didn't go there will tell me now . . ." He looked around the ring of tense faces.

"I don't know whether it's worse luck for you or for us, Lieutenant," said Celia Devon. "Linda gave a cocktail party last Friday. We were all there."

Bradley rubbed the faint bristle on the side of his jaw. "The murderer also knew that while Miss Prayne was riding tonight, everybody connected with her would be at the ringside watching. He could have taken the car keys then without being seen, driven to the place where he had hidden the body, put it in the rumble, and returned to the Garden."

Douglas Prayne covered his eyes with a hand on which heavy blue veins stood out.

"The tackroom must have been crowded by the time the murderer got back," Bradley went on. "It was almost easier to return the keys than to take them. To sum up: the murderer had to be at the Garden tonight. He must have visited Miss Marsh's office. And finally, he must have had access to this apartment. Everyone here qualifies for all three."

"Just what are you driving at, Lieutenant?" asked Miss Devon.

"He's telling you," snapped Mr. Julius, "that one of this precious bunch is a murderer. And he is an inspector, not a lieutenant."

Douglas Prayne roused him-

self. "We are fortunate to have you in charge, Mr. Bradley," he said. "Julius has often spoken of your discretion."

"Thank you," said Bradley. "My job, however, is to lay a murderer by the heels."

"Of course," Douglas Prayne said quickly. "But you will appreciate what this dreadful business means to me—and to my family. If we had someone less friendly to deal with, the situation could be dangerous."

Bradley looked up. "You recognize there *is* danger, Mr. Prayne?"

"Certainly, I do," said Douglas Prayne. "You see, sir," and he lifted a pale hand, "the Praynes have come upon evil times. My business . . . then this."

"Oh?" said Bradley.

"There will be reporters, photographers. Our privacy, our human rights, our future happiness are in your hands, Bradley."

A strange, choking noise came from Mr. Julius's throat, and he walked away. Bradley remained looking at Douglas Prayne with something like clinical interest.

"In your investigations," said Prayne, "you will naturally unearth a great many facts about us. Could you, Inspector, keep them private?"

"What sort of facts?" Bradley asked. His voice was cold.

Prayne shifted in his chair. "Well, sir, my business has failed. At the moment I am in the awkward position of being supported by my daughter, Patricia."

"Father!" Pat said.

"I still have important deals pending, Inspector," said Prayne. "If the gravity of my finances was made public—well, when a man's down, you know, people are inclined to kick him."

Bradley did not reply.

"Then, of course," said Douglas Prayne, "there's Gloria. Gloria was always getting herself involved in . . . well, unpleasantness, Inspector. You will come across these matters. Need they be made public?"

"Mr. Prayne, it is not my job to supply the newspapers with gossip."

"Thank you. Thank you very much," said Prayne.

"Is that all you wanted to say to me? You haven't any information that will help us to discover your daughter's murderer?"

"No!"

"I wonder if you've quite taken this in, Prayne. Your daughter has been murdered, deliberately and in cold blood. The murderer doesn't mean to be caught. If any of you know anything that menaces him, you are, yourselves, in real danger."

Douglas Prayne sat up. "You mean in actual physical danger."

"If you're deliberately withholding information."

"Then we have a right to protection!"

"You'll get what I can give," said Bradley. "But I cannot have men following you about from room to room. And your danger lies here in this house! Among your friends!"

Pat Prayne spoke up: "Mr. Bradley, you can't go on with the theory that one of us is a murderer. You've missed something!"

Bradley held her look. "Here is something I haven't missed," he said. "Your sister was calling on someone. She had settled down, relaxed and unafraid, just as Miss Marsh is at this moment! Her host went out of the room, perhaps to mix a drink. When he came back he walked up behind her, took hold of the silk scarf around her neck, and yanked it tight. She struggled. I can see her hands tugging desperately at the noose, her face turning dark, her eyes protruding—"

"Stop it!" George Pelham shouted. He sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking.

Then Linda Marsh was across the room. She dropped on her knees and put an arm around him. "George, my darling! You mustn't let it get you! You mustn't!"

Celia Devon laughed. "I had no idea the police were so talented. The stage has lost a superb actor in you, Inspector."

The telephone rang, and Pat picked up the receiver. "For you, Inspector," she said.

Bradley took it from her. "Yes . . . Yes, Monahan . . . *What!* . . . Well, where the devil are you now? . . . Go back to your starting point and wait there. That's your only bet." He put the phone in its cradle. "I thought you told me," he said to Johnny, "you left Severied passed out cold?"

"I did."

"Well, he's skipped. And he was sober enough to give one of the smartest tails on the force a complete run-around."

George Pelham stood up. The nerve beside his mouth would not stop twitching. "You've been doing a good deal of hinting around, Inspector," he said. "Are you planning to charge one of us with the murder?"

"Not yet," Bradley said. "I've been trying to make the situation clear to you, to show you that it's no parlor charade."

"Well, I've had about all of it I can take," Pelham said bitterly. "If you don't intend to arrest me, I'm leaving."

Bradley looked about mildly. "I see no storm troopers guarding the doors."

Pelham seemed taken back. "You don't insist on my staying?"

"Well, I could ask you if you

know who murdered Gloria Prayne."

"Naturally, I don't."

"Or if you saw anyone borrow the car keys from the tackroom."

"I didn't."

"Very well. That is all."

"Can I see you home, Linda?" Pelham asked.

Linda glanced at Bradley. "If the Inspector doesn't need me."

After Pelham and Linda had gone the others remained uneasily where they were. At last Celia Devon put down her knitting. "Are you fond of coconut cake, Inspector?"

Bradley's face broke into a grin. "With milk?"

"With milk," said Celia Devon.

"Miss Devon, I love you!"

"Then come into the kitchen." She was already on her way. "I believe that is the traditional setting for romantic policemen."

"Julius should make an excellent chaperon," said Bradley.

"Julius is going home!" said Mr. Julius. "I've already done enough squirming observing the reactions in this house." He stalked into the hall, and a moment later the front door banged.

Bradley sat on the kitchen table, swinging his legs, and holding a badly damaged piece of layer cake in one hand and a glass of milk in the other.

Miss Devon sat in a plain chair beside him. "I owe you an apology," she said.

"So?" Luke Bradley inquired.

"Accusing you of acting. We all do. We develop a mental picture of the person we'd like to be, and then try to behave like that person."

Bradley chuckled. "What's your picture of yourself, Miss Devon?"

"Cool, competent, witty, utterly self-sufficient," said Miss Devon, without hesitation. "But if you scrape off the paint—" she shrugged, "I'm just a disappointed old maid, Mr. Bradley."

"Do you have other revelations?" Bradley asked.

"Quantities. Take my precious brother-in-law. He sees himself as a country gentleman, a man of affairs. Actually he has the spine of a jellyfish. His greatest fear is that his friends at the club will learn the truth about him." Miss Devon's eyes softened. "But Pat's just exactly what she appears to be. That young man in there isn't half good enough for her."

"What about him?"

"Not very complex, Inspector. He's been confused. Now he's going to be desperately on Pat's side."

"What about Pelham?"

"George? High-strung, neurotic, bitter . . . all this hiding a real kindliness."

Bradley grinned at her. "So you've joined the obstructionists' club, too," he said.

"Obstructionists' club?"

"Look, Miss Devon, policemen have a way of remembering nasty things. Captain Pelham has been in the news before."

"It would be pretty cruel to dig up that old case, Inspector."

"Investigating murders is not a kid-glove profession. As I recall it, Pelham's wife walked out on him five years ago."

Miss Devon shrugged. "Perhaps it may explain George's attitude," she said. "George was truly in love with his wife. She was beautiful, gay, a grand horsewoman. George went off on a business trip that spring. When he came back, Dorothy was gone. She took no clothes, no money, left no message. Nobody has ever heard of her since."

"That much I knew."

"George was almost out of his mind. In the end the police dropped the case. They never found a shred of evidence."

"And that was that?"

"No. George turned to private detectives. He spent every cent he had and then got Guy Severied to foot the bills. Finally even the private detectives were ashamed to accept any more fees. The case of Dorothy Pelham was closed."

"That was five years ago," said Bradley, groping for his pipe. "You said it might explain an attitude?"

"For the last few days I've noticed George had the jitters again. Tonight I realized that Gloria's disappearance, so like Dorothy's vanishing act, had reopened a wound that never really healed."

The line between Bradley's eyebrows deepened. "Two vanishing ladies, Miss Devon!" He struck a match. "I don't believe in coincidence. Do you?"

"I wondered if you would," she said.

Bradley sighed and stood up. "Well, I must go."

He started for the hall, and then came back. "Will you do me a favor, Miss Devon?"

She looked astonished. "If I can."

"Lock your door when you go to bed tonight!"

He really left, this time.

Celia Devon stared after him thoughtfully, then went back to the living room where only Pat and Johnny remained.

"You had better turn in, Pat." Miss Devon advised.

"I can't sleep, Aunt Celia. It's almost morning. We'll get some breakfast soon."

Miss Devon went on to her room. Johnny settled himself beside Pat.

She held onto his hand. "Oh, Johnny, Bradley's wrong about us. It has to be someone outside!"

Johnny shook his head. "Pat, I'm like you. It seems ridiculous. No one had any reason to kill Gloria. But . . ." His voice dropped doubtfully.

"But what?" Pat stared at him.

"Well, somebody did! And look at Bradley's three facts. The murderer had to be at the Garden, at Linda's office, and here. Almost anyone might fit the first two situations. But who could have gotten into Gloria's room long enough to make that dummy letter?"

Johnny asked, *"Who?"*

Pat leaned forward. "Listen, Johnny. Last week-end Guy took Gloria to a shooting lodge in Delaware—duck hunting."

"Gloria in a duck blind!"

"Exactly!" said Pat. "Gloria wouldn't get herself cold and messy for any ducks. But she went to Delaware. Now, what would she do while the others were out? Sleep late, have breakfast in bed, dawdle around until teatime. She might read, *or write letters!"*

"Sounds reasonable. But . . ."

"Johnny, Gloria never wrote letters on anything but her own private letter paper, fastened with those three purple seals. If she knew she was going to have time on her hands, wouldn't she have taken her stationery with her?"

"Pat! That's important. *Did she?"*

"I don't know. But, Johnny, if she did, there are other people who could have stolen some paper. There were forty or fifty on the party."

"And several of them were at the last night of the Horse Show," Johnny said.

"And several are customers of Linda's," Pat stressed.

"Pat, you're a magician. The letter paper is what nailed Bradley's case down!"

"We can find out from Guy who was at the lodge. Then we can eliminate those who weren't at the Garden, and who couldn't have been at Linda's. When Inspector Bradley sees our list he'll believe us!"

VII

At ten-thirty the next morning Monahan was sheepish, and being sheepish made him angry. He stood in the foyer of Severied's apartment building, explaining to a faintly smiling Bradley: "Damn it, Inspector, I didn't have orders to make an arrest. I was just supposed to tail Severied."

"How did it happen?"

"The old army game. Around the block, a quick spurt uptown, and then tryin' to beat me on the lights. Finally he heads into Fifty-second Street, stops at a dive called the Blue Moon, pays off his driver, and goes inside. I hold my own cab and follow him. Well," and Monahan was growling, "that is that. There's half a dozen fire exits. He must have oozed out of one."

"Well, don't lose sleep over it," Bradley said. "If I'd thought

he was likely to play so cagey, I'd have left someone to help you."

"Thanks, Inspector."

"I've a man out at his Long Island place and I'm having his boat watched," Bradley said. "I guess it's the best we can do. You arrange to stay on here . . . Tell me, does Severied have a regular cleaning woman?"

"The superintendent's wife does for him, Inspector. But she don't go up unless Severied sends for her special. What's the angle?"

Bradley rubbed his chin. "The murderer must have hidden Gloria Praynes' body for at least two days in a place where no one would happen in, and find it. Now, an apartment, with no cleaning woman or maid to worry about—"

He turned, as Rube Snyder came in from the street and joined them.

"Here's what you wanted, Inspector," he said. "A warrant to search Severied's apartment."

"Swell. Let's have a look now."

Monahan dug up the superintendent, and remained below to cope with Severied if by any remote chance he showed up. Bradley, Rube and the superintendent, a grizzled Dane, went up in the elevator to Severied's floor, and walked swiftly along the tiled hallway. Just as they were opposite the apartment door a man came out, head lowered, running like a halfback in a clear field. He charged straight into Bradley. It was Johnny Curtin.

Johnny tried to wrench free, looked up in desperate relief. "Inspector, thank heaven, it's you!" He gestured wildly toward the open door of the apartment. "Guy's dead. The whole back of his head is blown off."

Bradley and Rube moved quickly. The inspector was the first through the door, but he stopped as he crossed the threshold.

The dead man sprawled on the rug still wore his overcoat, although his hat had rolled a few feet away. One look at his head, and Bradley turned away, swaying a little, his lips ashen.

"How the devil did he get up here?" he demanded. "Is everybody permanently asleep at the switch? Why didn't Monahan see him?"

He stepped into the room and halted once more, staring at the dead man from the side. "Good Lord!" he said. "This isn't Severied. It's *Douglas Prayne.*"

"Mr. Prayne!" Johnny started into the foyer.

"Hold it!" Rube yanked Johnny into the hall.

Rasmussen, the superintendent, began to whimper like a frightened child.

Unless Prayne's body had fallen on the gun, it was gone. Bradley disappeared through the

living room into the back of the apartment. He was only a moment.

"No one here," he said.

"Inspector!" Johnny said. "Let me explain. I—"

"Shut up, you!" Rube growled.

"Let him go," said Bradley. "Rasmussen, send Monahan up here. And have your employees stand by for questioning."

"Ja. I tell dem." Rasmussen scurried for the elevator.

"Rube! Go downstairs to the switchboard. Call headquarters and get the homicide squad here at once."

"Okay, Inspector."

"And get the nearest radio car to us pronto."

At last Bradley's gray eyes came to rest on Johnny. "Well?" he said.

"Inspector, I got here only a few minutes before you. Pat and I had a theory about Gloria's murder, and we thought Guy could help us. He has a privately listed phone and neither Pat nor I knew the number, so I came instead of calling. I rang the doorbell for about five minutes and there wasn't any answer. Then I saw the door wasn't latched, so I pushed it open and went in. I saw him lying there and—and I didn't look closely. I took it for granted it was Guy, and ran for help."

"Just what made you think you'd find Severied here?"

"Pat and I figured Guy was simply being cantankerous when he walked out. A souse is stubborn, Inspector. We thought he'd come back home to get some sleep, after he'd had his way."

"Mercy," said Bradley coldly. "Practical psychologists! You didn't see anyone come out of this apartment? No one passed you in the hall?"

"Not a soul. No one, Inspector."

"Did you touch anything in that room?"

"No! I took one look and ran!"

"Did you see Prayne this morning?"

"Yes. At his home."

"And what were you doing there?"

"Well, you see," Johnny said earnestly, "it was so late when you left the Praynes' last night that I just stayed on, and Pat and I talked until morning. Then we all had breakfast together, and Mr. Prayne left. He left long before I did."

"How long?"

"Well, about an hour and a half, I'd say."

Bradley groaned. "And where did he say he was going?"

"To his lawyer's."

"And you remained at the Praynes' for another hour and a half?"

"Yes, sir."

"And came straight here?"

"Yes—in a cab."

The elevator gate opened, and

Rube, with Monahan in tow, joined them. Monahan looked scared. "Inspector, I swear I—"

"Stop worrying," Bradley said. "Unless Severied got by you, you're in the clear."

"Thanks, Inspector. What do you want me to do now?"

"Work over the elevator man, the switchboard operator, and the night man. Someone besides Prayne came up and into this apartment. Find out who it was or get a description."

"Count on me, Inspector." And Monahan was off.

Bradley turned to Rube: "Take Mr. Curtin downstairs. When the radio car comes have 'em take him down to headquarters and lock him up! Then round up the others."

"You can't do this, Bradley!" Johnny cried. "What's the charge against me?"

"You find too many dead bodies," Bradley said.

While the squad from headquarters descended on Severied's flat and gave it the works Bradley got Monahan's report.

"Nothing that's gonna help, Inspector," he said ruefully. "But I'll have another crack at it. There's just one thing all the help swear to. Severied didn't come back. At least, no one saw him. It would have been possible, of course, for him to have waited until the elevator was at one of the upper floors, and then to have sneaked up the fire stairs. But that could only have happened during the night man's shift, when there's no one at the switchboard."

"But you were on watch all during that shift," said Bradley.

"And I never left that hallway," Monahan insisted. "But there was a time he could have come back, Inspector. After he gave me the slip at the Blue Moon. I spent maybe three-quarters of an hour looking for him, and getting back here. If he came straight here he might have made it."

"Right," agreed Bradley. "It's a chance. But how did he get out again? To have killed Prayne he'd have to have left some time in the last couple of hours. He couldn't have used the fire stairs then without being seen, could he?"

"No. And he didn't use the elevator."

"How about Prayne? Did they see him come in?"

"They didn't notice," Monahan said.

"That's just dandy," said Bradley. "Well, you've done your best, Monahan. Stick here until I send someone to relieve you. I'm going down to headquarters."

Back in his office, Bradley dictated his own reports. Then he had Johnny brought in.

Johnny was tight-lipped and truculent when a uniformed po-

liceman left him standing in front of Bradley's desk.

"I came to you last night because you were Mr. Julius's friend," he said, before Bradley could speak. "He was sure of your help and consideration. Now you're simply kicking us around."

"Sit down," said Bradley, his voice deceptively mild.

"I'll stand," Johnny said. Bradley took his pipe from his pocket and began to fill it from a stone crock on his desk. "You know, Curtin," he said, "I tried to be considerate last night. What's the result? If I'd locked every damned one of you up on suspicion, Douglas Prayne would be alive at this moment."

Johnny moistened his lips. "I appreciate your position. But I don't think you should have locked me up, Bradley."

"Were Prayne and Severied friendly?"

"I don't know. I didn't often see them together. They acted just like you'd expect a man and his prospective son-in-law to act."

"Then you would expect Prayne to pour out his troubles to Severied?"

"Well, in this case, it doesn't seem unnatural."

"Perhaps not. Let's get down to you. You and Pat have a theory about Gloria's murder. What is it?"

Johnny told him about Pat's suggestion that Gloria had taken her writing materials with her to the shooting lodge in Delaware. "It's not such a dumb idea, is it?"

Bradley smoked in silence. "No, because it could have happened," he said finally. "But I don't think it did. Mainly because there was nothing chancy about Gloria's murder, Curtin."

"You suspect Guy?"

"Not talking," Bradley said, and smiled. "So you went to Severied's apartment this morning to get a list of the people who were on that shooting party last week-end?"

"That's the only reason, Inspector."

"My guess is that you're just plain lucky, Curtin. If you'd turned up a bit sooner, we'd have two corpses now instead of one."

He fell silent then, and finally dismissed Johnny with a nod.

As that young man departed through the door, another entered. In his hand he was carrying a piece of tissue which he put down on Bradley's desk. In it was wrapped a bullet, flattened out on one side.

"You've got a report for me on the bullet so soon, Erhardt?" Bradley asked, in surprise.

Erhardt shook his head. "I haven't made tests yet. Without the gun I can't do much. This is one of those soft-nosed things. They raise hell when they mushroom in a wound."

"I noticed it," Bradley said.

"Anybody in this case with army connections—maybe during the last war?"

"So that's how it is!" Bradley murmured softly.

"A guess, Inspector, but perhaps it will stand up. As far as I can determine this bullet was fired from a type of automatic issued only to officers early in the war. There are a lot of them still floating around. If you've any soldiers mixed up in your case . . ."

"We've got a ducky ex-service man, Erhardt, with a bad case of nerves and a life made complicated by too damned many coincidences."

Erhardt grinned. "Then keep your eye on him."

"I will," Bradley said sternly.

Orders went in and out and more reports came in. And presently Snyder returned with all the principals in the Gloria Prayne case. He departed again, almost immediately, armed with a search warrant for the apartment of Captain George Pelham. He had been told to look for a gun.

VIII

The first person Bradley interviewed was Pat Prayne. She came in escorted by a uniformed cop and moving like a sleepwalker.

"I'm sorry, Miss Prayne," Bradley said gently. "I wanted to save you this."

She stared past him.

"I'm not going to ask you much about your father," Bradley said. "As I understand it, you sat up all night with young Curtin talking over a theory."

She nodded.

"You had breakfast. After that your father went out, saying he was going to see his lawyer. That correct?"

"Yes. That must have been about a quarter to nine."

"I see. Your father didn't mention going to Severied's?"

"No."

"Have you any idea why your father wanted to see Severied?"

He stared hard at Pat.

Pat's eyes fastened on her hands clasped in her lap. "Guy has stood by us before when we were in trouble."

"Then you don't think Severied killed your father?"

"I *know* he didn't!"

"You're a brave girl," Bradley said. "Brave—and loyal. I wish you were my friend! What did you do after Johnny left?"

"I went to bed."

"I see . . . Tell me about Dorothy Pelham. What was she like personally?"

"But, Inspector, what has that got to do with—"

"It's just a hunch of mine."

"When Dorothy disappeared," Pat said, "I was fifteen. I thought she was marvelous. I wanted to

be like her, to look like her, to talk like her."

"Mercy! So she was that attractive?"

"She was." There was warmth and admiration in Pat's eyes.

"And Pelham adored her?"

"I never saw two people so happy," Pat said. "If you'd known Dorothy you'd understand what losing her could mean to George. We all came to believe that she met with some sort of accident and couldn't be identified."

"But they must have canvassed hospitals and that sort of thing?"

"I guess they did," said Pat. "I was too young to be much help."

"And that's all anyone knows about it?"

"Yes."

"Did your sister Gloria ever talk about it to you recently?"

Pat frowned. "Why, perhaps," she said. "We still do talk about it occasionally, when something about George comes up. I mean how he's changed, and doesn't get any fun out of anything. But, if you mean really discuss the case, we didn't."

Bradley sat forward. "Miss Prayne, that's all I'm going to bother you with now."

As she walked toward the door, still moving as if in a daze, Bradley spoke into the communicator: "Send Miss Marsh in, please."

Linda Marsh arrived in an angry mood, approaching his desk belligerently. "I would like to say just this much, Inspector," she said. "Unless you had grounds on which to arrest me you've exceeded your authority. And I'm not talking without the advice of my lawyer."

"You sound as though you thought the idea was ridiculous," said Bradley.

"What idea?"

"Suspecting you of murder."

"Good heavens, man! Didn't I make it quite clear to you last night that I was willing to cooperate?"

"I *could* arrest you, you know," said Bradley, toying with a pencil. "You were in all the places the murderer had to be. And substituting the letter would have been easy for you, Miss Marsh. You would have been very smart, under those conditions, to have sent for me at once. That would throw suspicion entirely away from you."

"You're not being serious," said Linda, who seemed to have forgotten about lawyers.

"Of course I'm serious. You make a Grade A suspect, Miss Marsh."

"But Mr. Bradley, I . . ."

"What were you doing this morning, from quarter of nine on?"

"Why . . . I had breakfast about eight and got ready to go to the shop. Even though it's

Sunday, I had arranged to see my foreign buyer there. I left my apartment about—well, a few minutes before nine and walked down Fifth Avenue. I guess I did a little window-shopping, because it was going on quarter to ten when I reached the office. My appointment was for ten."

"Meet anybody on the avenue you knew?"

"No, I didn't."

"See?" said Bradley, with a smile.

"See what?"

"No alibi," said Bradley. "How do I know you were window-shopping? How do I know you didn't take a taxi to Severied's apartment, shoot Douglas Prayne, and then get back to your store in time to keep your appointment?"

"And how am I supposed to have gotten into Guy's apartment?" Linda asked.

"Oh, that's simple. Gloria Prayne probably had a key. We didn't find it among her belongings. When you killed her you took the key, thinking you might want to use it later." Bradley regarded her stunned expression with pleasure. "Makes a nice little case, doesn't it?"

"Inspector, I'm afraid I was a bit touchy when I first walked in here. I apologize."

"That's better," said Bradley. "Now sit down and tell me how long you've been in love with George Pelham."

"Mr. Bradley!" Color crimsoned her face.

"It's like pulling teeth," said Bradley, "to get you to credit me with any intelligence."

Linda sat down. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know all about Pelham."

"George is one of the grandest guys in the world."

"Are you going to marry him?"

"Really!"

"Well, it's not such a foolish question. When I see an attractive woman display a decided interest in an interesting tragic, and very eligible widower—two and two make four."

"I think," said Linda, "that if George asked me to marry him, I would. But he never will. He loved Dorothy too much."

"You've been to Pelham's apartment often, I suppose?"

"Of course."

"I just wondered if you'd had the opportunity to find out if he owns a gun—an automatic, preferably."

"I . . . I think he does," Linda said. "Yes, I know he does. He had it in the war."

"That's all for now, Miss Marsh," said Bradley.

Linda didn't move. "Just a moment, Inspector. There is only one reason why George would ever kill a man or a woman. If he found out that someone was responsible for Dorothy's disap-

pearance he would take the law into his own hands."

"I can think of another reason," said Bradley, and dismissed her.

Miss Devon walked in briskly and settled herself in the chair by Bradley's desk. A ball of blue yarn rolled away across the floor, and the inspector retrieved it for her. Then the steel needles went to work.

She said, "I think I can guess what you're going to ask me. Where I was earlier this morning; and if I know why Douglas went to Guy's apartment."

"They'll do for starters," Bradley smiled.

"I went out to do some marketing I'd forgotten about ten minutes after Douglas left. It took me nearly an hour because I went for a walk. I prefer thinking alone!" She looked at Bradley. "I could easily have gone to Guy's apartment, killed Douglas, and then done my shopping in the time I was out."

"I'll make a note of it," Bradley said.

"As to why Douglas went to Guy's apartment, I haven't the remotest idea. Or perhaps I'm not being tactful. Douglas didn't say why, but perhaps I have had *notions* about it."

"Such as?"

Miss Devon let the sock drop to her lap. "Has the idea of blackmail ever entered your head in connection with this case?"

"Lady, you're wasting your time keeping house," Bradley said.

"The way things are going, I may soon not have any family to keep house for."

"Following this blackmail theory," said Bradley, "Severied is our murderer."

"Why?"

"We assume that Gloria was doing the blackmailing, don't we?"

"Of course!"

"Gloria got frightened into writing a letter incriminating her victim, and left it with Miss Marsh. Now, if Miss Marsh were the victim she wouldn't have been given the letter to keep."

"Which narrows it down to Guy," said Miss Devon. "No one else had two thin dimes to rub together."

"That's the way it looks."

"I think you should know this: 'If Guy was being blackmailed, it was not on his own account. He would have thrown a blackmailer out on his ear in short order. But if he were protecting someone else—that's another story. And who would he be likely to protect so earnestly?' " Miss Devon went on, relentlessly. "Why, George, his best friend!"

"And what has the Captain got to hide?" Bradley asked.

"Ah, there you have me! But," and she paused for effect, "I am

sure that Guy was in no personal danger at Gloria's hands. The person he was protecting was the one who had something to fear."

"Quite," said Bradley.

Miss Devon's steady eyes met his. "It's been nice solving the case with you, Inspector," she said, and rose.

After Miss Devon had returned to the waiting-room Bradley picked up the phone. "Locate the telephone number of George Pelham's apartment," he ordered. "Rube Snyder is there. I want to talk to him."

He prowled up and down the room, but when the phone rang it was still the headquarters operator: "We've kept calling the number, but there's no answer."

"Damn!" said Bradley. "Rube probably thinks it's someone for Pelham. See if the apartment house has a switchboard. Get hold of someone there to go upstairs and tell Rube to report in at once."

"Yes, sir."

This time the wait seemed endless. When the call came Bradley spoke impatiently: "Hello, Rube?"

"Yesh, this is Rube." The sergeant's voice sounded queer. "Thanks for phonin' the super, Inspector."

"What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Listen, Inspector. Pelham's still at headquarters, ain't he?"

"Of course he is."

"Well, get a load of this," said Rube bitterly. "I get the key for this apartment from the super and I come upstairs. I walk into the apartment and . . . wham! Someone clouts me over the back of the head!"

"Who, Rube?"

"How should I know? I never got a look at him. Fireworks go off in front of my eyes, and the next thing I know the super is bendin' over me and I'm lyin' on the floor with my head on a pillow."

"With your head on *what?*"

"That's right. After he knocks me cold this guy puts a pillow under my head, the polite so-and-so!" . . .

After Snyder hung up Bradley asked for Pelham to be sent in.

Pelham stood in front of the desk looking at Bradley.

"Sorry, but I'll have to keep you waiting a moment, Captain. Sit down." Bradley was thumbing through a sheaf of papers.

Pelham sat down. The nerve at the corner of his mouth would not stay still. Finally Bradley said, "All right, Captain. Let's get down to brass tacks. Why did you murder your wife?"

Before Bradley could lift a hand Pelham had lunged across the intervening space and was at his throat. Bradley's swivel chair crashed against the wall. For a second he was in a decidedly

tough spot, as Pelham's fingers dug into his windpipe.

Then he managed to get one leg raised and to plant his foot squarely in the middle of Pelham's stomach. He shoved off, and Pelham went spinning across the room.

"Cut it!" Bradley said. The impetus of the shove had brought him to his feet.

The captain rushed him, and the result was short but sweet. Bradley side-stepped and his right fist came up under Pelham's chin, snapping his head back. Pelham went down and lay still.

Bradley walked to the office door. "Joe!" he called.

The uniformed cop bustled in. He gaped when he caught sight of Pelham. "Hey, Inspector, what happened?"

"I guess I didn't smile when I said it, Joe. Take his feet. We'll sit him over there on that chair."

Bradley loosened Pelham's collar and got water from the cooler. The man was stirring as Bradley held the cup to his lips. Then Pelham opened his eyes, and Bradley saw the dark rage burning in them.

"Take it easy," Bradley said.

Pelham wet his lips. His voice was cracked and hoarse: "So help me, Bradley, I'll make you pay for that accusation, you ward-heeling flatfoot."

The inspector looked pained. "Whenever anyone has it in for a cop they accuse him of being a bribe-taking politician," he said to Joe.

"You accused me of murder," Pelham said.

"If your wife wasn't murdered, what did happen to her?"

"Damn you, Bradley, I'm not here to answer questions about Dorothy!"

"Where is your old army automatic?" Bradley asked suddenly.

"If you're so anxious to know, get a search warrant and go over my apartment."

"I have. It isn't there!"

Pelham's eyes flickered, and then his lips clamped together.

Bradley said, "Prayne was murdered with the same type of gun as yours."

"How do you know that?"

"A Roettinger, firing soft-nosed bullets."

"Then arrest me!"

Bradley fingered some papers. "Snyder reports he found you at the Crop and Spur. What time did you leave your apartment this morning?"

"After breakfast."

"Did you go directly from your apartment to the riding school?"

"What good will it do me to say yes or no? I can't prove it."

Bradley sighed. "I've got a lot of time, Pelham," he said. "I can wait indefinitely for you to cool off. I'm convinced your wife's disappearance and these

two murders are connected. Was your wife in love with somebody else?"

"I ought to kill you for that," said Pelham.

"Maybe you killed *her* for it!" The swivel chair hinge creaked as Bradley continued rocking gently. "How was it? Did Gloria and her father have an inkling of the truth? Is that why you had to get rid of them?"

Pelham laughed, a mirthless, rasping sound. "I'm a mass killer, Inspector! I'm out to get the whole family!"

"Has Guy Severied got a key to your apartment?" Bradley asked.

"What of it?"

"Nothing—except that he's just been there and slugged one of my men."

"Why should Guy do that?"

"To protect you."

"From what?"

"Apparently he doesn't want to see you burn for what he considers justifiable homicide. He's been paying blackmail for a long time to guard your secret."

"The man's insane!" Pelham cried. "What secret?"

"The secret of your wife's disappearance. It got a little too hot when Gloria actually put it down on paper and gave it to Linda Marsh to keep. You couldn't risk that, could you, Captain?"

In spite of Joe, Pelham struggled to his feet. "Am I the best victim you can find to satisfy the Commissioner?"

"You're an awful good one," said Bradley. He looked at Joe. "Take him away," he said, "and turn the rest of them free."

"What's wrong, Inspector?" Pelham sneered. "Didn't your shock tactics work?"

But Bradley seemed to have forgotten him. He had swung out of his chair and was striding out of the room in the direction of the Missing Persons Bureau.

Inspector Flynn of that bureau greeted Bradley with enthusiasm.

Bradley told him, "I want the records in the case of one Dorothy Pelham, who disappeared about five years ago."

"Did we find her?"

"No. But I understand the case was officially dropped."

"I'll dig up the files for you."

The record was complete, if concise. The case had been reported in June 1935, by Captain George Pelham, the missing woman's husband. He had just returned from a motor trip through the New England States, where he had been on business. Inspector Earl Williams was assigned to the case on the 17th. His first report was brief:

"Dorothy Pelham, the missing woman, has been married to George Pelham for about four years. He went out of town on the 11th on business. He returned on the 15th, in the eve-

ning. Dorothy Pelham was not at home. No evidence of an intended absence. Clothes, jewels, etc., intact. Only possible evidence she might have intended staying away was absence of toothbrush. Employees in the apartment building saw her go out the afternoon of the 12th. Said nothing about going away. Pelham reports phoning all friends, acquaintances of his wife. Blank."

Then the second report, much briefer:

"Hospitals, public and private, morgues, covered. Blank. Followed up all reported accidents to females. Blank. No reports of suicides at water front, or on ferry runs."

The third report:

"Talked with nearly fifty friends of Dorothy Pelham. Every one of them scoffs at notion of suicide or wilfull disappearance. Subject was gay, full of life, no evidence of family trouble. She and husband out in society a lot; evidently very happy."

The fourth report:

"Investigated possibility of homicide. No known motive for anyone. Checked husband's alibi."

Here Bradley's eyes narrowed and he read slowly:

"George Pelham at Boston, Greenfield, Narragansett, Providence, registered at hotels in each city. Impossible to get complete detailed alibi, but seems unlikely he is involved. He *could* have flown to New York and back again to any one of these points in the course of an evening, but no record of such a trip. Checked with regular commercial air lines. Blank. There are lots of private planes he could have chartered. It would take months to check them all. Advise against expense, since there is no real reason to suspect him."

The fifth report:

"Gave Pelham the works. Thoroughly convinced he is innocent of any crime. Close to mental collapse."

The case was dropped in December. The only other piece of information was a note to the effect that the Bonestell Detective Agency, private, had been engaged by Pelham to carry on the search.

"What are you looking for?" Flynn asked.

"Evidence of murder," said Bradley. "I'd like to talk to Inspector Williams."

Flynn shook his head. "Williams is retired. Got a farm somewhere up in Dutchess County, I hear."

"Can you get his address?"

"Sure. Some of the boys will have it."

"The pension clerk will know," Bradley suggested.

"That's what you'd think, wouldn't you? But he won't. It was damn' queer about Earl Wil-

liams. He retired about eight months before he was eligible for pension."

"That's odd. When did he quit?" Bradley asked.

"Why, the end of that year, Luke. He shook off the department dust on January third."

"Just two or three weeks after this case was shelved!"

"Sure, but what of it?" said Flynn.

"I don't know, Mickey, I don't know. But get Mr. Williams's address for me in a hurry, will you?"

IX

Mr. Jerry Bonesteel, private investigator sat on a high stool in Bert Murtha's Restaurant and Bar adjoining Madison Square Garden. He was availing himself of Murtha's free lunch when Bradley's hand dropped on his shoulder. He turned on his stool.

"Why, you old horse thief!" he cried. "Where you been keeping yourself?"

"Around," said Bradley, occupying the next stool."

"Say, it's great to see you. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you. I finally located one of your operatives, who said you were apt to be here between five and six almost any day."

"Know why? They have the best damned salami in New York."

"I could bear to find out for myself," said Bradley. "And a bottle of ale," he added to the bartender.

"What's on your mind, Red? Got a case?"

"The Prayne case, Jerry. You know them, don't you?" Bradley was loading a piece of rye bread with salami. "In connection with the disappearance of Dorothy Pelham back about five years."

"So that's the way it is," said Bonesteel.

Bradley munched his sandwich, indicated approval, and reached for his glass of ale.

"That's how it is, Jerry."

"I'm a smart guy," said Bonesteel. "You think maybe little Dorothy might not have shuffled off to Buffalo of her own free will."

"I'd like to know what you think, Jerry."

"Nothing to it, Red. Mind you, I wasn't hired to investigate a crime. Just to find the gal."

"Uh-huh," said Bradley.

"But the department went into that," Bonesteel said quickly. "Bird named Williams was in charge. He dug around quite a lot and then washed it up."

"And then he retired, just eight months before he was eligible for pension."

"That's right. He's got a farm in Rhinebeck. I stopped off there last summer to see him."

"Nice place?"

"A dairy farm," said Bone-

steel, looking away. "Must have cost him plenty."

"Thanks," said Bradley. "About Dorothy Pelham?"

"Red, I shagged around for nearly three months trying to find some kind of a lead, and then I went to Severied and told him, frankly, he was wasting his dough."

"Severied?"

"Sure, Guy Severied, the society sportsman. Pelham hired me, but Severied paid my fee. He was a buddy of Pelham's."

"You must have found out something in three months."

"I did. I found out I'd like to work for Severied for life. That bird never once checked an expense account, Red. A prince."

Bradley sighed. "About Dorothy?"

"Red, that gal just went up in smoke. That's on the level."

Bradley drained his glass. "Well, there was no harm in asking you." He slid off the stool and handed the bartender a five-dollar bill. "It's all one me," he said.

"Thanks, Red. Wish I could have helped you," Bonesteel said, frowning.

"I wish you could. Well, so long, Jerry."

Bradley started for the door.

"Red!" Bonesteel called after him. Bradley turned. "There's one thing you might not know about Dotty Pelham."

"Yes?"

Bonesteel gave his bow tie a straightening tug. "She was crazy about the boys, Red."

Bradley waited for more, but Bonesteel had turned back to his bread and salami.

After dinner that night Bradley got his own car out of the garage and drove to Rhinebeck alone. A steady rain in the city had turned to snow when he'd gotten as far as Peekskill, and the going was slow. It was nearly eleven o'clock when he turned into the driveway of Earl Williams's farm.

He caught a glimpse of the rambling stone farmhouse, and of lights still burning in a wing at the rear. He parked his car and walked around toward the back door. As he approached, a dog, on the inside, set up a terrific clamor. Bradley saw the shadow of someone moving quickly against the drawn window shade. Then he mounted the back steps and knocked.

For a long time no one came. Then a bolt shot back and the door was opened just enough for the man inside to peer out.

"Well?"

"Earl Williams?"

The man in the door nodded.

"I know it's late, but I'd like to talk with you for a few minutes. I'm Luke Bradley, Homicide Division, New York City."

"Bradley!" There was no mistaking the startled note in the man's voice. Then the door

opened wide. "Down, Squire! Shut up!" The collie subsided, and Williams said: "Come in."

The kitchen was low-ceilinged, with heavy hand-hewn beams. Bradley saw a calabash pipe lying on the scrubbed table-top, a book turned face down, a cigarette stub burning in a saucer.

Williams was a tall, stoop-shouldered man with white hair, a leathery face, and deep-set black eyes. He took Bradley's coat and hat and placed them on a chair. Then he picked up his calabash, struck a match on the underside of the table. He fidgeted with the burnt match, waiting for Bradley to start the conversation.

Bradley had begun loading his own pipe. He was in no hurry.

"Just driving through?" Williams asked finally.

"No. No, I came especially to see you, Earl," Bradley said. "I need help on a case."

"I've been reading the papers," Williams said. "You're handling the Prayne murders, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I knew them in connection with a case at one time," Williams said. "Is it something about the Praynes you wanted to ask me?"

"No," Bradley said. "I wanted to ask you what happened to Dorothy Pelham."

"Pelham? Why, that's the case I was talking about."

"Yes," said Bradley. The cigarette in the saucer had burned itself out completely, leaving only tapering gray ash.

"That case was never solved, Bradley. I couldn't break it."

"Bunk," said Bradley, and stroked the dog.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said 'bunk,' " said Bradley, with a pleasant smile.

Williams sat silent for a moment, gripping the arms of his chair with both hands. "I think," he said, "if you were to read the records at headquarters—"

"The records don't tell me what I want to know."

"For example?" There was panic now in Williams's eyes.

"For example," Bradley said, "the records don't show why you retired from the force just eight months before you were eligible for pension."

"Why, that's simple. I had a chance to buy this place at a very reasonable figure. I'd always wanted a farm. I decided . . ."

"Where did you get the money?"

"Now, look here, Bradley—"

"You didn't save it out of your pay as a detective. You were on the force when you were twenty-two. You've never had any money. Yet you were able to buy this farm. Nine thousand, cash on the line."

Williams moistened his lips. "My wife—" he began.

"Your wife was one of eleven

children. Her father was a plumber, and when he died he left just about enough to pay his debts and bury him."

Williams rose slowly to his feet. "Am I charged with being in the rackets?"

"Not yet. Sit down." Williams dropped back onto the chair. Beads of perspiration glittered on his forehead. "Let's be sensible about this, Earl. I suggest you were paid to keep silent about facts you had unearthed in the Pelham case."

Williams groaned under his breath. "There was no crime!" he cried. "I swear it! Ask Bonesteel, the private dick who took over after we gave up the case."

"I have. He agrees with you. But he came on the case after you, Earl. It's possible you had destroyed some evidence."

"No, no, *no!*"

Bradley sighed. "Let's have it, Earl. You know what happened to Mrs. Pelham. You've been paid to keep quiet about it. Come clean, and perhaps there may be a chance for you to stay here on your farm."

Williams looked up, his eyes stricken. "There's nothing I can tell you, Bradley. Except this: There was no crime in connection with Dorothy Pelham's death."

"Then she *is* dead?"

"Yes."

"Was it an accident?"

"Yes, Bradley. I *have* concealed facts. And I'd do it again. It wasn't the money. I would have kept silent if there hadn't been a dime involved."

"All right, Earl, I'll accept that." Bradley leaned forward. "But two people have been murdered in the last forty-eight hours because they also knew that secret. You and Severied may be next. You haven't the right to keep that secret any longer!"

"I have to," said Williams wearily.

"You're a sucker, Earl! If you don't talk you'll endanger the life of your friend. That's not gratitude. It's stupidity!"

"I'm sorry."

Bradley stood up. "So am I. Get your hat and coat. You're coming back to New York with me."

"All right," said Williams. "If that's the way it has to be."

"Forget it, Earl," said a voice from behind him.

Guy Severied walked through a half-open door and into the warmth of the kitchen.

Bradley gave him a fleeting smile. He was obviously not surprised. "Mercy," he said, "I thought I'd have to start working Earl over before you'd come out of that hallway."

"You knew I was there?" Guy asked.

"You shouldn't leave Club Special cigarettes burning in country kitchens."

"It doesn't matter," said Guy.

"There's no reason why Earl should take the rap for this."

"He can't help himself," said Bradley. "And it's a serious rap. When a policeman conspires to conceal a crime—"

"He's told you there was no crime!" Severied said.

"What *did* happen?"

Guy shook his head. "No dice, Inspector."

"Do you know who murdered Gloria and her father, Severied?"

"No," said Guy, without hesitation.

"You know what was in the letter Gloria left with Linda?"

"I know what Gloria said she wrote."

"From reading that letter would the murderer know about Earl Williams?"

Guy whistled. "Nice point, Inspector. Neat. I'd missed it. Of course, he knows."

"Then I'm arresting you," said Bradley. "Protective custody. Get your things."

"But, Bradley—" Williams protested.

"Sorry. I want you both alive."

While Guy and Williams were getting into their things, Squire stalked over to the door, hackles raised and began sniffing and growling at the crack. But Bradley didn't notice, at least not consciously.

"Do we go in irons?" Guy asked.

"I don't own any," said Bradley. "Damn it, man, why don't you talk? Once I know, there'll be no use in more killings."

"Sorry, Inspector." Guy was sardonic. "I've been at some expense and personal misery to keep this secret for five years. I'm not giving up now. Not yet. Not yet. Not till I *know* it's the only way."

Williams joined them and they went out onto the back porch, locking the whining Squire inside. They started down the path, Williams lighting the way with a flash. Then it happened.

There were two sharp reports. Two tongues of flame stabbed the darkness. The torch dropped from Williams's hand and buried itself in the snow. Guy cried out. Bradley made a dive for the torch and recovered it. For an instant he saw Guy down on his knees, clutching at his left side. Then he ran. Before he reached the corner of the house he heard a motor spring to life, the whir of chains.

A red taillight was careening down the drive as Bradley sprang into his own car. He stepped on the starter button. Nothing happened. He leapt out quickly and lifted the engine hood. The torch revealed a mess of twisted wires, ripped from their moorings.

He cursed softly, feeling for a moment the bitterest kind of frustration. Then he remembered that a man could walk—

X

"You're still up?" Bradley said.

Celia Devon pulled the door back to admit him. "I didn't know there were any curfew laws, Mr. Bradley."

"It's four in the morning," Bradley told her.

"I'm past the age when I concern myself with beauty sleep."

"Where's Pat?"

"Asleep, thank the Lord. She was all in."

There was no friendliness in Bradley's tone. "Where have you been all evening?"

"Here, Inspector. Aren't you being a little grim?"

"We nearly had two more corpses on our hands tonight," said Bradley. "We are not amused."

"Inspector!"

"So Miss Prayne has been dead to the world?"

"Since about nine o'clock."

"Where's your car? It's not downstairs in the school, where it belongs."

"Johnny has it," Miss Devon said.

"Since when?"

"He took it about six o'clock this evening. He . . . he went to Delaware, Inspector."

"Delaware!"

"Those kids are still whistling in the dark, Mr. Bradley."

"Anyone go with him?"

"No."

"Are Curtin and Pelham at all intimate?" Bradley asked.

"Why . . . why, no. I mean, they always seemed to get along well enough. Johnny's much younger."

"It's the matter of Pelham's gun," said Bradley. "It was used again tonight. Somebody in a car, Miss Devon!"

Miss Devon evaded his eyes. "Everybody owns cars these days."

"You haven't asked me who tonight's victims were."

"Haven't I? I took it for granted, I'm afraid. Of course it was Guy. And you too, perhaps?"

"Guy will live, if it interests you."

"It does."

"The other victim was a man named Williams. Shot in the hand."

"A dairy farmer?" asked Miss Devon calmly.

"So you knew about our dairy farmer?" Bradley said.

"Oh, yes. Guy drove me out to the farm once. I think Guy helped him financially. He's really very generous."

"I remember. He kept Gloria equipped and under pressure. Was Williams turning a screw, too?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Perhaps you can tell me something about Dorothy. Did she run around a lot with other men?"

"Decidedly not," she said.

Bradley frowned. "A very reliable source has told me that she was 'very fond of the boys.' "

"Perhaps you had better check on your 'reliable source,' Mr. Bradley."

Bradley's eyes narrowed, and he stood up. "It's not important," he said. "I was just trying to fit all the pieces of the pattern."

"Does that mean you see a pattern?"

Bradley gave her a grim smile, and said: "I expect to make an arrest by morning."

GEORGE PELHAM parked his car outside the building where he lived. He got out, locked the car door, and walked across the pavement toward the building entrance. His walk was unsteady, as if he had been drinking. His overcoat was wet, his hat sodden.

The foyer was dark. Pelham started forward. In a dark alcove a figure stirred. Pelham didn't notice it. A hand reached out and caught at his sleeve.

"George!"

Pelham stopped dead in his tracks. "Linda!" he said, in a hoarse voice. "You . . . you startled me."

She came out of the darkness. "Oh, George, where have you been, sweet? I've been frantic about you, hunting for you."

"I was just—just looking," he said.

"I'll come up with you and fix you some coffee while you get out of those wet things."

"That would be swell," he said.

His face looked gray when she switched on the light inside his door. "Cold," he said.

"Where have you been, George?"

"Around. Hunting for Guy."

"You shouldn't have gone off by yourself."

"Why not?" asked Linda.

"Bradley's watching us all. He'll want you to explain."

"Then I'll explain! I have a right to hunt for Guy. Damn it, Linda, why is he hiding?"

"Guy knows what he's doing, sweet," said Linda.

"But what *is* he doing? Guy's hiding something. Are you hiding something, too?"

"George!"

"Something's going on. Bradley didn't pick Dorothy out of thin air."

"Darling, please!"

"If there's something about Dorothy I haven't been told—" He covered his face with his hands. "I can't go on without knowing, Linda, I can't!"

The doorbell rang. Linda went to answer it. Outside the opened door stood Bradley. Behind him, glowering, was Rube Snyder. Bradley looked past Linda to Pelham, huddled on the couch. He walked in.

"Captain, I'd like to borrow your car keys," said Bradley.

Pelham jumped to his feet. "What are you doing here?"

"Your car keys!" said Bradley.

"They're in my bedroom—on the bureau. I . . ."

"I'll get them," Linda said.

"What do you want with the keys?" Pelham demanded.

"I want to look for a gun."

"Oh, for God's sake!"

"Severied was shot tonight with your gun, Pelham."

"Guy *shot!*"

"You wouldn't know anything about it, I suppose," said Bradley grimly.

"When did it happen? Where?"

Linda came out of the bedroom with the keys.

"Guy's dead!" Pelham said. "*What!* George, I don't believe it!"

"He's not dead," said Bradley. "The murderer missed killing him by an inch or two. Blew quite a hole in him, though."

Pelham swayed on his feet. "I've got to go to him. Where is he, Inspector?"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to stay here for a while, Captain. I want to know where you've been this evening."

"George and I have been here together for quite some time," Linda said quickly.

"I know. All of twenty minutes. The keys, please." He took them and passed them to Rube. "Search," he said.

Rube nodded and disappeared.

"Well, Captain?"

"I've been hunting for Guy since about six o'clock," Pelham said, sinking back on the couch.

"And you, Miss Marsh?"

"I've been at the shop most of the evening," Linda said. "But I was worried about George. I kept calling and getting no answer. Finally I came here and waited for him."

"How long ago was that?"

"About an hour."

"Was anyone with you at the shop before that?"

"No." Linda's voice was angry.

Bradley turned to Pelham: "Do you remember a man named Williams who handled your wife's case? The murderer took a shot at him tonight, too."

Pelham wavered to his feet again. "Why?" he cried, *"Why?"*

"I thought perhaps you could tell me."

For the second time in twenty-four hours Pelham went off his head. He took the front of Bradley's coat in his hands and shook him. "You can't do this to me! You know what happened to Dorothy. Tell me, or, by God, I'll . . ."

"Sit down!" Bradley said. He said it so quietly that it checked Pelham in full flight.

Linda's voice was very low: "Then you know something, Mr. Bradley? Guy told you something?"

"He wouldn't, and now he can't," said Bradley. "No, Miss Marsh, I don't know the answer yet. But I will very soon."

Linda drew him aside. "Does George have to know, Inspector, if it is something that would hurt him?"

"It will supply the motive," said Bradley.

"But if *you* know, does it have to be *used?*"

"The murderer will be tried before a jury, Miss Marsh. You don't get convictions without supplying them with a motive."

"Then you can't make it easy for George?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Marsh. I'm going home and get some rest after I've made one more call. You'd better do the same thing. Tomorrow is going to be a tough day." . . .

Mr. Julius, wrapped from eyes to ankles in his long, black coat, was fumbling and stomping in the outside foyer of the house where Bradley lived on Washington Place. He exploded when Bradley walked in. "What kind of hocus-pocus is this?" he demanded. "Why did you send for me at four-thirty in the morning! Is this your idea of a joke?" He glared belligerently.

Bradley unlocked the door and switched on the lights in his apartment.

Mr. Julius pounded over to the hearth. "Start a fire!" he ordered.

"Yes, sir," said Bradley mildly, and got a fire going.

Mr. Julius rubbed his hands in front of the flame. Bradley filled his pipe from the jar on te table and came around to the couch.

"You're tired!" It was an accusation as Mr. Julius said it.

"I've been moving around."

"And getting nowhere, I wager!"

"Maybe not," Bradley said. "But Severied's out!"

"What's that?"

"The murderer took a shot at him early tonight. He nearly got him, too."

"Great Scott! Look here, Bradley, have you ideas about this?"

"Perhaps if I gave you some of the ideas I have you could piece them together yourself. I'd be interested in seeing if you arrive at the same conclusion that I have."

Mr. Julius banged his ear trumpet on the arm of the couch. "All right, *all right!* If you want to play games, go ahead."

"Just a number of disconnected clues," said Bradley. He spoke in a loud, clear voice. It would have been unnecessarily loud except for the old man's deafness. "Hang on to your hat."

"One: Guy Severied and George Pelham have been close friends for years.

"Two: Guy Severied did not

love Gloria Prayne, but they were engaged to be married.

"*Three:* Linda Marsh is thirty-four years old."

"What the hell kind of a clue is that?" Mr. Julius said testily.

"Hush," said Bradley, grinning. "*Four:* Gloria had an extensive and expensive wardrobe, purchased by Severied.

"*Five:* Gloria was afraid she was going to be murdered, and wrote a letter which would expose the murderer.

"*Six:* Severied knew about it.

"*Seven:* Gloria's body was kept hidden for two days.

"*Eight:* The keys to the Prayne car were kept on a table in the tackroom, and everyone connected with the case knew it.

"*Nine:* The murderer had a key to Guy Severied's apartment.

"*Ten:* Douglas Prayne hot-footed it to see Severied and was shot.

"*Eleven:* Severied went into hiding.

"*Twelve:* George Pelham owns a gun of the type used in the second murder.

"*Thirteen:* Severied went to Pelham's apartment to find that gun and had to knock out Rube to get away.

"*Fourteen:* When Dorothy Pelham disappeared the only thing missing was her toothbrush.

"*Fifteen:* Johnny Curtin gave Gloria the air, and she went away mad.

"*Sixteen:* Guy Severied got stinking drunk *before* he heard of the murder.

"*Seventeen:* George Pelham is what our romantic lady novelists call 'a one-woman man.'

"*Eighteen:* Earl Williams owns a dairy farm in Rhinebeck, N. Y.

"*Nineteen:* Guy Severied never looks at expense accounts.

"*Twenty:* All women think that chains keep them from skidding on icy roads."

"For Pete's sake!" said Mr. Julius disgustedly.

"*Twenty-one:* said Bradley. "The Hotel Gansvoort burned to the ground five years ago.

"*Twenty-two:* All unmarried women have a strong maternal complex.

"*Twenty-three:* The murderer had to have: (a) access to Gloria's stationery; (b) access to Linda's desk; (c) access to Pelham's apartment to get his gun; (d) access to Severied's apartment; (e) access to an automobile."

"God save us!" said Mr. Julius.

"*Twenty-four: The murderer had to be somebody Gloria Prayne trusted.* She would never have allowed herself to be trapped by anyone she feared. Not Severied! He was the person she was mortally afraid of." Bradley drew a long breath. "Well, have you got it?"

"I have got," said Mr. Julius, "a headache. What hooey!" The old man got up. "This place is

stifling. I think it's doped you." He walked over to the glass-topped door leading to the garden and opened it a crack. "I never thought the day would come," he said, "when you'd turn into a gibbering idiot!"

He snatched up his scraf and wrapped it around his throat. He struggled into his coat, pocketed his ear trumpet, jammed on his derby, and crooked the bone-handled umbrella over his arm.

"Good night," he said. "Consider yourself lucky if I ever give you five minutes of my time again." Without another word he slammed his way out of the apartment.

Bradley watched him go, smiling. Then he stood up, and the look of amusement faded.

"Miss Marsh, I have no intention of being murdered in my bed," he said, out loud. "Don't you think it would be a good idea if you came out of the kitchen and we talked things over?"

There was a quick, gasping breath from behind the curtain to the kitchenette. Then Linda Marsh stepped into the room. She held George Pelham's automatic quite steadily in her right hand.

"How did you like my summation of the case?" Bradley asked.

Linda's dark eyes were smouldering. "I thought it fatally good, Mr. Bradley," she said.

"My twenty-third clue was lacking a point," said Bradley quietly. "I should have added, 'Access to this apartment.' "

Linda stood motionless. "I don't quite understand you," she said.

"When we were in George Pelham's apartment, I went to some pains to tell you that I'd be here after I'd made another call."

Linda was clearly puzzled. "I thought it was some sort of trap. But I had to risk it. Then it turns out not to be a trap at all. What did you expect me to do, Mr. Bradley, surrender peacefully?"

"You might."

"I can still get away with this, Inspector. I can still live my life."

"Julius has the evidence," Bradley pointed out.

Linda laughed. "You had him thoroughly confused, Inspector. The poor old fool is more at sea than ever."

"How *did* you get in?" Bradley asked.

"Through the back garden. I broke a window pane in your kitchenette and unlocked the window. How did you know I was there?"

"I expected you. I saw the curtain move several times when I was talking to Julius. It couldn't have been anyone else, because I know, you see."

"That's unfortunate."

Bradley's gray eyes were tired. "Do you think Pelham would have married you in the end?"

Dark color spread from Lin-

da's throat and up over her face. "I think he will," she said. "But not if he had ever known the truth, Inspector. It would have blown what was left of his world to pieces."

"I'm sorry for you," Bradley said.

"Damn you for that," said Linda.

"You took care of the others from behind," said Bradley. "Would it be easier for you if I turned my back?"

For the first time the gun in Linda's hand was not steady. It began to tremble violently. Tears welled up into her eyes.

"For God's sake, Mr. Bradley, isn't there *any* way out of this? I'm fighting for my life, for George's. You know that! I thought, with Gloria gone, there would be an end to it. She deserved to die. I'd do it again. I thought it made me safe . . . made George safe. I thought Guy would benefit. And then I found out she'd told her father. I couldn't stop then, Mr. Bradley. I had to go on!"

"I know," Bradley said gently.

"I thought I would be safe, even after that. But you came into it. My only chance was to keep Guy and Williams from talking."

"It's like a snowball," Bradley said. "Murder always is. Now you are going to kill me. When Guy recovers he's going to realize it's you. You'll have to go on. You'll have to finish the job you tried tonight. Guy—then Williams. Do you know what will happen after that?"

Linda moistened her lips. "What?"

"Celia Devon is no fool. She suspects George. Wrongly, of course. But she's guessed the secret, or will. Sooner or later she will suspect you. You'll have to keep on. Perhaps in the end George himself will have to die . . . although you have done all this for him. You're out over your head, Miss Marsh. You can't win. I wanted you to come here. I wanted to give you a chance."

"A chance!"

"You've done all this to keep Pelham from knowing the truth about Dorothy," Bradley said. "I offer you the chance to win on that score. If you refuse, in the long run the thing will catch up with you, and there will be no secrets kept from anyone."

She stared at him, biting her lip.

"You'll have to make the decision," said Bradley. Very slowly he turned, put his pipe down on the mantel, and looked into the fire, his back to Linda.

Then he heard a strangled cry, the quick sound of movement across the room, and the gun went off.

Bradley sprung around. A cold blast of air struck him.

"So the poor old fool is at

sea, is he?" crowed Mr. Julius.

He had come through the door from the garden. The bone handle of his umbrella had been hooked over Linda's arm, yanking the automatic out of line. A sharp rap over the knuckles with the ear trumpet had forced her to drop it after one shot had gone wild.

"Smelled perfume the minute I stepped in the place," said Mr. Julius. "Thought I was a fool, didn't you? Thought I couldn't follow your childish exposition of the case? Phooey!"

Bradley looked at Linda. She had dropped down onto the edge of his bunk.

"Didn't dare admit it at the time," Mr. Julius went on. "She'd have blasted both of us! You need a nursemaid, Bradley. I snapped back the catch when I opened that garden door, so I could come back the same way. No time to call cops. I expected to find your brains spattered on the rug before I could get around. The woman's a lunatic, and you try to reason with her."

"Thanks," said Bradley quietly. "I think perhaps you're right." He walked over to Linda, rested his hand on her shoulder. "Well, Miss Marsh, I'm afraid this is the end."

Linda looked up at him. A deathly pallor had spread over her face.

She got slowly to her feet, seemed to waver for an instant, and then collapsed on the rug. Mr. Julius sprang forward and knelt beside her. His bony fingers fumbled for something on the rug. He held up a tiny glass vial.

"You clumsy fool," he said. "You've let her cheat the hangman!"

XI

Bradley was late in reaching his office the next morning. He had been through a session with the Commissioner, cleaning up the record of the case. He walked around behind his desk, and stood there for a minute, shuffling through some papers. The lines in his face seemed to be deeper than usual.

"Do you always greet guests so cordially?" asked a dry voice.

He turned, startled. Seated in a chair by the window, her knitting needles clicking over a new blue sock, was Miss Celia Devon.

"Sorry," Bradley said. "I'm still in something of a fog."

Miss Devon eyed him shrewdly. "You know, Inspector, I have the greatest admiration for your abilities as a detective, but you're a terrible liar—that is, if you're responsible for this." She pointed to a newspaper.

Bradley looked unhappy. "Is it that bad?"

"Oh, the subway straphangers will eat it up," said Miss Devon. "Linda Marsh, love killer and

suicide. According to this, she was in love with Guy Severied, killed Gloria because Gloria had a hold on him, was forced to murder Douglas, and then actually made an attempt on Guy when he turned her down. It's beautiful, Mr. Bradley. And it's the sheerest twaddle, as you very well know!"

"That story in the paper will hold water," said Bradley. "Severied is quite willing to be the goat. I talked to him at the hospital before I gave it out."

"Guy would," said Miss Devon. "But why? Why not the truth—whatever it is?"

"Because, said Bradley gravely, "for five years Guy Severied has gone through hell to keep the truth hidden, and Linda has committed two murders for the same cause."

"But, see here . . ."

"It's a strange story, Miss Devon. The story of the love of a man for his best friend, and of a woman for that same friend. Guy Severied has gone to enormous expense and was preparing to marry a woman he hated simply to protect George Pelham. Linda Marsh killed Gloria and her father to save Pelham from being hurt.

"Dorothy Pelham, as we suspected all along, Miss Devon, was the key to the whole affair—Dorothy Pelham, who was 'crazy about the boys.' You doubted that, because, under that acid veneer of yours, you really think well of people. But Dorothy Pelham didn't deserve your confidence. I suspect that from the time she and Pelham were married she was never faithful to him.

"Guy Severied knew this, and he knew how desperately bound up in her Pelham was. He knew what it would mean to Pelham if he ever found out the truth. He exerted all his influence on Dorothy, trying to get her to play ball. There was one man, however, whom she couldn't or wouldn't give up. We will call him 'X.' He lived out of town, and I suspect that Dorothy had known him before her marriage. Whenever X came to New York on business trips he and Dorothy saw each other. Severied tried to break this up.

"On the day Dorothy disappeared, X was in town. Severied went to her and begged her not to see him. She laughed at him, and went to keep her appointment with X at his hotel. Severied, who was keeping tabs on her, decided to have a showdown with them both. He went to the hotel where X was staying." Bradley drew a deep breath. "The important point, Miss Devon, is that X was staying at the Hotel Gansvoort."

"Good Lord!" Miss Devon's tone was horrified.

"That night, as you know," Bradley continued, "the Gans-

voort burned to the ground. Fifty or sixty people died in the fire. Dorothy Pelham and X were among them.

"Severied was at the hotel when the fire broke out. In fact, he was on his way upstairs to confront the lovers. You remember his presence at the hotel was played up in the papers the next day. He was commended for his heroic efforts to save the lives of guests who were trapped in the fire. Of course, his chief concern was to save Dorothy, but he never got to her."

Miss Devon shivered.

Bradley knocked the cold ashes from his pipe. "Severied was then confronted with a problem. If he told Pelham that Dorothy had died in the fire he would have to explain how he knew. Worse than that, he had been seen a great deal with Dorothy. Wouldn't Pelham inevitably jump to the conclusion that, not only had his wife been unfaithful, but that Severied too, was guilty?

"Severied had to decide whether it was better for Pelham never to know what had happened to his wife, and still retain his belief in her and in his best friend—better than to know that she had never been faithful to him, and to go on living with the gnawing suspicion that Severied had doublecrossed him. Guy decided it was better for George never to know."

"I think he was right," said Miss Devon.

"It was a costly decision. Once he had made it he could never go back on it. If, months later, he told what he knew, he would never be able to persuade anyone that he hadn't been there with Dorothy himself. He had to keep silent then, at any cost.

"Then Earl Williams, the detective who handled the case, following ordinary routine, finally stumbled on the truth. Guy admitted it, and sold Williams on keeping quiet. No crime had been committed, so Williams agreed.

"Then things really got tough. Gloria was at Guy's apartment one day. He left her to do an errand, and she began looking at papers and letters on his desk. I gather she had no very strong sense of private property. In the process she found a secret drawer. In it was a written agreement between Severied and Williams, disclosing the whole story."

"Gloria had struck gold!" said Miss Devon.

"Quite. She began a systematic blackmailing of Severied, which included marriage. Naturally, Severied hated her guts. He must have made it so clear that she got frightened. She wrote a letter, exposing the whole thing, and left it with Linda. If Guy pulled anything he would pay. That was her notion.

"Now, Linda Marsh is en-

dowed with an ordinary amount of curiosity. Gloria had acted so queerly she couldn't resist opening the letter. And there the seed of murder was sown. Linda was in love with Pelham. It seemed likely that sooner or later George would marry her. But if this story out of the past ever got to him, Pelham would crack into a thousand pieces. Linda was willing to go to any lengths to keep that knowledge from George.

"She planned carefully. It was simple enough to prepare a duplicate letter to substitute for the original. Then she bided her time. The night Gloria left Johnny at El Coronado, she went to Linda's shop, where Linda often worked late.

"Linda took the opportunity. She strangled Gloria and hid the body in a storeroom to which only she had access. Two nights later she took the Praynes' car during the excitement at the Horse Show, rolled the body off a loading platform at the rear of the shop into the rumble, drove back to the Garden, and that was that. Very smartly she then turned over the phony letter to me.

"Then things began to happen. She went to Guy's apartment to find the copy of that agreement, having taken a key from Gloria's purse. She had also quietly borrowed Pelham's automatic. While she was there, Douglas Prayne arrived. Your brother-in-law, Miss Devon, was, I am afraid, not a nice person. Gloria had told him the facts. He saw himself in a position to continue the blackmail of Severied. He arrived at Guy's apartment, and found Linda there.

"He was no fool. He probably caught Linda red-handed going through Severied's desk, put two and two together, and decided he had another blackmail victim —Linda. But he was dealing with a woman who meant to let nothing stand in her way. She shot him.

"Then she had her next bad break. I don't believe in coincidences. I began prying into Dorothy Pelham's past. She watched me drawing closer and closer to the truth. She thought if I put the heat on Guy and Williams they'd talk. She was on a sort of merry-go-round by then. There wasn't any stopping.

"Last night I gave her a chance. I let her know I was going to be at my apartment. I had to do that, because I wanted to force her to show her hand. It's funny," and Bradley smiled wryly, "but I found myself wondering how I could saw up my case without divulging the secret everyone had tried so hard to keep. I offered to protect that secret if she would submit to arrest." Bradley shrugged. "I don't know what she would have

chosen. Mr. Julius barged in, and he may have saved my life."

"And now," said Miss Devon, "the secret they've struggled so hard to keep . . ."

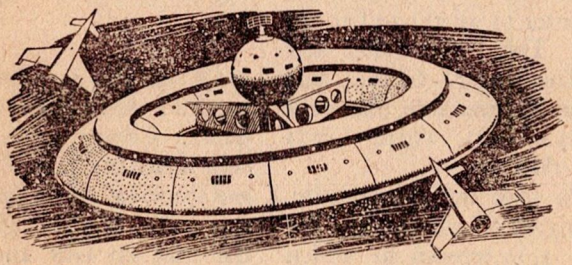
"Will remain a secret," said Bradley. "Since there will be no trial, the motive I gave the press will stand up. George Pelham will never know the truth about his wife. Linda had courage, Miss Devon. Her suicide was the one way the secret could finally be kept."

Miss Devon gave Bradley a steady look. "If you'd known that she intended to do . . . suicide, I mean . . . would you have let her go through with it?"

"Mercy!" said Bradley. "Are you trying to compromise a police officer?"

"I'm trying to get a straight answer from an extremely devious man."

"I'm glad," said Bradley, "that I didn't have to make the decision."



the last act

by . . . Herbert Harris

A murderer who anticipates his intended victim's every move — may be courting stark disaster.

THE AUDIENCE at the Olympic Theatre sat on the edge of suspense as Mavis Alloway clenched her fists, and turned her expressive back on them.

"Get out—all of you!" she shrieked, and as an excited whispering came from beyond the footlights, the target for her outburst left the stage by the door up right.

Mavis Alloway stood breathing harshly for a moment, her face dark with fury. Then she walked quickly upstage to the sideboard, on which stood a tray containing a Gordon's gin bottle and a tumbler. She poured a large measure of "gin," and swallowed it almost at a gulp, her eyes darting toward the door.

As the curtain slowly came down, a burst of unrestrained applause arose from the auditorium.

John Alloway moved sullenly away from the wings as his wife left the stage.

He had no wish to speak to her. For a long time they had ceased to mean anything to each

The inglorious scroll of crime is often illuminated by strange marginal figures—grinning imps of the perverse and malicious who seem determined to drape around the wickedest schemes the chill shadow of the hangman's noose. But in this suspenseful little story of a murder scheme that boomeranged, Herbert Harris has left the margins blank, skillfully omitting the hidden fingerprint, and letting the killer himself be his own executioner.

other. She walked straight past him, as if completely unaware of his presence. If, nowadays, their eyes met, they met like swords, and he was glad when she refused to look his way.

At one time he had allowed himself to believe that a reconciliation might be possible. But he knew now he had no desire to resume the old relationship. He was too deeply in love with Melanie Scott.

Melanie was only a small-part girl, and she would probably never be anything else. She had no ability as an actress—in fact, she was everything his wife was not. He shut his eyes, placing their images together in his mind's eye—Mavis, with her cold northern face and her strident whip lash tongue; and Melanie, with her warm vivacity, her delicious little sprays of laughter, her voice like the tinkle of music-boxes.

He transferred his attention to the stage. Old Joe, the property-man, was already at work behind the plush curtains, hidden from the chattering auditorium.

John Alloway knew he would presently take the tray from the sideboard—the one with the Gordon's gin bottle and the glass which his wife had hastily drained—and carry it backstage to the clutter of stage-properties ranged against the whitewashed wall.

He had stood watching this scene for two nights, while forbidden thoughts—terrible, fascinating—paced the corridors of his brain. The scheme seemed almost too clear, too ridiculously simple.

He knew that old Joe pottered about backstage in the afternoon, never failing to omit a prop—a ritual which included putting a little fresh water in the gin bottle and placing it on the tray with the glass. Then Joe would leave the deserted theatre, and go off to his dinner.

He could so easily slip into the theatre after Joe left, and put the poison in the bottle. Mavis would just swallow it at a gulp. And later, some time later, she would mysteriously die.

But what if someone thought of the "gin" she had gulped on the stage? Of course, it would not be thought of immediately—perhaps not for some time. Indeed, it might not be thought of at all. But, then, somebody *might* think of it.

If it were a slow-acting poison Mavis would not die till later. He could change the bottles when the theatre became deserted again. One Gordon's gin bottle was like any other of the same brand. So he would buy a bottle of Gordon's gin, empty it, and substitute the new bottle for the old one. Then he would take the old bottle away somewhere, and destroy it—perhaps throw it in the river.

The precaution was important.

If anyone should think of the water in the gin bottle as the probable cause of Mavis's death, the bottle might be examined for traces of poison. Oh, yes, and the glass too! He must wash the glass, or replace it with another.

How could he possibly come under suspicion? The police couldn't accuse him of poisoning his wife at home, because everybody knew that he and Mavis no longer lived together. The idea looked so safe and ingenious that he ceased to be terrified by it. Instead, it made his spirits soar.

His presence backstage was accepted as a matter of routine. Not that he haunted the theatre to be near his wife. He was drawn there by the magnetism of Melanie Scott.

"I'm sorry for the guy really," the stage manager said to the chief electrician one night, when Alloway was out of earshot. "He's crazy about the Scott girl. But she won't go to him until his wife frees him. Not that I blame him. Mavis Alloway's one of those aggressive, temperamental women who make men targets for their own frustration. But Melanie's a damn nice kid. He'd marry her like a shot if Mavis would release him—not that she's ever likely to."

John Alloway knew that Mavis would never release him and it was this knowledge which strengthened his determination to carry out his plan. He executed each phase of the scheme with methodical precision, for he was a methodical man. As far as he could see the plan could not fail. It was without a flaw.

At eleven o'clock that night, John Alloway slipped quietly from one of the exits of the deserted Olympic Theatre, and made his way towards the river. Pausing by the parapet, he hurled an empty Gordon's gin bottle into the oily, dark tide, and heard the faint splash as it struck the water.

Resolutely then he returned to the hotel room which had been his home since he had walked out of Mavis's life. He sat in an armchair, sipping at a whiskey, going over the phases of the plan he had carried out, checking and re-checking them.

Soon his telephone would ring. There was a tormenting uncertainty in not knowing when Mavis had died. After the last curtain? In her dressing-room? In a cab? At home? Surely somebody would ring to notify him as next of kin.

The call came at midnight. It was from the stage manager, Carter, with whom he had become friendly. Carter said: "I didn't see you at the theatre tonight."

"No, I wasn't there," Alloway said, deliberately keeping his voice level.

"I thought you might not have heard about your wife."

"Mavis?" Alloway prompted evenly. "What happened?"

"She was taken ill," Carter told him. "Violent pains. She was rushed to the hospital and operated on for appendicitis."

"I see," Alloway said calmly. "I'm glad you were there, Carter."

"Yes. Luckily it happened before we rang up the curtain. Her understudy took over—your little friend Melanie Scott. She gave a terrific performance. But the strain must have been too much for her, because she collapsed right after the last curtain. They whisked her off to join Mavis at the hospital—St. Andrew's. Thought you'd want to ring them."

"Yes . . . yes, I would," Alloway said. "Thanks." He replaced the receiver and sat looking at it —and through it.

The papers the following morning devoted many columns of type to the mystery surrounding the death of Melanie Scott, a young actress who had died after taking over the part of Mavis Alloway at the Olympic Theatre.

A shorter paragraph recorded that a man named John Alloway had been killed instantly in a fall from his fifth-story hotel suite.

bird with the broken wing

by . . . Agatha Christie

Mabelle Annesley's beauty seemed to beckon men to destruction—to promise them bewildering ecstasy. Was death then so great an evil?

MR. SATTERTHWAITE looked out of the window. It was raining steadily. He shivered. Very few country houses, he reflected, were really properly heated. It cheered him to think that in a few hours' time he would be speeding toward London. Once one had passed sixty years of age, London was really much the best place.

He was feeling a little old and pathetic. Most of the members of the house party were so young. Four of them had just gone off into the library to do table turning. They had invited him to accompany them but he had declined. He failed to derive any amusement from the monotonous counting of the letters of the alphabet and the usual meaningless jumble of letters that resulted.

Yes, London was the best place for him. He was glad that he had declined Madge Keeley's invitation when she had rung up to invite him over to Laidell half an hour ago. An adorable young person, certainly, but London was best.

A top-echelon mystery story critic must, of necessity, maintain a certain asperity in his literary judgments. Book-jacket blurb writers may be a bit reckless with their superlatives, but the real experts can't afford to be. When a dozen such critics dare to affirm that Agatha Christie may well be the foremost living detective story writer, you can rest assured it's a deserved tribute. Here is an Agatha Christie story so deftly magical, its dark fabric of death has the very feel and texture of reality.

Mr. Satterthwaite shivered again and remembered that the fire in the library was usually a good one. He opened the door and adventured cautiously into the darkened room.

"If I'm not in the way—"

"Was that N or M? We shall have to count again. No, of course not, Mr. Satterthwaite. Do you know, the most exciting things have been happening. The spirit says her name is Ada Spiers and John here is going to marry someone called Gladys Bun almost immediately."

Mr. Satterthwaite sat down in a big easy chair in front of the fire. His eyelids drooped over his eyes and he dozed. From time to time he returned to consciousness, hearing fragments of speech.

"It can't be P A B Z L—not unless he's a Russian. John, you're shoving. I *saw* you. I believe it's a new spirit come."

Another interval of dozing. Then a name jerked him wide awake.

"Q U I N. Is that right?" Yes, it's rapped once for Yes." "Quin. Have you a message for someone here? Yes. For me? For John? For Sarah? For Evelyn? No—but there's no one else. Oh! it's for Mr. Satterthwaite, perhaps? It says "Yes." Mr. Satterthwaite, it's a message for you."

"What does it say?"

Mr. Satterthwaite was broad awake now, sitting taut and erect in his chair, his eyes shining.

The table rocked and one of the girls counted.

"L A I—it can't be—that doesn't make sense. No word begins L A I."

"Go on," said Mr. Satterthwaite, and the command in his voice was so sharp that he was obeyed without question.

"L A I D E L—and another L—Oh! that seems to be all."

"Go on."

"Tell us some more, please."

A pause.

"There doesn't seem to be any more. The table's gone quite dead. How silly."

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully. "I don't think it's silly."

He rose and left the room. He went straight to the telephone. Presently he was through.

"Can I speak to Miss Keeley? Is that you, Madge, my dear? I want to change my mind, if I may, and accept your kind invitation. It is not so urgent as I thought that I should get back to town. Yes—yes—I will arrive in time for dinner."

He hung up the receiver, a strange flush on his withered cheeks. Mr. Quin—the mysterious Mr. Harley Quin. Mr. Satterthwaite counted over on his fingers the times he had been brought into contact with that man of mystery. Where Mr. Quin was concerned—*things*

happened! What had happened or was going to happen—at Laidell?

Whatever it was, there was work for him, Mr. Satterthwaite, to do. In some ways or other, he would have an active part to play. He was sure of that.

Laidell was a large house. Its owner, David Keeley, was one of those quiet men with indeterminate personalities who seem to count as part of the furniture. Their inconspicuousness has nothing to do with brain power—David Keeley was a most brilliant mathematician and had written a book totally incomprehensible to ninety-nine hundredths of humanity. But like so many men of brilliant intellect, heradiated no bodily vigor or magnetism. It was a standing joke that David Keeley was a real "invisible man." Footmen passed him by with the vegetables, and guests forgot to say how do you do or good-bye.

His daughter Madge was very different. A fine upstanding young woman, bursting with energy and life. Thorough, healthy and normal, and extremely pretty.

It was she who received Mr. Satterthwaite when he arrived.

"How nice of you to come—after all."

"Very delightful of you to let me change my mind. Madge, my dear, you're looking very well.

"Oh. I'm always well."

"Yes, I know. But it's more than that. You look—well, blooming is the word I have in mind. Has anything happened, my dear? Anything—well—special."

She laughed—blushed a little. "It's too bad, Mr. Satterthwaite. You always guess things."

He took her hand. "So it's that, is it? Mr. Right has come along?"

It was an old-fashioned term, but Madge did not object to it. She rather liked Mr. Satterthwaite's old-fashioned ways.

"I suppose so—yes. But nobody's supposed to know. It's a secret. But I don't really mind your knowing, Mr. Satterthwaite. You're always so nice and sympathetic."

Mr. Satterthwaite thoroughly enjoyed romance at second hand. He was sentimental and Victorian.

"I mustn't ask who the lucky man is? Well, then all I can say is that I hope he is worthy of the honor you are conferring on him."

Rather a duck, old Mr. Satterthwaite, thought Madge.

"Oh! we shall get on awfully well together, I think," she said. "You see, we like doing the same things, and that's so awfully important, isn't it? We've really got a lot in common—and we know all about each other and all that. It's really been coming on for a long time. That gives one such

a nice safe feeling, doesn't it?"

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "But in my experience one can never really know all about anyone else. That is part of the interest and charm of life."

"Oh! I'll risk it," said Madge, laughing, and they went up to dress for dinner.

Mr. Satterthwaite was late. He had not brought a valet, and having his things unpacked for him by a stranger always flurried him a little. He came down to find everyone assembled, and in the modern style Madge merely said:

"Oh! here's Mr. Satterthwaite. I'm starving. Let's go in."

She led the way with a tall gray-haired woman—a woman of striking personality. She had a very clear, rather incisive voice, and her face was clear cut and rather beautiful.

"How d'you do, Satterthwaite," said Mr. Keeley.

Mr. Satterthwaite jumped. "How do you do," he said. "I'm afraid I didn't see you."

"Nobody does," said Mr. Keeley sadly.

They went in. The table was a low oval of mahogany. Mr. Satterthwaite was placed between his young hostess and a short dark girl—a very hearty girl with a loud voice and a ringing determined laugh that expressed more the determination to be cheerful at all costs than any real mirth. Her name seemed to be Doris and she was the type of young woman Mr. Satterthwaite most disliked. She had, he considered, no artistic justification for existence.

On Madge's other side was a man of about thirty whose likeness to the gray-haired woman proclaimed them mother and son.

Next to him—

Mr. Satterthwaite caught his breath.

He didn't know what it was exactly. It was not beauty. It was something else—something much more elusive and intangible than beauty.

She was listening to Mr. Keeley's rather ponderous dinner table conversation, her head bent a little sideways. She was there, it seemed to Mr. Satterthwaite—and yet she was not there! She was, somehow, a great deal less substantial than anyone else seated round the oval table. Something in the droop of her body sideways was beautiful—was more than beautiful. She looked up—her eyes met Mr. Satterthwaite's for the moment across the table—and the word he wanted leapt to his mind.

Enchantment—that was it. She had the quality of enchantment. She might have been one of those creatures who are only half human—one of the Hidden People from the Hollow Hills. She made everyone else look rather too real.

But at the same time, in a queer way, she stirred his pity. It was as though semi-humanity handicapped her. He sought for a phrase and found it.

"A bird with a broken wing," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Satisfied, he turned his mind back to the subject of Girl Guides and hoped that the girl Doris had not noticed his abstraction. When she turned to the man on the other side of her —a man Mr. Satterthwaite had hardly noticed—he himself turned to Madge.

"Who is the lady sitting next to your father?" he asked in a low voice.

"Mrs. Graham? Oh! no, you mean Mabelle. Don't you know her? Mabelle Annesley. She was a Clydesley—one of the ill-fated Clydesleys."

He started. The ill-fated Clydesleys. He remembered. A brother had shot himself, a sister had been drowned, another had perished in an earthquake. A queer doomed family. This girl must be the youngest of them.

His thoughts were recalled suddenly. Madge's hand touched his under the table. Everyone else was talking. She gave a faint inclination of her head to her left.

"That's him," she murmured ungrammatically.

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded quickly in comprehension. So this young Graham was the man of Madge's choice. Well, she could hardly have done better as far as appearances went—and Mr. Satterthwaite was a shrewd observer. A pleasant, likeable, rather matter-of-fact young fellow. They'd make a nice pair—no nonsense about either of them —good healthy sociable young folk.

Laidell was run on old-fashioned lines. The ladies left the dining room first. Mr. Satterthwaite moved up to Graham and began to talk to him. His estimate of the young man was confirmed, yet there was something that struck him as being not quite true to type. Roger Graham was distrait, his mind seemed far away, his hand shook as he replaced the glass on the table.

"He's got something on his mind," thought Mr. Satterthwaite acutely. "Not nearly as important as he thinks it is, I daresay. All the same, I wonder what it is."

Mr. Satterthwaite was in the habit of swallowing a couple of digestive pastilles after meals. Having neglected to bring them down with him, he went up to his room to fetch them.

On his way down to the drawing room, he passed along the long corridor on the ground floor. About halfway along it was a room known as the terrace room. As Mr. Satterthwaite look-

ed through the open doorway in passing, he stopped short.

Moonlight was streaming into the room. The latticed panes gave it a queer rhythmic pattern. A figure was sitting on the low window sill, drooping a little sideways and softly twanging the strings of a ukulele—not in a jazz rhythm, but in a far older rhythm, the beat of fairy horses riding on fairy hills.

Mr. Satterthwaite stood fascinated. She wore a dress of dull dark blue chiffon, ruched and pleated so that it looked like the feathers of a bird. She bent over the instrument crooning to it.

He came into the room—slowly, step by step. He was close to her when she looked up and saw him. She didn't start, he noticed, or seem surprised.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he began.

"Please—sit down."

He sat near her on a polished oak chair. She hummed softly under her breath.

"There's a lot of magic about tonight," she said. "Don't you think so?"

Yes, there was a lot of magic about.

"They wanted me to fetch my uke," she explained. And as I passed here, I thought it would be so lovely to be alone here—in the dark and the moon."

"Then I—" Mr. Satterthwaite half rose, but she stopped him.

"Don't go. You—you fit in, somehow. It's queer, but you do."

He sat down again.

"It's been a queer sort of evening," she said. "I was out in the woods late this afternoon, and I met a man—such a strange sort of man—tall and dark, like a lost soul. The sun was setting, and the light of it through the trees made him look like a kind of Harlequin."

"Ah!" Mr. Satterthwaite leaned forward—his interest quickened.

"I wanted to speak to him—he—he looked so like somebody I know. But I lost him in the trees."

"I think I know him," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Do you? He is—interesting, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is interesting."

There was a pause. Mr. Satterthwaite was perplexed. There was something, he felt, that he ought to do—and he didn't know what it was. But surely—surely, it had to do with this girl. He said rather clumsily:

"Sometimes—when one is unhappy—one wants to get away—"

"Yes. That's true." She broke off suddenly. "Oh! I see what you mean. But you're wrong. It's just the other way round. I wanted to be alone because I'm happy."

"Happy?"

"Terribly happy."

She spoke quite quietly, but Mr. Satterthwaite had a sudden sense of shock. What this strange girl meant by being happy wasn't the same as Madge Keeley would have meant, by the same words. Happiness, for Mabelle Annesley, meant some kind of intense and vivid ecstasy —something that was not only human, but more than human. He shrank back a little.

"I—didn't know," he said clumsily.

"Of course you couldn't. And it's not—the actual thing—I'm not happy yet—but I'm going to be." She leaned forward. "Do you know what it's like to stand in a wood—a big wood with dark shadows and trees very close all round you—a wood you might never get out of—and then, suddenly—just in front of you, you see the country of your dreams—shining and beautiful —you've only got to step out from the trees and the darkness and you've found it?"

"So many things look beautiful," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "before we've reached them. Some of the ugliest things in the world look the most beautiful."

There was a step on the floor. Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head. A fair man with a stupid, rather wooden face, stood there. He was the man Mr. Satterthwaite had hardly noticed at the dinner table.

"They're waiting for you, Mabelle," he said.

She got up; the expression had gone out of her face; her voice was flat and calm.

"I'm coming, Gerard," she said. "I've been talking to Mr. Satterthwaite."

She went out of the room, Mr. Satterthwaite following. He turned his head over his shoulder as he went and caught the expression on her husband's face, a hungry despairing look.

"Enchantment," thought Mr. Satterthwaite. "He feels it right enough. Poor fellow—poor fellow."

The drawing room was well lighted. Madge and Doris Coles were vociferous in reproaches.

"Mabelle, you little beast—you've been ages."

She sat on a low stool, tuned the ukulele and sang. They all joined in.

"Is it possible," thought Mr. Satterthwaite, "that so many idiotic songs could have been written about My Baby."

But he had to admit that the syncopated wailing tunes were stirring. Though, of course, they weren't a patch on the old-fashioned waltz.

The air got very smoky. The syncopated rhythm went on.

"No conversation," thought Mr. Satterthwaite. "No good music. No *peace.*" He wished the world had not become definitely so noisy.

Suddenly Mabelle Annesley broke off, smiling across the room at him, and began to sing a song of Grieg's.

"My swan—my fair one—"

It was a favorite of Mr. Satterthwaite's. He liked the note of ingenuous surprise at the end.

"Wert only a swan then? A swan then?"

After that, the party broke up. Madge offered drinks, while her father picked up the discarded ukulele and began twanging it absent-mindedly. The party exchanged good nights, drifted nearer and nearer to the door. Everyone talked at once. Gerard Annesley slipped away unostentatiously, leaving the others.

Outside the drawing room door, Mr. Satterthwaite bade Mrs. Graham a ceremonious good night. There were two staircases, one close at hand, the other at the end of a long corridor. It was by the latter that Mr. Satterthwaite reached his room. Mrs. Graham and her son passed up the stairs near at hand where the quiet Gerard Annesley had already preceded them.

"You'd better get your ukulele, Mabelle," said Madge. "You'll forget it in the morning if you don't. You've got to make such an early start."

"Come on, Mr. Satterthwaite," said Doris Coles, seizing him boisterously by one arm. "Early to bed—etcetera."

Madge took him by the other arm and all three ran down the corridor to peals of Doris's laughter. They paused at the end to wait for David Keeley, who was following at a much more sedate pace, turning out electric lights as he came. The four of them went upstairs together. . . .

Mr. Satterthwaite was just preparing to descend to the dining room for breakfast on the following morning when there was a light tap on the door and Madge Keeley entered. Her face was dead white and she was shivering all over.

"Oh! Mr. Satterthwaite."

"My dear child, what's happened?" He took her hand.

"Mabelle — Mabelle Annesley—"

"Yes?"

What had happened? What? Something terrible—he knew that. Madge could hardly get the words out.

"She—she hanged herself last night. On the back of her door. Oh! it's too horrible." She broke down—sobbing.

Hanged herself. *Impossible.* Incomprehensible!

He said a few soothing old-fashioned words to Madge, and hurried downstairs. He found David Keeley looking perplexed and incompetent.

"I've telephoned to the police, Satterthwaite. Apparently that's got to be done. So the doctor said. He's just finished examining the—the—Good Lord, it's a

beastly business. She must have been desperately unhappy—to do it that way. Queer that song last night. Swan Song, eh? She looked rather like a swan—a black swan."

Yes.

"Swan Song," repeated Keeley. "Shows it was in her mind, eh?"

"It would seem so—yes, certainly it would seem so."

He hesitated, then asked if he might see—if, that is—

His host comprehended the stammering request.

"If you want to—I'd forgotten you have a *penchant* for human tragedies."

He led the way up the broad staircase. Mr. Satterthwaite followed him. At the head of the stairs was the room occupied by Roger Graham, and opposite it, on the other side of the passage, his mother's room. The latter door was ajar and a faint wisp of smoke floated through it.

A momentary surprised invaded Mr. Satterthwaite's mind. He had not judged Mrs. Graham to be a woman who smoked so early in the day. Indeed, he had had the idea that she did not smoke at all.

They went along the passage to the end door but one. David Keeley entered the room and Mr. Satterthwaite followed him.

The room was not a very large one and showed signs of a man's occupation. A door in the wall led into a second room. A bit of cut rope still dangled from a hook high up on the door. On the bed—

Mr. Satterthwaite stood for a minute looking down on the heap of huddled chiffon. He noticed that it was ruched and pleated like the plumage of a bird. At the face, after one glance, he did not look again.

He glanced from the door with its dangling rope to the communicating door through which they had come. "Was that open?"

"Yes. At least the maid says so."

"Annesley slept in there? Didn't he hear anything?"

"He says—nothing."

"Almost incredible," murmured Mr. Satterthwaite. He looked back at the form on the bed.

"Where is he?"

"Annesley? He's downstairs with the doctor."

They went downstairs to find an Inspector of Police had arrived. Mr. Satterthwaite was agreeably surprised to recognize in him an old acquaintance, Inspector Winkfield. The Inspector went upstairs with the doctor and a few minutes later a request came that all members of the house party should assemble in the drawing room.

The blinds had been drawn and the whole room had a funereal aspect. Doris Coles

looked frightened and subdued. Every now and then she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. Madge was resolute and alert, her feelings fully under control by now. Mrs. Graham was composed, as always, her face grave and impassive. The tragedy seemed to have affected her son more keenly than anyone. He looked a positive wreck this morning. David Keeley, as usual, had subsided into the background.

The bereaved husband sat alone, a little apart from the others. There was a queer dazed look about him, as though he could hardly realize what had taken place.

Mr. Satterthwaite, outwardly composed, was inwardly seething with the importance of a duty shortly to be performed.

Inspector Winkfield, followed by Doctor Morris, came in and shut the door behind him. He cleared his throat and spoke.

"This is a very sad occurrence —very sad, I'm sure. It's necessary, under the circumstances, that I should ask everybody a few questions. You'll not object, I'm sure. I'll begin with Mr. Annesley. You'll forgive my asking, sir, but had your good lady ever threatened to take her life?"

Mr. Satterthwaite opened his lips impulsively, then closed them again. There was plenty of time. Better not speak too soon.

"I—no, I don't think so." His voice was so hesitating, so peculiar, that everyone shot a covert glance at him.

"You're not sure, sir?"

"Yes—I'm—quite sure. She didn't."

"Ah! Were you aware that she was unhappy in any way?"

"No, I— No, I wasn't."

"She said nothing to you? About feeling depressed, for instance?"

"I—no, nothing."

Whatever the Inspector thought, he said nothing. Instead he proceeded to his next point. "Will you describe to me briefly the events of last night?"

"We—all went up to bed. I fell asleep immediately and heard nothing. The housemaid's scream aroused me this morning. I rushed into the adjoining room and found my wife—and found her—" His voice broke.

The Inspector nodded. "Yes, yes, that's quite enough. We needn't go into that. When did you last see your wife the night before?"

"I—downstairs."

"Downstairs?"

"Yes, we all left the drawing room together. I went straight up, leaving the others talking in the hall."

"And did you see your wife again? Didn't she say good night when she came up to bed?"

"I was asleep when she came up."

"But she only followed you a

few minutes later. That's right, isn't it, sir?" He looked at David Keeley who nodded.

"She hadn't come up half an hour later."

Annesley spoke stubbornly. The Inspector's eyes strayed gently to Mrs. Graham. "She didn't stay in your room talking, Madam?"

Did Mr. Satterthwaite fancy it, or was there a slight pause before Mrs. Graham said, with her customary quiet decision of manner:

"No, I went straight into my room and closed the door. I heard nothing."

"And you say, sir," the Inspector had shifted his attention back to Annesley, "that you slept and heard nothing. The communicating door was open, was it not?"

"I—I believe so. But my wife would have entered her room by the other door from the corridor."

"Even so, sir, there would have been certain sounds—a choking noise, a drumming of heels on the door—"

"No."

It was Mr. Satterthwaite who spoke, impetuously, unable to stop himself. Every eye turned toward him in surprise. He himself became nervous, stammered, and turned pink.

"I—I beg your pardon, Inspector. But I must speak. You are on the wrong tack—the wrong tack altogether. Mrs. Annesley did not kill herself—I am sure of it. She was murdered."

There was a dead silence, then Inspector Winkfield said quietly: "What leads you to say that, sir?"

"I—it is a feeling. A very strong feeling."

"But I think, sir, there must be more than that to it. There must be some particular reason."

Well, of course there *was* a particular reason. There was the mysterious message from Mr. Quin. But you couldn't tell a police inspector that. Mr. Satterthwaite cast about desperately, and found something.

"Last night—when we were talking together, she said she was very happy. Very happy—just that. That wasn't like a woman thinking of committing suicide."

He was triumphant. He added: "She went back to the drawing room to fetch her ukulele, so that she wouldn't forget it in the morning. That didn't look like suicide either."

"No," admitted the Inspector. "No, perhaps it didn't." He turned to David Keeley. "Did she take the ukulele upstairs with her?"

The mathematician tried to remember. "I think—yes, she did. She went upstairs carrying it in her hand. I remember seeing it just as she turned the corner of the staircase before I turned off the light down here."

"Oh!" cried Madge. "But it's here now." She pointed dramatically to where the ukulele lay on a table.

"That's curious," said the Inspector. He stepped swiftly across and rang the bell.

A brief order sent the butler in search of the housemaid whose business it was to do the rooms in the morning. She came and was quite positive in her answer. The ukulele had been there first thing that morning when she had dusted.

Inspector Winkfield dismissed her and then said curtly, "I would like to speak to Mr. Satterthwaite in private, please. Everyone else may go. But no one is to leave the house."

Mr. Satterthwaite twittered into speech as soon as the door had closed behind the others. "I—I am sure, Inspector, that you have the case excellently in hand. Excellently. I just felt that —having, as I say, a very strong feeling—"

The Inspector arrested further speech with an upraised hand. "You're quite right, Mr. Satterthwaite. The lady was murdered."

"You knew it?" Mr. Satterthwaite was chagrined.

"There were certain things that puzzled Dr. Morris." He looked across at the doctor who had remained, and the doctor assented to his statement with a nod of the head. "We made a thorough examination. The rope that was round her neck wasn't the rope that she was strangled with—it was something much thinner that did the job, something more like a wire. It had cut right into the flesh. The mark of the rope was superimposed on it. She was strangled and then hung up on that door afterward to make it look like suicide."

"But who—?"

"Yes," said the Inspector. "Who? That's the question. What about the husband sleeping next door, who never said good night to his wife and who heard nothing? I should say we hadn't far to look. Must find out what terms they were on. That's where you can be useful to us, Mr. Satterthwaite. You've the *ongtray* here, and you can get the hang of things in a way we can't. Find out what relations there were between the two."

"I hardly like—" began Mr. Satterthwaite, stiffening.

"It won't be the first murder mystery you've helped us with. I remember the case of Mrs. Strangeways. You've got a *flair* for that sort of thing, sir. An absolute *flair*."

Yes, it was true—he *had a flair*. He said quietly: "I will do my best, Inspector."

Had Gerard Annesley killed his wife? Had he? Mr. Satterthwaite recalled that look of misery last night. He loved her—

and he was suffering. Suffering will drive a man to strange deeds.

But there was something else —some other factor. Mabelle had spoken of herself as coming out of a wood—she was looking forward to happiness—not a quiet rational happiness—but a happiness that was irrational—a wild ecstasy—

If Gerard Annesley had spoken the truth, Mabelle had not come to her room till at least half an hour later than he had done. Yet David Keeley had seen her going up those stairs. There were two other rooms occupied in that wing. There was Mrs. Graham's and there was her son's.

Her son's. But he and Madge—

Surely Madge would have guessed. But Madge wasn't the guessing kind. All the same, no smoke without fire—

Smoke!

Ah! he remembered. *A wisp of smoke curling out through Mrs. Graham's bedroom door.*

He acted on impulse. Straight up the stairs he went and into her room. It was empty. He closed the door behind him and locked it.

He went across to the grate. A heap of charred fragments. Very gingerly he raked them over with his finger. His luck was in. In the very center were some unburned fragments—fragments of letters.

Very disjointed fragments, but they told him something of value.

"Life can be wonderful, Roger darling. I never knew—" "all my life has been a dream till I met you, Roger—" "—Gerard knows, I think—I am sorry, but what can I do. Nothing is real to me but you, Roger. We shall be together, soon.

"What are you going to tell him at Laidell, Roger? You write strangely—but I am not afraid—"

Very carefully, Mr. Satterthwaite put the fragments into an envelope from the writing table. He went to the door, unlocked it and opened it to find himself face to face with Mrs. Graham.

It was an awkward moment, and Mr. Satterthwaite was momentarily out of countenance. He did what was, perhaps, the best thing, attacked the situation with simplicity.

"I have been searching your room, Mrs. Graham. I have found something—a packet of letters imperfectly burned."

He regarded her steadily.

A wave of alarm passed over her face. It was gone in a flash but it had been there.

"Letters from Mrs. Annesley to your son."

She hesitated for a minute, then said quietly, "That is so. I

thought they would be better burned."

"For what reason?"

"My son is engaged to be married. These letters—if they had been brought into publicity through the poor girl's suicide—might have caused much pain and trouble."

"Your son could burn his own letters."

She had no answer ready for that. Mr. Satterthwaite pursued his advantage.

"You found these letters in his room, brought them into your room and burned them. Why? You were afraid, Mrs. Graham."

"I am not in the habit of being afraid, Mr. Satterthwaite."

"No—but this was a desperate case."

"Desperate?"

"Your son might have been in danger of arrest—for murder."

"Murder!"

He saw her face go white; he went on quickly: "You heard Mrs. Annesley go into your son's room last night. Had he told her of his engagement? No, I see he hadn't. He told her then. They quarrelled, and he—"

"That's a lie!"

They had been so absorbed in their duel of words that they had not heard approaching footsteps. Roger Graham had come up behind them unperceived by either.

"It's all right, Mother. Don't—worry. Come into my room, Mr. Satterthwaite."

Mr. Satterthwaite followed him into his room. Mrs. Graham had turned away and did not attempt to follow them. Roger Graham shut the door.

"Listen, Mr. Satterthwaite. You think I killed Mabelle. You think I strangled her—here—and took her along and hung her up on that door—later—when everyone was asleep?"

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at him. Then he said surprisingly: "No, I do not think so."

"Thank God for that. I couldn't have killed Mabelle. I—I loved her. Or didn't I? I don't know. It's a tangle that I can't explain. I'm fond of Madge—I always have been. And she's such a good sort. We suit each other. But Mabelle was different. It was—I can't explain it—a sort of enchantment. I was, I think, afraid of her."

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded.

"It was madness—a kind of bewildering ecstasy. But it was impossible. It wouldn't have worked. That sort of thing—doesn't last. I know what it means now to have a spell cast over you."

"Yes, it must have been like that," said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully.

"I—I wanted to get out of it all. I was going to tell Mabelle—last night."

"But you didn't?"

"No, I didn't," said Graham slowly. "I swear to you, Mr. Sat-

terthwaite, that I never saw her after I said good night downstairs."

"I believe you," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He got up. It was not Roger Graham who had killed Mabelle Annesley. He could have fled from her, but he could not have killed her. He had been afraid of her, afraid of that wild intangible fairylike quality of hers. He had known enchantment—and turned his back on it. He had gone for the safe, sensible thing that he had known "would work" and had relinquished the intangible dream that might lead him he knew not where.

He was a sensible young man, and, as such, uninteresting to Mr. Satterthwaite, who was an artist and a connoisseur in life.

He left Roger Graham in his room and went downstairs. The drawing room was empty. Mabelle's ukulele lay on a stool by the window. He took it up and twanged it absent-mindedly. He knew nothing of the instrument, but his ear told him that it was abominably out of tune. He turned a key experimentally.

Doris Coles came into the room. She looked at him reproachfully. "Poor Mabelle's uke," she said.

Her clear condemnation made Mr. Satterthwaite feel obstinate.

"Tune it for me," he said, and added: "If you can."

"Of course I can," said Doris, wounded at the suggestion of incompetence in any direction.

She took it from him, twanged a string, turned a key briskly—and the string snapped.

"Well, I never. Oh! I see—but how extraordinary. It's the wrong string—a size too big. It's an A string. How stupid to put that on. Of course it snaps when you try to tune it up. How stupid people are."

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "They are—even when they try to be clever."

His tone was so odd that she stared at him. He took the ukulele from her and removed the broken string. He went out of the room holding it in his hand. In the library he found David Keeley.

"Here," he said. He held out the string.

Keeley took it. "What's this?"

"A broken ukulele string." He paused and then went on: *"What did you do with the other one?"*

"The other one?"

"The one you strangled her with. You were very clever, weren't you? It was done very quickly—just in that moment we were all laughing and talking in the hall.

"Mabelle came back into this room for her ukulele. You had taken the string off as you fiddled with it just before. You caught her round the throat with it and strangled her. Then you came

out and locked the door and joined us. Later, in the dead of night, you came down and—and disposed of the body by hanging it on the door of her room. And you put another string on the ukulele—*but it was the wrong string,* that's why you were stupid."

There was a pause.

"But why did you do it," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "In God's name, *why?*"

Mr. Keeley laughed, a funny giggling little laugh that made Mr. Satterthwaite feel rather sick.

"It was so very simple," he said. "That's why! And then—nobody ever noticed me. Nobody ever noticed what I was doing. I thought—I thought I'd have the laugh on them."

And again he gave that furtive little giggle and looked at Mr. Satterthwaite with mad eyes.

Mr. Satterthwaite was glad that at that moment Inspector Winkfield came into the room. . . .

It was twenty-four hours later, on his way to London, that Mr. Satterthwaite awoke from a doze to find a tall dark man sitting opposite to him in the railway carriage. He was not altogether surprised.

"My dear Mr. Quin!"

"Yes—I am here."

Mr. Satterthwaite said slowly: "I can hardly face you. I am ashamed. I failed."

"Are you quite sure of that?"

"I did not save her."

"But you discovered the truth?"

"Yes, that is true. One or other of those young men might have been accused—might even have been found guilty. So, at any rate, I saved a man's life. But she—she—that strange enchanting creature—" His voice broke off.

Mr. Quin looked at him.

"Is death the greatest evil that can happen to anyone?"

"I—well—perhaps—No."

Mr. Satterthwaite remembered—Madge and Roger Graham—Mabelle's face in the moonlight—its serene unearthly happiness—

"No," he admitted. "No—perhaps death is not the greatest evil."

He remembered the ruffled blue chiffon of her dress that had seemed to him like the plumage of a bird with a broken wing.

When he looked up, he found himself alone. Mr. Quinn was no longer there. But he had left something behind.

On the seat was a roughly carved bird fashioned out of some dim blue stone. It had, possibly, no great artistic merit. But it had something else.

It had the vague quality of enchantment.

So said Mr. Satterthwaite—and Mr. Satterthwaite was a connoisseur.

cat's evidence

by . . . . Philip G. Chadwick

It was brutal, cold-blooded murder. But what really horrified old Mrs. Wardle was the insult to her cat.

I KNOW I'M just an old, crotchety woman. But I'm not so silly as some make out. I've got two eyes and I've got a tongue, and I'm just as clever as certain young smart guys who think the police wear blinders.

Take Ned Butters, with his flash ties and padded shoulders. A nasty bit of work, Ned, and as smart as they make 'em. Moved in upstairs, so *he* said, because he was worried about his uncle. Poor Mr. Marsden had dropsy in both legs, and was so top heavy he couldn't stand without help, and that gave Ned his opportunity.

Now what *I* did for Mr. Marsden, I did because I was paid for it. But young Ned took him chocolates, and drinks, and even read to him sometimes, just out of sympathy. Sympathy!

"It's his will you're thinking of, young Ned," I told him. "That's where *your* sympathy is, my lad. Right in your pocket."

And he grinned and said, "Well, if the old so-and-so did die, it wouldn't be natural if he

Human nature has some unbelievably strange quirks to it, and the oddities of restless aged folk living in households where warped behavior is an ever-present reality has supplied many a mystery story writer with a road map to Murder Highway. But seldom has that map been more dramatically pinpointed with little red dots than by Philip Chadwick in his newest yarn.

forgot to leave a bit to his favorite nephew."

Not that the old man wouldn't have been better off dead. He was that miserable. There he'd sit, day after day, close to the fireplace, hot or cold, fire or no fire. There he'd sit and chatter to the overfed canary in the cage at his side, an ugly spoiled bird if ever there was. "Pretty birdy!" he'd say. "Cheep-cheep! Tweet-tweet!"

Daft on that bird he was, and whenever he had the window open he'd be terrified for fear my Puddy would climb the fire-escape, and scare it.

Ned must have suffered awful, sitting there pretending to be kind when all he really wanted was to push the old fellow over, and get on with his girls. He'd come down almost sweating sometimes.

"He's sure a trial, that old so-and-so!" He'd try to laugh, but there was an ugly glint in his eye as if he wished the old man dead that minute. Nasty bit of work, young Ned, with no decency in him.

One day I came in from shopping, and had no sooner put down the potatoes when there was a big crash overhead. *The old man's taken a nasty fall,* I thought, and started upstairs. Then I heard Ned shouting at the top of his lungs that Mr. Marsden had had a fit, and for me to come quickly.

When I got upstairs there was the poor old man lying in the hearth. There was blood all over the fire-irons, and Ned looked ghastly, his eyes fastened on the canary fluttering like a mad thing in its cage.

"He's dead!" Ned whispered. "I heard him call, and when I rushed in there he was, with your blasted cat just scooting out of the window. You can see what happened. The cat scared the bird, and the old boy must have stood up and toppled over.

I knew he was lying. He always lied, that Ned. I could have said, "You're a liar, Ned. You pushed him! You got mad with him, an' pushed him. That's what scared the bird. *You've killed him.*"

But I held my tongue. I'm no fool. I told him I'd phone the doctor. I didn't tell him I'd phone the police too, and urge them to come quick—or else there'd be another murder.

It wasn't only that he'd killed the old man. I didn't like the smooth way he'd blamed it on my poor Puddy. I know the little dear sometimes just peeped in at the fat canary, but she'd never meant any harm.

Other folks from the different rooms had heard, and Ned made a good job of telling his tale to each of them, so that when the police came they didn't need me to help them. But I listened. I heard one of the cops asking

who'd wasted their time calling *them* in, and someone replying it must have been that dratted old Mrs. Wardle.

A cop called out to me, but being a bit deaf at times I didn't hear him. I went into my room, and he had to follow.

High and mighty acting, he was. He told me I'd no business to upset everyone by saying there'd been a murder. And I could see Ned, snooping at me from behind his back, and making me madder an' madder.

"Mr. Butters here has explained what happened," said the cop. "There's no suggestion of foul play."

"He's lying," I said, feeling safe with the police there. "My Puddy never goes in that room, and Ned knows it."

"It was *your* cat," Ned shouted. "Your big, ugly tabby. There aren't any other cats here and you know it."

"The only other cat hereabouts," said one of the upstairs women, "is a black Tom across the road. There's no way he could get to the fire escape."

The cop was beginning to think it very funny. "Perhaps we ought to inspect the feline exhibit," he said to his mate. "Where *is* the animal in dispute, Mrs. Wardle?"

The animal in dispute!

So I opened the cupboard door and showed them my Puddy, purring away just as if she was trying to give her own evidence.

"In here where she's been all morning," I said. "Having kittens. Even *you* clever dicks couldn't have seven kittens in an hour."

Poggioli and the fugitive

by . . . T. S. Stribling

Terrifying was the dead man's secret, and the fear of one who drifted alone. But only Poggioli knew if murder had been done.

WHEN GEBHARDT of the *Tiamara Times* telephoned in for help, my friend, Dr. Henry Poggioli, asked if the reporter were at the fish docks. I repeated his question over the wire and answered, "No, he's at the morgue."

"Then tell him I'm busy for the day," Poggioli said.

Such abruptness, and I must say such irrationality, puzzled and disturbed me. I popped my instrument in its fork.

"All right, say it." said Poggioli.

"Would you have gone if he had been at the docks?"

"Yes, I would."

"Will you please explain why the docks are so much better as a setting for a criminological problem than the morgue?"

"I have a general and a specific reason," Poggioli said. "The fish docks are a center of local and Latin-American activity and a good deal of it is questionable. The morgue is a dead end where action has stopped. When action ceases mystery dies."

When a Pulitzer prize-winning novelist opens the portals wide on a brightly glowing earlier chapter of his writing career some remarkable characters are likely to emerge. Most of us who remember T. S. Stribling's stories in early and now legendary issues of Adventure would be right eager to hail with rejoicing the reappearance of such a redoubtable criminologist as Dr. Poggioli were he to stand before us in reprint guise solely. But here he is in all the untarnished splendor of a brand new T. S. Stribling yarn.

I argued that mysteries were just as mysterious after the death of their actors as before. But Poggioli said no, they ceased to be mysteries, and became simply the records of mysteries, a field in which he had no interest.

I didn't agree with this but I didn't debate his point. I said, "That's your general reason. Now give me your specific one." I wondered what he'd say.

"The case I'm interested in lies at the docks. That's why I'm willing to go down there this morning." To amplify his answer he picked up his copy of the morning paper. "This is from Alex Alexson's column, SEAWEED, SHIPS AND SKIPPERS," he informed me. "It is written in Alexson's usual silly style, but the hint he gives is a genuine one. It always is." And he read again, *"'A little minnow whispered into this reporter's ear that a certain trawler's slip was showing.'"*

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"If I knew I would turn to something else," said Poggioli.

"Yes, I'm sure you would. Now let me tell you the situation Gebhardt has just described over the phone. A Cuban schooner, the *La Laguna Serena,* has just brought a decapitated American soldier from down among the keys, and has left a guard over his body in the morgue until the army identifies it. Isn't that more of a mystery than Alexson's minnow whispering about a certain trawler's slip?"

"That's no mystery at all," said Poggioli. "It's simply an accident."

"Accident?"

"Certainly. The schooner was an auxiliary schooner. The soldier fell off the stern into the screw and suffered a fatal and gruesome accident. The Captain has brought the body into port. That's all there is to it."

"Why did the Captain station a guard over the corpse?" I asked argumentatively.

Poggioli made an impatient gesture. "The guard is there. Gebhardt is certainly able to ask him without my help."

His stubbornness angered me. I said I thought I would go over and help the reporter in any way I could.

Poggioli warned me that I would be throwing away my time, that Gebhardt's request for help merely meant that he had a simple one-paragraph story of a death which he hoped to expand into a whole column of mystery.

Knowing Gebhardt, I had to admit that could easily be. However I called him up again, and asked him why he didn't question the guard as Poggioli had suggested.

The reporter's unhappy voice came back, "The fellow speaks Spanish."

"Oh," I said, "so *that's* the reason. I'll be right over."

Poggioli sat watching me. "The guard speaks Spanish," he affirmed.

"You heard Gebhardt's voice over the wire," I said.

"No I didn't. It simply occurred to me that your Spanish was all you've got that Gebhardt could use."

I paid no attention to this. I went out, caught a taxi and drove to the morgue. Twenty minutes later the reporter met me at the entrance of the melancholy building.

"I'm sure glad you can talk Spanish," he began gratefully. "This stacks up to a front page story for me, if I can just get it. You go in there and find out from the sailor why they ever brought the body here in the first place. That at least would be a lead."

We went in together. The sailor was a brown man and he was standing formally at attention beside the sheeted figure on the table. He turned out to be Pedro, of the schooner, *La Laguna Serena,* out of Santiago, Cuba.

I didn't quite like to ask a Cuban sailor why his ship had brought home the body of an American soldier. It wasn't a delicate suggestion, so I switched to the accident itself which I knew Gebhardt would want.

"How did the fatal accident occur, Pedro?"

"I don't know, Senor."

"Then you didn't see him fall overboard into the propeller of your boat?"

"Senor, he didn't fall off our boat," the brown man assured me earnestly.

"Did he fall off some other boat in your fleet?"

"We have no fleet, Senor. *La Laguna Serena* trawls alone."

I was a little puzzled. "If he didn't fall off your trawler where and how did you find him? Just floating in the sea?"

"No, Senor, we found him lying in the middle of the little dock on Doce Key."

"Didn't you ask some resident of Doce Key how the body got there?"

"No one lives on Doce Key, Senor. It is just a rock where fishermen dry their nets. It has a little quay where they can get ashore. That is where we found the body."

I was somehow taken aback at this departure from Poggioli's prognosis. "So you don't even know who he is?"

"No, Senor. The Captain saw the military identification tag around his neck, so we brought him here and telephoned the military to come and claim his body."

This really surprised me. When I translated it to Gebhardt he said, "There is enough mystery in that for you to get a fiction story out of it, too."

I shook my head. "To find a

headless dead man on a bare rock in the ocean is sensational and a good filler for the newspapers, Gebhardt. But I couldn't put it into a story. My art requires general truths, not accidents."

Gebhardt brushed this aside, plainly annoyed by my implication that his trade was not an art. He said, "Find out why the Captain brought his body to Tiamara. That's the only reason I telephoned you in the first place."

When I passed the question on to Pedro the brown man was astonished.

"Would Captain Jiminez, Senor, sail away and leave unhonored a soldier of the army that is fighting the battles of all free nations at this very moment? Do you think that, Senor?"

When I translated Pedro's reply to Gebhardt I'll frankly admit I was thrilled. No newspaper man, however, can believe an heroic or unselfish thing about anyone.

"Ask him if there is no other reason why he is standing guard over this body?"

When I did this, Pedro explained simply enough that Captain Jiminez had hoped for a reward from the military for bringing in the body. The Latin fisherman saw nothing ironic in the situation. He had told me first his moving fundamental reason, and then, his incidental one. But as might have been expected, my journalistic companion reversed this order instantly.

He said, "I'm half a mind to write this up as humor. If I can't get a better lead I'll do that."

I was disgusted. I am reasonably cynical and hard-headed but when Gebhardt seized on a completely incidental motive and raised that up to obscure one that was fine and unselfish, I really was disgusted.

I said, "Gebhardt, that would be an outrage."

The reporter began arguing in an attempt to justify himself. If I had run into as many welchers and pretenders as he had and so on, all the trite excuses of the ungenerous.

In the midst of this Pedro said he was thirsty. I was sympathetic. "Haven't you had anything to drink since you went on guard? I'll get you a glass of water!"

The sailor lifted a hand. "Senor, no, not water. Not here among dead men."

I understood his Latin distaste for water at any time or place, and especially in a morgue.

"Gebhardt," I directed, "Get Pedro a coke. Get a whole carton. I'll go on with the questions, and tell you what I find out."

The reporter departed and I continued with my catechism. I wanted a little atmosphere for Gebhardt's story.

I said, "This barren island,

Pedro—who built the quay on it? The fishermen?"

"Oh no, Senor. No one knows for sure but they say the pirates built it back in the old days. Gasparilla, Teach, Captain Kidd."

There was color in that, romantic mystery. If Gebhardt got nothing more out of it than an historical sketch for the Sunday edition, it would be something. In the middle of my questioning Pedro interrupted me to say, "Senor, I am so sorry."

I asked what about, and it turned out that what he wanted to drink were not cokes at all, but, of course, wine. He had Latin fears about imbibing any sort of drink in a foreign country unless it had first been rendered germ-proof by at least a minimum of alcohol. He could not imagine why he had not mentioned the unfortunate fact before.

Naturally I went out at once to get the wine, and had the good fortune to meet Gebhardt coming out of a grocery store with a carton of cokes. I explained Pedro's mistake to him, and he immediately became suspicious.

"It's the power of advertising," I said. "It's the result of seeing hundreds and thousands of 'When Thirsty' signs."

"Yes, but Pedro can't read English," argued Gebhardt holding fast to his doubt.

"Maybe not. But you're forgetting he has read the very same signs in Spanish all over Cuba."

"Yes, of course, that's right. Did he say anything further about why his Captain had brought the body here to Tiamara?"

"No, he didn't. But I found out for you that Key Doce was a resort of pirates in the old days. Pirates built the quay on the island."

"That's something," admitted the reporter. "If nothing better turns up, I might rig a column of pirate stuff, and run that."

We went on back to the morgue, planning Gebhardt's article in the event that nothing more exciting and timely came our way. When we reached the place and went inside we saw an army sergeant standing by the table inspecting the headless body of the soldier. Pedro had vanished.

The sergeant was examining the metal tag around the dead man's neck and also looking at a tattoo on the left forearm. When he saw us he recognized our kind for he said, "You fellows from the paper?"

Gebhardt said, "Yes. Can you identify this man?"

The sergeant glanced at the tag again. "Sure. He was Robert Mears, Waycross, Georgia. Height—five eleven. Weight—one hundred and eighty pounds. Blonde. Thin light hair; tattoo mark on left forearm. Funny

thing about the tattoo. It's sort of smeared. Sea and the sun, I imagine."

"Did Pedro turn the body over to you when you arrived?" I asked. "Did you bring him any reward from the Army?"

"No, there was no reward offered, and when I came in there was nobody here. I had no trouble finding the body however. The sheet was turned back just like it is now."

Gebhardt tried to make something out of this, but I assured him that Pedro had simply grown tired of waiting for us, and had gone out to get himself a drink. We talked for some little bit, with Gebhardt getting more and more nervous all the time until finally he said:

"Look here, I'm going to telephone Poggioli again."

"What about?" I asked.

"About that tattoo," he said. "Did you ever hear of a tattoo blurring?"

We went to a telephone in a little railed-off corner, and Gebhardt called up my apartment. He evidently got Poggioli, for he talked for a few moments in an undertone, possibly to keep the sergeant from hearing. Presently he put up the receiver and turned to me with a queer expression.

"The dead man isn't Robert Mears," he said.

The moment I heard this and realized that it had been relayed from Poggioli, I knew it had to be true. But how and why, I had not the faintest idea. I made a guess.

"Is it the smeared tattoo—"

"Poggioli said the tattoo was merely a corroborative detail," repeated Gebhardt with his strange look. "No, what proves that the body is not that of Robert Mears is his identification tag."

"His what?"

"That's right, his identification tag. Poggioli said if he really were Robert Mears, he wouldn't have his tag on in perfect shape. He said if the head had been cut off by a ship's propeller the tag certainly would have been damaged or lost in the sea."

"Well, it would have been," I said. "Is Poggioli coming over here? Is the problem mysterious enough for him now?"

"Yes, he's coming right over. He said to ask the sergeant to wait for him."

When we made this request of the sergeant he dismissed it with military brevity. But when I explained it was Dr. Henry Poggioli, the well-known criminologist whom we were expecting, and that he was looking at the man who had written the accounts of Poggioli's investigations which he had read in the magazines, it made all the difference in the world. He shook my hand, and introduced himself.

He was Sergeant Roy P. Floyd, from Reading, Pennsylvania.

In a short while we heard a motor outside, and Poggioli entered the morgue. He had brought with him a little vial of kerosene, and he used it immediately and effectively to remove the tattoo mark from the dead man's forearm, thus proving his contention that the dead man was not Mears of Waycross, Georgia. I must mention that this was the only time I ever saw Poggioli use anything in pursuit of criminals except strict psychologic deduction.

Poggioli set his bottle aside. "Your record of Robert Mears shows him to be absent without leave?" he asked. At the Sergeant's quick "Yes Sir," Poggioli went on: "What you want to know, Sergeant, is where Mears is now. What *we* want to know is how he got this body substituted for his own, and shipped here in an obvious attempt to be declared dead, and have his case dropped by the Army."

Gebhardt interrupted, hopefully with his pencil out. "Did Mears himself murder this man, decapitate him, and try to make the switch?" he asked.

"That's a detail," dismissed Poggioli. "The question is how did he get a fishing boat to bring the body here, deliver it to the military, and why should the guard vanish? Such manipulation would require the financial power of a racketeer. Do you know him, Floyd?"

"He was in my company, sir." Here the Sergeant smiled. "He didn't have a dime in the Army. He shot craps and bummed his cigarettes."

"Did he ever talk to you about his plans? Were they practical or romantic?"

"I would say romantic, sir. He tried to borrow a dollar from me once. He said he had a system that would beat any crap game, and all he needed was a dollar."

"Then he didn't murder this man," said Poggioli, looking at the body with its severed neck.

"How do you make that out, Dr. Poggioli?" asked Gebhardt almost with reverence.

"He wasn't practical enough," said Poggioli. "But that makes the mystery deeper than ever."

"What mystery, Poggioli?" I asked, somehow on edge about the matter.

"How he ever got the body delivered here. Could it possibly have been Mears in disguise who was standing guard over the cadaver, when you arrived?"

"No. Pedro was a Cuban who spoke only Spanish." I turned to Sergeant Floyd. "Mears couldn't talk Spanish, could he?"

"He couldn't talk English a month ago when he was in my company."

Poggioli shook his head. "I can't quite make this out. I will have to talk to Mears and get the

feel of the fellow before I can say how he ever got this body brought here to impersonate him."

"Where will we go to talk to him?" asked the Sergeant in a brittle tone. "I was sent here to bring him into camp."

"He's probably down around Key Doce in a boat of some description."

"What description?" demanded Sergeant Floyd.

"Probably in a very poor craft, possibly owned by a fisherman who sympathizes with Mears in his flight from the army."

"That seems improbable," said the Sergeant who knew Mears.

"Such was my implication when I said 'possibly,'" said Poggioli, in the tone of a lecturer who dislikes interruptions.

Gebhardt began planning how to get to Key Doce. As a *Times* reporter he knew the art of reaching unscheduled destinations in tropical seas. He said we might wangle something to get us to the Key in Oceanfront Park where there were fishing boats, cruisers and private yachts for hire. Sergeant Floyd decided his assignment could be stretched to permit him to go with us.

The patrons of the big beautiful boats we found in the municipal yacht basin gave me a sad insight into the distribution of luxuries in America. We, a group of intellectuals, could find absolutely nothing within our economic orbit, whereas we saw fat, well-feathered men waddling blithely about seeking still finer yachts for their cruises. And these were men devoid of any genius whatsoever except, of course, the sort they had.

At last Gebhardt went to a telephone, and called up his managing editor. The rest of us stood just outside the glass door, listening to him stressing the mysterious features of the story: discovery of body on empty key, brought to Tiamara for unknown reason, military tag of A.W.O.L. soldier switched to dead man, guard, Pedro, mysteriously vanishing.

It really was quite a bill of particulars. Gebhardt sat in the booth, nodding and arguing and gesticulating with his free hand.

Finally he came out and said to Captain Marks, "You can send your bill to the *Times*. Do you want to confirm it over the phone?"

The Captain was delighted. No, no, he trusted us implicitly. But in the midst of this confession of faith he somehow managed to step inside, and check Gebhardt's authority. He came out expressing his delight at such passengers. He usually carried dull business men, for intellectuals of science and literature, as a class, never seemed to care much for yachting.

At first I thought Poggioli and I were going along free. But it

turned out that Gebhardt had arranged with his paper that we should do some work to repay him for our passage. Poggioli was to keep a lookout for the craft in which he hoped to find Mears. I was to help Gebhardt with his reporting.

It sounded simple enough. I thought I was merely to help the reporter interview Mears if we succeeded in finding him. But it was not that at all. Gebhardt's editor had concocted quite an assignment.

My duties were to keep a sharp lookout for all pleasure yachts of impressive dimensions, get in touch with them by radio, take down the names and addresses of their owners, and his list of guests. If any young woman on board were about to get married or was already on her honeymoon, I was to get the girl's name, the name of her fiance or new husband, and every conceivable tidbit of gossip or scandal ever associated with their private lives, and deliver the information to Gebhardt's private cabin to be whipped into shape for transmission to the *Times*.

In short we had turned into a sea-going society column. We did all of this by radio naturally, and when I spotted one yacht and began my questioning other boats for miles around picked us up, and began radioing in their guest lists voluntarily. My trouble was not in finding yachts, but in keeping them separated, with the right women engaged or married to the right men.

On our first night Gebhardt got a radio message from the managing editor saying he had received over two thousand subscriptions by wireless to be mailed all over America and would Gebhardt consider a handsome offer to cruise through the Canal, and straight up the West Coast?

On the third day Gebhardt was instructed to tell my yacht owners that if they were equipped to send wireless photographs the *Tiamara Times* would gladly receive them. Apparently the *Times* had tapped a salt water gold mine.

In the midst of this buzz of social publicity Dr. Henry Poggioli kept a lonely, almost unnoticed, watch for a small craft with a runaway soldier in it.

Well, on the fourth day, while I was busy relaying the guest list of the yacht *Ingobar* out of New York for Cairo, Captain Marks' voice bawled through his megaphone for us to stand to port and prepare to drop anchor.

I looked to port and saw a great flattish stone thrust up into the intense blue of the sea. In its lee lay a nondescript little craft with something bulky in its stern, and a stub of a mast in its middle.

Poggioli and Captain Marks were studying the boat through binoculars. The skipper said,

"There's a winch and an air pump in its stern. I can't make out whether the man is white or colored."

Poggioli said, "He's white."

"Your glasses must be better than mine."

"No, he's the man we're after. He's Mears of Waycross, Georgia."

"Why do you say that?"

"It takes two men to use a diver's outfit like that. It isn't likely there would be two such expeditions among the keys at the same time. So the man that isn't there must be the body we left in the morgue at Tiamara."

The deduction was so obvious it brought no comment from Captain Marks. But he did ask sharply, "Did Mears murder his partner to use him as an escape from the army?"

"I don't think so. But I'll know a good deal more about it when I've talked to him. I'll get something of his temperament, and I ought to be able to make a guess."

When our mahogany hull had whispered to within earshot of the little hulk, Poggioli called through a speaking trumpet, "Boat ahoy! How's your grub and water?"

The skipper now had begun to follow the criminologist's program with curiosity.

"Why the grub and water, Dr. Poggioli?" asked Marks.

"Men are more communicative when they are desperate," said Poggioli. As he spoke, his answer came back.

"Purty skimpy!"

Whether the man in the boat were a murderer or not, all of us began smiling at his dialect. It so completely underwrote Poggioli's deduction that he was Robert Mears of Waycross, Georgia.

Captain Marks became active. He called to the steersman to telephone the cook for a platter of food and coffee. He suggested to me that I tell Sergeant Floyd to stay off deck until Poggioli talked to the man.

I rushed to the cabin and found petty officer Floyd helping Gebhardt with his radio society news. Both men were sarcastic about brides to be and debutantes. I broke in on them and said, "Sergeant, Poggioli's got your man!"

Sergeant Floyd wheeled toward the cabin door, but I stopped him. "You're to stay out of sight until Poggioli gets all the details. Then you can come out and take him over."

Gebhardt jumped up. "I don't have to stay here working on this tripe." He changed his tone. "Sergeant, you can't come on deck anyway. Will you finish interviewing the Baroness de Traut over the wireless?"

"I won't know what to ask her."

"You don't have to ask any-

thing when you interview the Baroness. Just listen and write."

He turned over his head phone, paper and pencil to the soldier, caught up some extra sheets for himself, and hurried out on deck to question the man who either had or had not murdered his diving partner, and tried to palm off the dead body as his own.

When we reached the deck again the cook had lowered some grub to the derelict and the lone survivor was eating ravenously. Poggioli was saying, "You eat like a man who has been out of grub a long time."

The soldier maneuvered his food so he could mutter, "I did not start with no grub, suh."

I smiled at the double negative.

"But why should you and your partner start on such a junket without grub?" Poggioli asked.

Mears stopped swallowing. "How come you know I had a pardnah?"

"You've got a winch and an air pump. You had to start with another man to run them."

The fellow began eating again. "That's right. You're a smart man. The reason we started out without grub was—we decided to try that Frenchman's experiment."

Gebhardt began writing. "What Frenchman?" he called down.

"That there Frenchman that started across the Atlantic on a raft with nothin' to eat or drink, not even watter."

I myself remembered reading of that fantastic French experiment when it broke in the press. In the queer world of the newspapers it had not seemed so suicidal. But it *was* suicidal, and for this Georgia boy to be alive at all was surely a miracle.

"Did you actually live on fish and mollusks all during your cruise?" I called down.

"If I'm still alive an' this ain't a dream, I done it."

Gebhardt, still scribbling, called down, "Do you mean you came on a junket like this to see if you could survive with just a fishing line and a net?"

Poggioli answered for the fellow. "No, he and his partner were searching among the keys for buried treasure."

The sun-blackened youth stopped eating abruptly. "How'd you know that?"

"Very simply. Men don't risk their lives without an object. The Frenchman wanted to write a book. You have an air pump and a winch, so you must have been looking for buried treasure."

"I be hanged," ejaculated Mears blankly.

"Did you find any?" rapped out Gebhardt.

"They found some," answered Poggioli for the man, "that's how his partner got killed."

At this the youth in the boat

stared up at Poggioli with his mouth hanging open.

"How . . . how did you know?"

"I didn't know it," said Poggioli calmly, "but it seemed likely. If your partner sent you up a bar of precious metal, you certainly would be greatly excited, and stop working the air pump. Naturally he would drown."

Mears shook his head earnestly. "It wa'n't the way you think, sir. He come up with it hisself. Then he went down ag'in an' got hung. He signaled. I hauled as hard as I could, but he was hung. I could feel somethin' give, and he came up. His neck was tore, an' broke. He was dead. I held to the winch an' looked at him. There we was, rich—but him dead. Then I knowed people would think I done it. They would say I kilt him after he helped me find the treasure."

"How much treasure was there?" asked Gebhardt.

The youth reached under his seat, and produced a single small barnacle-grown brick. He got to his feet and handed it up. He had already scratched off a spot that showed the pale gleam of silver.

"You didn't kill him intentionally, Mears," said Poggioli. "It was the fact that there wasn't any more silver down there that really killed your partner."

The lonely man looked enormously relieved, but he stared hard at Poggioli as the latter went on:

"You both thought there was a trove here at the foot of the quay. Your partner was as excited as you. He began groping and pushing among the coral formations and got hung. You hauled up on the winch as hard as you could. It was all you could do. When his neck tore he came up. But he had been dead before that, for you couldn't lift and work the air pump, too."

"Sir, I—I didn't know what had happened. He come up dead with his throat tore."

"That's right, Mears. Came up dead. And you took your identification tag from around your neck and you put it around his neck. You laid his body out on the dock."

"How do you know I done all that?" cried the soldier.

"Because the tag would have been lost in such an undersea struggle—or bent, or damaged. But it lay on your partner's neck like an ornament put there by an undertaker. You couldn't have told the world more plainly in words that you were away without leave, and that you hoped your partner's body would be mistaken for your own. Isn't that so?"

The soldier simply sat holding a bone of meat staring at Poggioli. He looked down at his own boat, then at the cook who had hauled up his brick of silver.

"Who gets that?" asked Mears.

"It isn't worth more than a hundred or a hundred and fifty dollars," Poggioli said. "The Government will get part of it and you the rest. What I want to know, Mears, is this. How did you get the body to Tiamara?"

"Tiamara?"

"Yes, Tiamara."

"Is that where it went?"

"You didn't know it had gone there?"

"No, I jest laid it out on the dock," said Mears. "I hoped somebody would come along and take the tag back an' git me wrote off as dead, and shut of the army. I didn't figger nobody would take the body back, too."

He blinked bewilderedly.

That ended the case. When Floyd came out he recognized Mears and immediately took charge of the prisoner. Gebhardt was happy. He turned his marine social column over to the radio man who had learned how to handle the matter, and went to his cabin to write up the fabulous story.

I followed him to the cabin and watched him warm to his task.

"There's material here for a great short story," he mentioned cheerfully to me.

I shook my head. "No, it runs too smoothly and predictably. It's newspaper stuff—not life . . . or literature."

"What do you mean, too predictably?" he demanded.

"The characteristic feature of life, Gebhardt, is that you can't forecast how anything will turn out. That's why good mystery stories have such an appeal. They mirror the unpredictable. This business is like a demonstration out of Euclid."

I left Gebhardt joyous, triumphant, amused and a bit scornful, and went out on deck which was deserted now except for Poggioli walking up and down.

I joined him as one seaman falls in with another, step for step, although I don't think he liked it.

"Well," I said finally. "I wish it had had a quirk to it."

"Quirk to what?" he snapped.

"To the incident you have just unraveled!" I said in surprise.

Poggioli gave a brief snort, then after a moment relented a little. "Our unraveled incident leaves us in a more complete mystery than ever."

"How is that, Poggioli?" I said. "It seems to me that we have . . ."

"How do you explain Pedro walking off and never coming back?"

"He probably got drunk," I said. "He drank too much."

Poggioli gave another disagreeable snort, and went into the cabin. I never care to be alone. Presently I went into the

cabin, too, and met Gebhardt just coming out with his copy.

"Taking it to the wireless, eh?" I called after him. "Well, it should win acceptance from newspaper readers."

"There are eight hundred thousand of them," called back the reporter, "and in the morning my byline will greet each and every one of them on the front page!" He was quite elated over it, the fool.

I went into the cabin and sat down. Poggioli moved back and forth swaying to the swing of the sea. His disturbance was the antithesis of the reporter's.

I said to him, "Poggioli, don't worry over imaginary problems."

He hushed me up with an effacing movement of his hand, crossed to a lounge and sat down. A newspaper lay on the lounge. He picked it up, and I saw it was an old copy of the *Times* which we ourselves had brought aboard the *Tarpon Queen*. But when I mentioned that fact to him he informed me coldly that he was able to read the date for himself. So I hushed, and simply sat there watching Poggioli read a three-day-old *Times*.

Presently to my surprise he paused, scratched his bluish chin, drew out a pencil and marked something in the paper. Then he tossed it aside and went out on deck.

I followed him, and saw him enter the radio room just as Gebhardt came out. The reporter was in high good spirits. He took a turn on deck, expanding his lungs and ignoring me completely. Once he gave himself a thump on the chest.

For some reason Gebhardt's euphoria depressed me. I went back into the cabin, sat down on the couch and presently picked up the *Times* which Poggioli had discarded. As I looked it over absently, I noticed the sentence he had underscored. It was the same one he had read aloud to me in our apartment, the quotation from Alex Alexson's shipping column, "A little minnow whispered in this reporter's ear that a certain trawler's slip was showing."

I wondered what Poggioli could possibly have seen in that on his second reading. I decided he had simply thought of some unrelated topic as I quite often do when I'm reading some passage of trivial nonsense.

I wondered gloomily if I would have been happier as a journalist like Gebhardt, writing about uncombed combinations of chance instead of stamping the flow of life under my eyes with the pain, passion and intricate designs of fiction. The first was the easier, and certainly the more profitable insanity. I went to my private cabin, and turned in.

I believe I have as little envy in my make-up as the next man. But I must say that when we

eased into Tiamara quay the next morning and I heard the newsboys screaming, "Great Decapitation Mystery Solved"—I felt what an unjust world this is.

Gebhardt came out on deck in high fettle. I am sure it was the first time one of his stories had ever made the first page. He didn't wait for the gang plank, but jumped from the taff rail to the wharf, and got out nickels for the newsboy.

He took three copies, tossed one to me, and another to Captain Marks and nosed into the remaining copy himself. I felt an impulse to throw my copy into the water. I opened it up instead, and read the secondary headlines under the decapitation streamer.

International Smuggling Gang Busted by Times Crime Expert, Dr. Henry Poggioli. Takes Tip from Times' Shipping Column. His Wireless Warning Enables Police to Catch Gang Agent, Pedro Alfiero, a Sailor, Bringing Dope Into Tiamara Morgue in Clothing of Decapitated Corpse, Found Accidentally on Key Doce by Gang.

I turned nervously through the pages looking for the story Gebhardt had wirelessed in. On the society page I read a great splash, "The Baron and Baroness De Traut are cruising off Tiamara as guests of Amri B. Pendiver, the Roasted Peanut Magnate on his Yacht, *Shalimar III.*"

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned.

Dr. Henry Poggioli stood at the quayside, smiling at me.

"There's your twist, your quirk, whatever you want to call it, my fine feathered friend," he said. "I wirelessed the police last night, just as Gebhardt was sending in what he thought was the complete story. I knew that Pedro must of necessity have disappeared for a very good reason, for a man does not go out into the hot sun for one little drink when he has a great responsibility to fulfill. From what you told me, he would have wanted you to think well of him—if he had been the Pedro you described.

"He had to be another, different kind of Pedro, and Alex Alexson's column supplied me with the key. Tipping off the police by wireless was then just an automatic gesture. You could have done it yourself."

I returned his stare, unflinchingly. "Perhaps," I said. "But only Dr. Poggioli could have done it with such a fine flourish and kept mum about it. You might at least have warned me."

"Then you would not have enjoyed so delightful a surprise when you opened that paper just now." Poggioli said.

To that—what answer could I give?

change from a silver dollar

by . . . Robert Sheckley

The sky was a wall of darkness and the man in the diner had the warped mind of a killer. Could she outwit his vicious ruse?

SHE HAD BEEN driving so long that her hands felt like extensions of the steering wheel. The headlights of her car swept in bright banners across a section of road, and her car rushed toward the lighted stretch, but could not overtake it. The road flowed ahead, and just beyond it was a high wall of darkness. The headlights pushed the darkness back, but it remained as tall as the sky, quivering restlessly as if waiting to drop on her.

The luminous dial of the car clock read 3:25. How long had she been driving? Five hours, six? Unblinkingly she watched as the headlights burrowed into the darkness. Little dots danced in the corners of her eyes, and the great wall of black seemed about to topple.

"That's enough," she told herself firmly. "Coffee for you."

Tom and the children weren't expecting her until tomorrow afternoon, anyway. But she had wanted to surprise them, and start their brief Spring vacation a day earlier. Driving at night

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Robert Sheckley has achieved a phenomenal writing success since the publication of his first story three short years ago. His work has appeared in many "slick" publications, and in most of the science-fantasy magazines. But it is in the field of murder fiction that he seems to us most expert. Although the hitchhiker of this unusual story commits no actual violence, we instinctively recognize him as a fiend.

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should have been fun. But the thick black lines on the road map had turned out to represent unlighted, winding tar roads, and the miles stretched out unendingly.

Ahead she saw the red neon glow of a diner, and eased her foot stiffly from the accelerator.

On the road in front of the diner she saw a man, his hand raised in the hitchhiker's sign. For a moment the headlights glared into his thin, tired face. Then she swung into the diner's empty parking space.

As soon as the handbrake was set she leaned back and stretched until her muscles cracked. Then she picked up her purse, took the key out of the ignition, and opened the door.

The diner was humidly warm, thick with frying smells and the stale odor of dishwater. She sat down at the counter, noticing that the counterman was in the rear, bending over a tub of peeled potatoes.

The door of the diner opened and closed, and a man sat down beside her. She caught a glimpse of his tight, thin-lipped face, and realized that he was the hitchhiker.

The man cleared his throat, and she turned her head quickly, hoping he wouldn't ask for a ride. He must have understood her gesture, for he didn't speak.

The counterman approached to take her order, a beefy, dull-faced man with tight blond curls on his massive head.

"You and the missus want coffee?" he asked the hitchhiker.

She glanced sharply at him. What a stupid assumption to make, even if they *were* sitting together in the empty diner. But then, the counterman obviously wasn't a perceptive sort.

The hitchhiker turned with an apologetic smile. He stared at her, and his smile faded. She felt suddenly cold, because the man seemed to be looking right through her to the warm, comfortable car outside.

"I want coffee and a hamburger," she said.

The hitchhiker hesitated for a long moment, then drew in his breath sharply. "I'll have the same as the missus," he said.

"Right." The counterman walked slowly to the grill, scratching the back of his neck with a thick, dirty-nailed hand.

She compressed her lips tightly. There was no sense in making a scene. If this was his idea of a joke, she would ignore it.

"Me and the missus, we've been driving all night," the hitchhiker said.

"That so?" The counterman pressed down on the hamburgers with a knife. "Want the coffee now?"

"Sure," the man said. "The missus always likes her coffee right away."

What could she say? I am not

this man's wife? This man is not my husband? There was no sense in making herself ridiculous for the sake of the counterman's dull-witted comprehension.

The counterman left the hamburgers and drew two cups of coffee. He started to add milk from a white enamel pitcher.

"Oh, I want mine black, please," she said.

"That's right, the missus always likes hers black," the hitchhiker said, beads of perspiration appearing on the tight skin of his forehead. "She's the damnedest coffee hound you ever saw. Drinks it night and day, black, you know?"

"Yeh, sure," the counterman said, placing the cups in front of them. "My old lady, she likes it black, too."

"Is that so?" the hitchhiker said. "You know, the wife and me, we're going up to visit her sister in Ohio. Up in Cleveland, Ohio. We've been planning on visiting her sister all year, but this is the first time we got around to it."

She turned angrily. This had gone entirely far enough. Certainly the fat counterman could see that this man in a baggy brown suit and dirty shirt couldn't be her husband.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the hitchhiker said hastily, "Drink your coffee, honey. You're tired. See how tired she is? Boy, she always gets herself into a temper when she's dragged out. And has she got herself a temper!"

A slow smile creased the counterman's thick lips. He rubbed his nose, and said, "Me, if my old lady gets into a temper, I hand her one." He winked at the hitchhiker.

The hitchhiker winked back. "You said it," he said. "That's the only way."

The counterman grinned, and walked over to the grill.

"I don't want to make a scene," she said in a low voice, "But unless you stop this at once—"

"Relax, honey, relax," the hitchhiker said, and casually lifted her keys from the counter. He jingled them in his hand, and said, "You get too nervous."

"Give me back those keys," she said.

"Look, honey, you're getting me sore," the hitchhiker said, perspiration rolling down his cheeks. "If you don't shut your mouth I'm going to clip you one. Right here and now."

"Treat 'em rough," the counterman said, placing the hamburgers in front of them. "Ketchup?"

"I've got identification—" she stopped. The hitchhiker's face was suddenly carved of gray stone as every muscle in it went tense. He drew back his open hand.

"I'm warning you," he said.

He meant it! She felt sick inside as she realized that the hitchhiker wasn't joking. He was playing a desperate game; to leave with her, by force if necessary, to get into her car—

"Hope you won't mind if I slap her around a little," the hitchhiker said genially. "She's been whining all night."

"Just don't get the place all bloody," the counterman laughed.

She sat very still, the untasted hamburger in front of her, trying to control the trembling in her hands. She had to be very calm now, and think this out carefully. A telephone?

"Have you a telephone?" she asked the counterman.

"Who you calling this time of night?" the hitchhiker asked quickly.

"My husband."

"Look. One more word out of you—I swear, one more word like that, and I'm giving it to you."

His tight, hard face was set immovably, jaw muscles knotted. His eyes stared at her unblinkingly, like the eyes of a jungle beast, and she stared back, fascinated. Light blue, she thought. Just like Tom's.

"Gimme a piece of the cherry pie," the hitchhiker said. "You know, the missus isn't always like this. I'm a little ashamed of her. She's been riding too long."

"Women," the counterman said, with casual contempt.

"She has her good points," the hitchhiker said judiciously. "She takes care of the kid good. My mother's keeping the kid while we visit her sister."

"I ain't got no kid yet," the counterman said.

"Ours is thirteen months."

She felt numb, but quite certain that this sort of thing just didn't happen. Not to her. A woman with a nice home and two children couldn't be abducted from a diner in the small hours of the morning.

The numbness increased, and suddenly she was very tired, and the need for action seemed distant.

"Boy or girl?" the counterman asked.

"Little girl. Sorry I ain't got no picture."

Perhaps I'm wrong, she thought vaguely. Perhaps this man actually is my husband, and I'm his wife, and he has a perfect right to beat me because I've been whining all night. . . .

A cup clattered at her elbow.

"I'll take a refill on the coffee," the hitchhiker said. "Want some more, honey?"

He grinned at her, and she saw his blackened teeth. No, she thought, he's not my husband because my husband has clean white teeth with several gold fillings in the molars, and this man has not seen a dentist in a

long time. So he's not my husband.

"No," she whispered, watching the fat, bristly-faced counterman rubbing his preposterous blond curls. Her sharp-nosed hitchhiker-husband was gulping down his second coffee, holding her car keys in his free hand.

Holding her car keys! Instantly the dreamy numbness was gone and she was wide awake. She thought of making a run for the door, into the black night. But the hitchhiker was standing now, between her and the door.

"I guess that's it," he said. "Me and the missus better get rolling."

"Okay," the counterman said. "Let's see, that's two hamburgers, fifty cents, pie, sixty-five, three coffees, ninety-five cents."

"Pay the man, honey," the hitchhiker said easily.

"I will not," she said, clutching her handbag.

"I said pay him!"

"Pay him yourself!" she screamed. "Listen to me!" she shouted at the counterman. "Are you blind? Can't you see—"

The hitchhiker slapped her across the mouth.

"You're going to get it," he promised softly. "You're really going to get it."

"Ninety-five cents," the counterman said.

The hitchhiker stared angrily at her, but she was gripping her purse in both hands, her knuckles white. He fished a torn wallet out of his back pocket, opened it, and reached into one of its compartments.

"Here." He dropped a shiny silver dollar on the counter. The man picked it up suspiciously.

"It's legal money," the hitchhiker said, moving toward the door. "It's my good-luck dollar."

She looked at the silver coin, wondering where he had gotten it. Las Vegas, perhaps? Saving it, after everything else was gone. For an opportunity like this?

That was it! Quickly she sat down at the counter and said, "I want another cup of coffee, please. Quickly."

The counterman glared at her, but brought it. She gulped a mouthful and stood up, still gripping her purse tightly.

"That's a dollar five," the counterman said.

The hitchhiker looked at her bitterly. "How about one coffee on the house?" he asked, trying to grin.

"Come on. You're rich enough to go driving to Ohio, you're rich enough to pay your check."

"Honey—" But she didn't look at him. If he wanted her purse, he would have to beat her unconscious first. And she didn't think that the counterman, sympathetic to male supremacy though he might be, would allow that.

"She's holding out on me," the hitchhiker said.

"I don't give a damn. You owe me five cents more," the counterman said, his face very red, coming up beside the hitchhiker.

The hitchhiker looked at her. She looked at the keys in his hand.

"All right," he said, and dropped the keys on the counter.

She scooped them up and ran out the door. Teeth chattering, she started the car and slammed it into gear. The road lighted in front of her.

She stared very hard at the section of road lighted by her headlights, thinking of the hitchhiker's good-luck silver dollar, the last cent he had.

She shuddered.

And the hitchhiker? Beaten up, perhaps, for five cents he couldn't pay?

But she couldn't think of it now, she couldn't even cry, because the wall of darkness was in front of the rushing headlights, tall as the sky, waiting to fall on her.

MURDER AT CHRISTMAS

By CHRISTOPHER BUSH

Ludovic Travers, one of the truly great detectives of fiction, makes one of his rare appearances in a short story in the next issue. . . . Ludovic's wife has been called away—of all times—the afternoon before Christmas Eve and he is asked to spend the week-end with his friend, Robert Valence, Chief Constable of the quiet village of Worbury. . . . So, when two detectives get together is it any wonder they couldn't keep their collective nose out of murder, even around Christmas.

an ounce of curiosity

by . . . Clarence Budington Kelland

An ounce of curiosity can go a long way. It can even expose a dark deed of violence in the simplest of rustic laboratories.

SCATTERGOOD BAINES was driving along the road between Higgins Bridge and Coldriver, when the witch hopplebushes parted and a young man lunged into the road. He was hatless, scratched by briers, panting. Scattergood's ancient mare shied and pretended she was in her first youth, which amused the old hardware merchant.

"Beats all what mem'ries we got," he said to her. "The idee of a body your age cuttin' up didoes!"

Then he turned to the young man, who was picking himself up from the dust and poising for renewed flight.

"Bear chasin' ye?" he asked genially.

The young man stiffened at sound of that kindly voice, white teeth showing between lips that curled in a snarl.

"Don't try to stop me," he said tensely. "You mind your own business."

"Allus calc'lated to," said Scattergood. "But if you're runnin' fer a train, it's gone."

When we were very young Clarence Budington Kelland seemed to us the most celebrated of writers. On every contents page of almost every magazine we opened, it appeared to us then, his name leaped up at us, and so did that of Scattergood Baines, the most humorous and fascinating of rustic wits. We still feel much the same way about Mr. Kelland, and when Baines turns detective, as he does here, our delight knows no bounds.

It was evident the young man was beside himself with fear.

"I want that horse," he said.

"Ye hain't got many competitors fer her," said Scattergood. "I dunno's I've had a offer fer her in fifteen year. Who's a-chasin' yet?"

"Don't you meddle with me. I tell you I won't be caught. Get out of that surrey!"

"Don't mind givin' ye a ride," said Scattergood. "Be they bears, or Injuns, or sheriffs?"

"It's a posse," said the boy.

"What did ye do?"

"Nothing. . . . Nothing. . . . I didn't do it; but they got it proved on me."

"Um. . . . They kin prove ye done what ye didn't do, eh? How old be ye?"

"Twenty," said the boy.

"Git in," said Scattergood.

The boy hesitated. "Git in," said Scattergood, and, strangely enough, the fugitive obeyed after a moment's pause.

"Old linen duster in behind," said Scattergood. "Git it out and on. I calc'late the's a felt hat there too, that I use on rainy days. Rain's bad fer straw. Put 'em on."

The boy obeyed, and Scattergood watched him out of the corner of his eye. "The idee is," said he, "that I kind of git puzzled over a feller that hain't done nothin' but it kin be proved onto him. It gits me to itchin' with curiosity. I dunno's the's anybody in Coldriver that's troubled with curiosity the way I be."

"Do—do you mean you're going to help me get away?"

"Wal, I wouldn't go so fur's to say that. I hain't goin' to put you onto no express train, if that's what you mean. I dunno's I know jest what I am to do with ye—outside of listenin' to ye."

"But if they come—if they catch up with us?"

"Wal, in sich a eventuality, I'd pull that there hat down perty fur and keep my mouth shet," said Scattergood. "Listens like somebody a-comin' now."

The young man stiffened and looked about him like a hunted animal.

"Ye better git kind of limp in the spine, like ye wa'n't interested special," said Scattergood, "and scrouge down some."

A floundering on the hillside, voices calling, a jingling as of hardware became audible, and presently two men leaped into the road twenty yards behind. They spied the rig and bellowed after it.

"Hey, there!" shouted a peremptory voice.

Scattergood pulled up leisurely. "Bellerin' at me?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Baines! I'm headin' a posse, and we're right on his heels."

"How be ye, Williams? How's the family? Whose heels be ye onto?"

"Feller that robbed Ol' Man Sanford, to Higgins Bridge, and done him a job of twistin' the ol' feller's knuckles with a pair of pliers, and bashed him over the head some. Left him fer dead; but he hain't. Calc'late he's got a thick skull onto him."

"And you're onto the heels of this here miscreant?"

"I bet he hain't a quarter of a mile ahead. Young feller. Kind of slender. Hain't seen nothin' of sich a man?"

"Git much money?" asked Scattergood.

"About thirty-eight hundred."

"Um. . . . I dunno's I'd go so fur's to let my knuckles git twisted to save that much," said Scattergood. "How d'ye know this feller you're chasin' done the deed?"

"Sanford *said* it was him."

"Recognize him plain, eh?"

"The feller was wearin' a red handkerchief over his face."

"Knew him by a strawberry mark, mebbe?"

"No, but he said it was him. And folks seen him a-comin' down Sanford's lane."

"With the pliers into his hand?" suggested Scattergood.

"Didn't have no pliers, but he was a-runnin'."

"With thutty-eight hundred dollars in his hand?" said Scattergood.

"Hain't nobuddy seen the money," said the deputy. "The's a heap more evidence, too."

"Seems like the' was most enough," said Scattergood.

"This here feller," said the deputy, "was clerkin' in the ol' man's store summers, and goin' to the State College winters. So he had a chance to know Sanford's habits and all, and the way he wouldn't never trust no big sum to a bank."

"Um. Them college fellers is apt to do anythin'," said Scattergood.

"On top of it all," said the deputy, "Sanford let him git through last night, and I calc'late the young feller was aggravated over it."

"How come he to git away from ye?" asked Scattergood.

"He slep' back of the store. When this here deed was discovered, quite a number of folks gathered together, down there; but nobuddy dast go in on account of him bein' desprit. So they hollered that he better come out peaceable."

"Uh-huh. Did he come?"

"He come as fur's the door and asks what's the rumpus, and somebody yells he was wanted fer robbin' Sanford, so he kind of stands a minute and then says he'll git his hat and coat and come along, and then he goes back fer 'em, and the next we know a kid hollers that he's hyperin' across lots fer the woods. So we got organized and set out to ketch him."

"Good luck to ye," said Scattergood. "G'-by."

The deputy and his companion shuffled off down the road and disappeared around the bend. Scattergood did not cluck to his mare, but sat with chin on chest and eyes half closed until the young man in the seat beside him squirmed with anxiety. Presently the old hardware merchant spoke.

"I'm a deppity myself," he said.

The boy started, gathered himself to leap from the surrey.

"Hold your hosses," said Scattergood mildly. "I'm jest considerin' this and that. So long's I'm a deppity and you're in my custody, I hain't breakin' no law helpin' a fugitive to escape, be I? Eh?"

The boy made an inarticulate sound in his throat.

"It's handy bein' a deppity," said Scattergood. "Now, here you be as much under arrest as a feller kin git, and no harm done to nobuddy. Not till things simmers down some, and we kin git to look at what's happened 'thout havin' the high strikes."

"I won't be caught," said the boy hoarsely.

"You *be* caught," said Scattergood; "and I calc'late you're goin' to *stay* caught till I'm through with ye. Now, ye wouldn't think, to look at me, how spry I be! So jest sit quiet and don't compel me to take no steps. If you done this here thing you're a-goin' to the pen'tentiary fer it. But if you didn't do it, then I aim to see you don't go to no pen'tentiary fer what somebody else contrived."

"I didn't," said the boy. "I didn't take his money and I did not hurt him."

"But you was to his house."

"Yes."

"What fer?"

"To ask him to let me stay on. It wasn't much of a job, but it gave me time to study, and I saved 'most every cent I made."

"How come he to let you git through?"

"It was on account of his granddaughter."

"Um. . . . Perty gal?"

The boy nodded.

"He ketched you courtin' her?"

"He saw me kiss her," said the boy.

"Dew tell!"

"She works in the store, too. She's an orphan, but Mr. Sanford won't let her live with him. He lives all alone. He makes her work, and only pays her just enough so that she can live with some people who run a boarding-house."

"Objected to her kissin' a feller, did he?"

"He said she was going to have his money when he was through with it, and he wasn't going to have any young spriggins like me trying to make up to her and get it."

"I've knowed sich things to

happen," said Scattergood. . . . "G'dap there. G'lang!"

There was silence for a time as they drove along the pleasant road, then Scattergood cleared his throat. "If it turns out ye hain't the miscreant," he said, "I'll put ye in a job till this here college opens up."

The boy said nothing. There were things more important to consider now than jobs or educations.

"What are you going to do?" he asked anxiously.

"Git the true inwardness of this here matter," said Scattergood. "In the meantime, the' hain't never been nobuddy more arrested 'n what you be at this present moment. Young feller, you're in custody, you be. . . . What say your name was?"

"Ben Martin."

"And what's the name of this gal you was keepin' comp'ny with?"

"Susan Briggs."

"His daughter's gal, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Be ye goin' to do what I tell ye 'thout makin' a fuss?"

Young Martin turned to look steadily into Scattergood's face. "I've heard of you, Mr. Baines," he said. "I put myself in your hands."

"G'dap!" Scattergood said to his mare.

Scattergood drove by a somewhat circuitous route to his farm on the outskirts of Coldriver, where he conducted Ben Martin into the kitchen.

"Mandy," he said to his wife, "I calc-late you better feed up this here dangerous character, so's he'll be too logy to run. They say he's guilty of 'most everythin', short of murder."

"I calc'late even a murderer gits hungry," said Mandy.

"He's under arrest," said Scattergood. "I done it personal and private. Now I got to go out and see if he done the deed. Kin you 'n' him git along together peaceable while I'm away?"

"I don't b'lieve we'll have words," said Mandy.

Scattergood turned to the boy. "If you hain't here when I git back," he said, "I'll be kind of disapp'inted."

"I'll be here," said Ben.

Scattergood drove into town and hired a car and driver to take him to Higgins Bridge. Once in that village, he drove to Old Man Sanford's house, a quarter of a mile from the river, and walked in without the formality of rapping. A neighbor woman sat in the hair-cloth rocker.

"How's he?" asked Scattergood.

"Restin' easy," said the woman, nodding toward the bedroom door.

Scattergood walked in and stood at the foot of the bed, looking down at the wizened

face with its fringe of whiskers which lay on the pillow.

"How be ye?" he asked.

"Nigh dead," said Sanford. "Have they ketched the miscreant?"

"I hain't sure," said Scattergood. "It was Ben Martin, eh? Recognize him plain?"

"It couldn't of been nobuddy else. Ben was here fifteen minutes before it happened a-beggin' me to give him back his job."

"Which," said Scattergood, "you wouldn't do?"

"Not by a jugful," said Mr. Sanford. "He went away, and then he come back with a handkerchief over his face, and he hit me with the pliers and tied me up and twisted my knuckles till I told him where the money was."

"Recognize his voice?"

"He talked funny so I would not know him—like he had a mouthful of mush."

Scattergood turned his back for an instant and then faced Sanford again. "Did he talk like this?" he asked in a voice which had lost its distinctness and had become, somehow, loose and, if one may use the word to describe a sound, flaccid.

"Dog-goned if it didn't!" said Old Man Sanford.

"I jest wondered," said Scattergood.

"The' hain't found the money yit, have they?"

"I hain't heard tell," said Scattergood. Then, after a pause, "Hope to see ye around soon. Uh-huh. Calc'late your hand'll be tender fer quite a spell. G'-by."

"G'-by," said Old Man Sanford, and he turned his face to the wall disconsolately, for the loss of thirty-eight hundred dollars rested heavily upon his heart.

Scattergood paused in the dining room. "Kitchen been redd up since this here outrage was done?" he asked.

The neighbor woman sniffed. "Didn't dast to touch it. Deppity sheriff give orders. He says the' may be clues a-layin' around. Huh! If that there coot found him a clue he wouldn't know whether to let it set on his lap like a baby or fat it up to exhibit at the fair."

"Calc'late I'll look in," said Scattergood. "I dunno's I ever see a clue hangin' around in its nat'ral state."

He pushed open the kitchen door and stood peering into the room which had been the scene of last night's occurrences. Old Man Sanford was a scrupulous housekeeper. No unwashed dishes were visible; the floor was spotless; everything was in its place—everything but an overturned chair and certain lengths of clothesline which had been cut from the limbs of Mr. Sanford when he had been released. Scattergood examined the rope: the knots were just knots. They told

nothing of the age, size, color of eyes, or previous condition of servitude of the criminal.

The old hardware man spent five minutes examining the kitchen; but came out equipped with no more information as to the identity of the miscreant than he had carried in.

"See any of them clues of the deppity's?" asked the neighbor woman.

"Nary," said Scattergood. "I dunno's I hold much with clues, not the kind ye kin see with your eyes and tetch with your fingers. If I was a crim'nal, and kind of smart and contrivin', seems to me I'd furnish a sight of them clues. Or else I'd be cautious and not leave none. A smart man could come nigh to bewilderin' the officers of the law if he set his mind to it. I bet you I could up and commit me a crime and have the sheriff arrestin' the Baptis' minister fer it. Sich clues kin be made up as easy as whittlin' a stick."

"Mebbe so," said the woman.

"Uh-huh. Seems as though. But the's one kind of clue can't be made up, and that's the kind ye can't see or tetch."

"Then how ye goin' to know it's there?"

"Ma'am," said Scattergood, "it all lays in the capabilities of the human heart. The's men that jest can't whistle when they're a-walkin' up a road on a summer mornin'. The's men that could shoot ye down if it suited their purpose, but couldn't rob ye under no circumstances, and the's men that could pick a glass eye out of your head whilst ye was asleep, but couldn't bring themselves to lay a hand on ye in violence. Them, ma'am, is the kind of clues I was referrin' to. And the feller don't live that kin disguise 'em, or change 'em, or make 'em fit anybody but himself."

"Dew tell. And be the' any sich around here?"

"They're around everywhere, ma'am, if ye got the eyes to see 'em, and the understandin' heart to know what they signify."

"I calc'late these here ones signify that Ben Martin done a perty mean trick."

"Know Ben perty well, ma'am?"

"As well's most."

"If Ben's name hadn't been mentioned, would this here crime make ye think of him right off? I mean, ma'am, do ye ketch a resemblance to Ben in it? Human actions, ma'am, got to resemble their doers like children resemble parents."

"Mr. Baines," she said severely, "you talk like you was a button short."

"Mebbe I be," said Scattergood. "But bein' so makes all the difference, ma'am, between livin' and bein' alive. G'-by, ma'am."

Scattergood's subsequent investigations took channels which

might not have been approved by one wise in the efficient methods of the police. For instance, he was driven to Sanford's store, where he talked to Susan Briggs.

"How be ye, Susan?" he asked.

She raised her head to look at him, with dumb misery in her eyes.

"Name's Baines," he said. "Scattergood Baines, of Coldriver. Kind of worried about Ben, eh?"

"I—I can't bear to think of his being chased like—like some animal," she said brokenly.

"If he done it," said Scattergood gravely, "he deserves to git chased."

"He *couldn't* do it," she said.

"What gives ye that idee? Strong enough, hain't he? He was there or thereabouts, wa'n't he? He *could* 'a' done it."

"Men don't commit crimes with their hands," she said; "they commit them with their hearts."

Scattergood eyed her sharply, and cleared his throat. "H'm, Ben's got a heart, hain't he? Same's any feller."

"It's not that kind of heart, Mr. Baines. If you knew him you'd see what I mean."

"I calc'late to foller ye. What ye mean is if ye stand alongside of a pile of stove wood all split fur burnin', and the's a fiddle a-layin' beside it, why, you know right off the fiddle couldn't of done the splittin'."

"Yes," she said.

"How," he asked, "d'ye know Ben's a fiddle and not an ax?"

"Because," she said, "he was gentle. Not that he was a coward. Ben wouldn't be afraid. But it turned him sick to see aynthing suffer. He'd go all white and trembly. No matter how hard he wanted to torture something, he *couldn't*. And I can't bear to think of him now—hunted and half crazy and hungry and thirsty."

"Um. I calc'late he hain't hungry nor thirsty. Nor hunted much. At this here present minute, he's a-settin' in my kitchen with a full stummick."

"Mr. Baines!"

"I run onto him by accident," said Scattergood, "and kind of figgered I'd better look into things. Got any idee where I better start lookin'?"

"No. . . . No. . . . I can't imagine who could do such a dreadful thing."

"It was somebody knows Ol' Man Sanford well," said Scattergood. "It was somebody that knowed his ways and watched and studied him. . . . Your grandpa seen Ben a-kissin' ye?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"You must 'a' picked a bad time."

"He'd gone out to his dinner," said Susan, "and came back unexpectedly. He just stood in the door and scowled, and said, 'I thought I'd ketch ye.' "

"Jest like that," said Scatter-

good. "Um. . . . Sneaked back a-purpose."

"He said he'd heard we were carrying on," she said. "But we weren't carrying on. We meant it. It was honest."

"Now, who d'ye s'pose told him?" asked Scattergood. "Anybody else makin' up to ye?"

She blushed, hesitated.

"I bet the' was several," said Scattergood. "Jest gimme their names."

"Well, there was Jim Leslie and Peter Banks and Ray Welch. But I didn't care for any of them."

"Um. . . . If I was you, I'd kind of mislay my tongue for the day. G'-by," said Scattergood.

He spent that night in the Higgins Bridge hotel renewing old acquaintances and making new ones. During the evening the majority of the male residents of the village dropped in at the hostelry to discuss the most exciting event which had taken place in years. Scattergood studied them, talked with them, but, curiously enough, his interest seemed to turn rather to horses than to crime.

Early the next morning he went out to look at horses, and spent the major part of the day in opening equine mouths, observing equine teeth and legs and paces. In the afternoon he called again upon Old Man Sanford to ask one question: *Who told him Ben Martin and Susan Briggs were carrying on?*

One other question he asked —of the deputy sheriff: *Who reported having seen Ben coming away from Sanford's house on the evening of the outrage?*

At four o'clock he stopped to speak to certain urchins playing duck on a rock in a field.

"Any rats runnin' around? Jest common rats?"

An abundance was reported.

"The fust feller to fetch me a rat in a cage gits a quarter," he said.

Scattergood ate his dinner placidly, and on his way to his room stopped at the desk.

"Jim," he said to the proprietor, "the's some fellers comin' in to-night with the idee of sellin' me hosses. I'm goin' upstairs. When they come you tell 'em to step right up."

"Sure thing, Mr. Baines. Didn't know you dealt in hossflesh."

"Don't, not 's a rule. But Higgins Bridge hosses is interestin' especial."

He ascended the creaking stairs and seated himself in the rocker before the window of the somewhat dingy but clean and homelike room which he occupied.

In twenty minutes Jim Leslie rapped on the door and was admitted. Jim was a young man of thirty, short and stocky and swarthy. Almost on his heels

came Peter Banks, somewhat older, gray-eyed, wiry, nervous of movement and inclined to be talkative. Before he was comfortably seated, Ray Welch arrived. Ray was perhaps forty, an ordinary man of neutral tones. All wore their business faces, which were a trifle grim. Horsedealers' faces.

"Wal," said Scattergood, "here you all be. Um. . . . We was talkin' hosses, wa'n't we?"

"We was," said Jim Leslie succinctly.

"Interestin' subject," said Scattergood. "Ye kin derive a heap of knowledge from observin' the reflections a hoss gives off."

"All a hoss ever gives off to me," said Ray Welch, "is work."

"Any of ye ever carry sugar lumps in your pockets?" asked Scattergood.

"What fur?" asked Leslie.

"So's your hosses'll go nuzzlin' ye for 'em."

"Don't want no hoss nuzzlin' me," said Banks.

"I like a hoss that whickers when he hears me a-comin'," said Scattergood.

"I like a hoss that throws his heft in the pull," said Welch.

"Um. . . . I've known 'em to pull more for a word than they would for a gad," said Scattergood. "Uh-huh, as I was sayin', hosses is lookin'-glasses. They reflect the fellers that own 'em."

There came a rap on the door. Scattergood called, "Come in," and Marvin Towne, sheriff of Coldriver County, entered.

"I'm a-lookin' for Mr. Baines," he said.

"Here I be," said Scattergood. "What's wanted, Marvin? If 'tain't pressin', jest set. I'm dickerin'."

"No hurry," said the sheriff; "dicker ahead."

"Most folks looks at a hoss's teeth," said Scattergood. "I do. Um. . . . Speakin' of teeth, you got a perty good set yourself, Welch."

Ray Welch grinned sourly. "Ought to have," he said. "They cost me thutty dollars."

"They hain't false!" exclaimed Scattergood.

"Upper 'n' lower," said Mr. Welch.

"A body'd never dream it." Scattergood bent and reached under the bed. "Ketched me a rat this afternoon," he said, producing a wire trap in which a great old barn rodent scurried to and fro.

"Too bad we hain't got a ferret," said Leslie.

"Keepin' him for a pet?" asked Marvin Towne.

"No," said Scattergood; "but it kind of goes ag'in' me to kill any kind of critter. I wisht some of you boys 'ud do it fur me." He looked up expectantly.

Welch stood up. "Don't need no ferrets nor no tikes," he said.

He picked up the cage in his

hands, and Scattergood noted how they whitened at the knuckles; he saw how the man's face changed and was no longer neuter: the eyes glittered, the nostrils seemed pinched, the upper lip curled.

Welch opened the door of the trap and shook the rat out of its prison. It dropped squealing to the floor; but before it could right itself and scurry to safety Welch set his heel upon its back. He did not stamp; he was deliberate. For an instant he held the creature under his boot, and then, slowly, gloatingly, he pivoted. . . .

"Welch," said Scattergood, "your hosses got wild-eyed when you got clost, and throwed up their heads. They was scairt of ye, Welch. Them hosses had been abused."

"None of your business," said Welch, still quivering. "I aim to have an animal do what I tell it to."

"This was more'n that. They wa'n't the hosses of a severe man; they was the hosses of a cruel man."

Welch stood scowling, but uncertain in his mind. He did not understand what Scattergood was getting at.

"You doted on killin' that rat," said Scattergood. "Most folks shrink from sich things. Now, 'twan't the usual man could 'a' put the pliers to Ol' Man Sanford's knuckles. That feller had to have a bent."

"I calc'late Ben Martin had a bent, all right," said Welch.

"Um. . . . Lemme see; it was you told Sanford he was carryin' on with Susan Briggs, wa'n't it?"

"What of it?"

"Oh, nothin' special," said Scattergood. "And it was you seen him a'comin' away from Sanford's house, the night of the robbery."

"I seen him all right."

"He says," said Scattergood, "it was you advised him to go ask the old man to give him another chance."

"I done so," said Welch. "Kind of sorry to see the young feller lose his job."

"Um. . . . Mandy asked Ben Martin to kill a pullet. He could not do it. He turned sick, and had to give it up."

Welch shrugged his shoulders and sneered.

"Ye hear about these here laboratories," said Scattergood, "where folks makes experiments. Wal, I been a-runnin' a kind of a laboratory, as ye might say. Now, ye take some kind of a drug, and ye experiment around, and test this here attribute and that there attribute, and then ye know what it'll do and what it won't do. Ye know what it kin do and what it can't. I been a-testin' folks instid of drugs. Um. . . .

It was a feller with false teeth wrenched up Sanford's fingers. I tested that in this here labora-

tory of mine, too. This here miscreant took out his teeth, to kind of disguise his voice and make it mushy, so as Sanford wouldn't recognize it."

Welch was very still now; his eyes narrowed as he peered at Scattergood.

"Now, let's kind of check up. Fust, ye had a grudge ag'in' Ben on account of Susan. That's one. Next, ye told Sanford they was carryin' on. That's two. Then ye told Ben to go see the ol' man. That's three, and kind of important-like. Ye knowed Ben was a-goin' there—planned it, as ye might say. And ye reported seein' him. Um. . . .

"If ye see him ye must 'a' been thereabouts. I know the' was a man with false teeth there, and you got false teeth. That's a p'int. I know the banks wouldn't give ye three thousand dollars on a mortgage on your farm—and ye needed that money perty bad. But all of them things might not 'a' counted ag'in' ye if ye hadn't been the kind of a feller that could do torture and enj'y it. . . .

"So I calc'late you better put it on the table, Welch?"

"Put what on the table?"

"Sanford's thutty-eight hundred dollars."

"I hain't got it. I never had it."

"Ye got it right in your pants," said Scattergood. "I figgered that out in the laboratory, too. Ye hain't the hidin' kind. Ye could not trust no hidin' place but ye got a sight of confidence in yourself. I calc'late that there bulge is it. . . . See if 'tain't, Sheriff. See if 'tain't!"

Welch made a sudden menacing movement, but Marvin Towne was efficient in such matters. The movement was never completed. Handcuffs clicked.

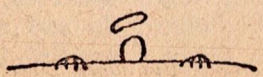
"Investigate that there bulge, Marvin," said Scattergood.

The sheriff tossed a thick wallet upon the table.

Scattergood turned to the other two men. "I calc'late that ends the hoss tradin' fur to-night," he said. "Um. . . . It had to be one of the three of ye. . . . G'-by."

An hour later, Scattergood was driving toward Coldriver with Susan Briggs on the seat beside him.

"I calc'late," he said, "you'll want to give Ben the results of these here chemical analyzin's of ourn!"



holiday for ghosts

by . . . Dorothy Dunn

Leo Barnett got quite a kick out of Hallowe'en and he hated to stay in after school. Murder? Oh, well—it happens sometimes.

WELL, MISS CAMPELL, since you have asked me to write a one-thousand word essay on "My Most Exciting Moment"—I will write it. But I did not throw that eraser at Willie Stratford. As they say laughingly: It was two other guys. But I know you are not laughing, and I will accept my punishment like a man, even though I am only fourteen years old.

At that, it is not quite as bad as the punishment one of the teachers over at the Field School loaded on a pal of mine for pitching a paper wad. She gave him a block of paper after school, and told him to roll a hundred, and throw them as far as he liked. He got a big kick out of it. Then she said, "Now pick them up." It took him until five o'clock. But I should not be giving you a tip like this.

And now for the thousand word essay on excitement. You would not believe it if I did not see it myself, and have a bump on my head to prove it, plus Mr. Stevens across the street with his

The innocence of childhood may be largely a fable, but that doesn't mean that children are little monsters either. To a boy of fourteen there just aren't any emotional guideposts sufficiently close to his experience to make the blackest crime seem horrible. But when Dorothy Dunn undertakes to look out through the windowpanes of a lad's maturing consciousness at a world he never made you may rest assured the vista will be a chilling one.

throat cut, as you probably read in the paper. Plus the sheet with blood on it that the killer left on Mr. Stevens' front porch.

If you saw those things, you would say: "Poor Leo Barnett. He is not a problem boy at all, but just a man of action who cannot sit still through Arithmetic because of what he has been through leaving a mark on him." You would also say: "No wonder the poor dear had to clip Willie Stratford with that eraser!" But I have already told you that I did not do that.

It happens on Hallowe'en night, see? Me and some pals fix up sandbags, and steal sheets from home for costumes. We cut holes in pillow cases and tie the corners for ears. Then we go out for a good time, only I don't have it. I have a murder instead.

We go around with some girls for awhile, ringing doorbells and saying: "My name's Jimmy, whattle ya gimme?" We collect mostly apples and cookies and very few pennies, although Helen Wilts is with us singing those corny torch numbers for the public.

Then Willie Stratford, who made me so mad this afternoon gets a bright idea. "Let's split up and scare the girls," he says to me. "You run through the alley, Leo, and meet us in front of Dick's house."

I don't give it much thought, but I scram when the rest do and scare myself half to death, the alley's so dark behind the school. And just when I hear a noise behind me and try to pick up speed, I trip on the sheet.

I'm getting to my feet, see, telling myself I'm a big boy now, and when I turn around I'll only see a dog or something. And then I turn around.

But I don't see a dog. I don't see much of anything. There's just a blob of a man in the shadows, and he socks me right in the neck under the pillow case.

The wind goes out of me and its worse than getting a baseball in the belly, and I fall down. He rips the ghost costume off me, and gives me a kick. I know after that kick that I am no muscle-match for the man I can't see. So I pull the old possum trick and keep my eyes shut.

I open them just in time to see him scooting around Culver Way in my costume, carrying my paper bag of handouts.

I guess it's the sheet I'm worried about and I scale the back fence of the school, cut through the girls' yard, and see him standing there under the street light in front of Mr. Stevens' house. He is eating one of my apples and a cop goes by without so much as a look, and I hope the apple has a worm in it. (Only now I'm glad it didn't.)

I run after the cop, who is Mr. Bannon, keeping his eye out for juvenile you-know-whats,

and I tell him to go arrest the man who stole my ghost costume.

He laughs like it is a great joke, the way you laughed when I said I did not throw that eraser at Willie.

"Every year you lads think up new ways to pester the law on Hallowe'en," he says. "Run along now and enjoy yourself. But mind you, no property damage, or it's you I'll be arresting!"

So he walks on, and the man waits until he leaves. Then he throws down my paper sack in the bushes by the steps and goes up on Mr. Stevens' porch, and rings the bell.

I creep up close and hear him say: "My name's Jimmy, whattle ya gimme?" And Stevens, who is a good guy and doesn't want to get his windows soaped, lets the guy inside. Only he thinks it's a kid.

He thinks it's a kid and he gets his throat cut that way because of the man being an escaped convict whose wife Mr. Stevens has stolen while this other man is in the pen. But I guess you know all that from the papers, Miss Campbell, as I believe you read everything except maybe the funnies.

Well, the man comes out of the front door slow and tosses the sheet on the porch and goes off like he belonged on the street. Nobody pays him a second look.

I go up to get the sheet because I am in trouble enough already about the holes in a good pillow case and I see there's blood on it. Then I look through the window and see Mr. Stevens with his cut throat.

Mr. Bannon comes around again and I call him up on the porch, and this time he knows I ain't just clicking my teeth. Only this time it's too late.

Of course that's no slander to the law because I didn't know it was going to happen myself, even if Mr. Bannon had believed me. I just wanted my sheet back the first time and didn't blame the cop for not being interested in a sheet.

Well, it seems they already know up at the precinct that this escaped man might be after Stevens, as Stevens knew he had been released from prison and was trying to keep out of his way. They also knew his name was Slip Gordon. They catch him very soon in a crap game (that's dice), and he gives them the bird.

"You got no evidence," he says. "I was not near that house."

They had me there to look him over, but I hadn't seen him too good without the pillow case and couldn't say for sure. But all at once I remember the apple he bit into. I also remember what I read in the Detective Book that you took out of my geography book last week.

When you get to page 43, Miss Campbell, you will read that it is possible for a laboratory

technician to make a cast of teeth marks in an apple and identify the rat that bit into it. Which they did, and also gave me two tickets to the police circus.

They sure were nice to me.

I will put an apple on your desk tomorrow, teacher, in remembrance of this essay on my most exciting moment. And I hope you will forgive me for hitting Willie Stratford with that eraser, when you knew all the time it was me that did it. If I had known how long it takes to write a thousand words, I would have socked him with an inkwell and made it worth my while. Or is it more words for inkwells?

Your pupil,
LEO BARNETT

---

sentimental beat

by . . . Arthur La Bern

Inspector Barnes couldn't quite forget smiling Molly Reeves. So he walked back into the past for a closer look at her character.

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR Barnes sipped his coffee. He liked it sweet and strong. It was a carry-over from the days when he had been a fresh-faced rookie cop on the beat around Summerville Gardens.

Those were the days when it was not unknown for a policeman to be invited into a spic-and-span kitchen for a quick cup of coffee at the invitation of some smiling housemaid.

Inspector Barnes remembered one of them—Molly Reeves, friendly, blue-eyed, with chestnut curls and a country girl's complexion. Molly's softly-modulated speech appealed to him more than the voices of the shriller city girls.

Perhaps, if he had stayed on the beat, he would have married Molly. He often thought about her, wondering whether she had married Abel, the lynx-eyed gardener he had never liked.

Perhaps after all, the gardener would have made her happier than he could have done. It was hard to imagine Molly as the

It may seem at first glance that Arthur La Bern has made the police officer of this freshly minted yarn a bit too much of a sentimentalist. But we think you'll change your opinion of him when he "makes his kill," in the parlance of detective fiction initiates. For what could be more fascinating than a dramatic revelation of just how sternly shrewd a romantically minded sleuth can be when he hears the clarion call of duty.

wife of a police inspector, listening to his after-dinner talk about murders, or playing bridge with the wives of the other inspectors. Molly would be happier listening to Abel's monosyllabic comments about slugs and green fly.

He remembered the day Lynch, the chauffeur, had cut the top of his thumb off with the bread-knife. Molly had bandaged it skillfully and swiftly with her own handkerchiefs, and made him a cup of coffee. Then she had fainted.

No, he couldn't see Molly as a policeman's wife. Of course, women could change considerably in a lifetime. But as it was, Inspector Barnes had never married.

It was perhaps not unnatural that he should pause one evening outside the old house in Summerville Gardens on his way to a game of pinochle at MacGovern's Parkside Tavern.

He was staring up at the house when somebody said: "Anything wrong, Inspector?"

It was the young policeman on the beat, anxious to show that he recognized a top-brass official.

The Inspector laughed. "No. I was just feeling sentimental. When I was pavement pounding around here as a rookie I used to get cups of coffee in the kitchen of this house. No such luck these days, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid not, Inspector. It belongs to a couple of old people who live in the basement. A Mr. Lynch and his wife."

"Did you say 'Lynch'? Why, that was the name of the chauffeur who used to work here."

"That's right, Inspector. It was before my time. But when the old lady died she left the house, the car and all her cash to the chauffeur."

"Well, what do you know! Who'd be a policeman?" The Inspector laughed again. "Lucky old Lynch! I think I'll pay him a visit. Perhaps he'll know what happened to Molly."

Inspector Barnes descended the wide stone steps of the house and rang the bell. He noticed that the kitchen window was heavily curtained, and very dirty.

There was a shuffling sound from within, and a woman's voice called out, "Who is it?"

"I'm an old friend of Mr. Lynch," Barnes replied. "Can I see him?"

He heard the scraping of a heavy bolt, and a door opened a few inches. A woman's face peered out at him.

It was the face of an incredibly stooped, old woman. Faded blue eyes flickered nervously under her thinning white hair as she stared up at him.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Time certainly could exert a cruel tyranny.

"Molly," he said. "You remember me, don't you?"

The old crone shook her head. "I don't know you," she muttered suspiciously. "What are you here for?"

"Don't be scared, Molly. You must remember Ted Barnes. You used to make me cups of coffee."

"Well, I can't make you any cups of coffee now. How can I remember everybody I made a cup of coffee for in my life?"

The woman in the doorway was really scared, and he laughed again to reassure her.

"So you married Lynch did you, really? I always thought you would marry young Abel."

"So I did marry Abel," said Molly Reeves. "But he's been dead and buried ten years. Then I married Mr. Lynch—though I can't see that it's any of your business."

A man's voice came from inside the room.

"Who is it, Molly?"

Barnes was looking over her head, and in his restricted view of the kitchen he saw that this too had changed. What had once been so spic-and-span had now been allowed to gather dust and grime, becoming almost a pigsty. All he could make out of the man in the bed were a pair of scrawny, rheumatic-looking hands grasping the counterpane.

Beyond the kitchen window he could see a corner of the garden which, in contrast to the kitchen, had remained as bright and well kept as it had been in the days of Abel.

"Can't I see Mr. Lynch for a moment?" Barnes asked. "I'm sure he'll remember me."

She shook her head. "He does not want to see anybody. Go away, now."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Molly," he said, genuinely sad. "It's a pity you don't remember me because I was in the kitchen the day Lynch had that accident and lost the top of his thumb. So, you see, that can't be Lynch in the bed there. I can see *both* his thumbs clearly. And if it isn't Lynch it must be Abel."

"I tell you Abel's dead and buried."

"Judging by the well-kept garden, his ghost must be pretty active," Barnes murmured. "Are you sure it wasn't Lynch the pair of you buried ten years ago?"

Molly made no audible reply. For the second time in his life Inspector Barnes saw her in a dead faint on the kitchen floor, her limbs crumpled under her.

"Ah, well," he mused. "Looks like I won't be getting that game of pinochle in tonight as I'd hoped. I'll be doing some digging in Abel's garden instead."

midnight visit

by . . . Robert Arthur

He wasn't the mysterious, Alfred Hitchcock kind of secret agent. Utterly prosaic he seemed until —a man at bay screamed shrilly.

JIM AUSABLE did not fit any description of a secret agent Fowler had ever read. Following him down the musty corridor of the gloomy French hotel where Ausable had a room, Fowler felt let down. It was a small room, on the sixth and top floor—scarcely the expected setting for a figure of romantic adventure. But Ausable, in his wrinkled business suit, badly in need of cleaning, could hardly be called a romantic figure.

He was, for one thing, fat. Very fat. And then there was his accent. Though he spoke French and German passably, he had never altogether lost the New England twang he had brought to Paris from Boston twelve years before.

"You are disappointed," Ausable said wheezily over his shoulder. "You were told that I was a secret agent, a spy dealing in espionage and danger. You wished to talk to me because you are a writer, young and romantic, and a mutual friend in Boston gave you my name. You visioned

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mysterious figures in the night, the crack of pistols, drugs in the wine.

"Instead, you have spent a dull evening in a French music hall with a sloppy fat man who, instead of having messages slipped to him by dark-eyed beauties, gets a prosaic telephone call making an appointment in his room. You have been bored!"

The fat man chuckled to himself as he unlocked the door to his room, and stood aside to let his discomfited guest enter.

"You are disillusioned," Ausable told him. "But take cheer, my young friend. Presently you will see a paper, a quite important paper for which several men have risked their lives. You will see it come to me in the next-to-the-last step of its journey into official hands. Some day soon that paper may well affect the course of history. In that thought there is drama, is there not?"

As he spoke, Ausable closed the door behind him. Then he switched on the light.

And as the light came on, Fowler had his first authentic thrill of the day. For halfway across the room, a small automatic in his hand, stood a man.

Ausable blinked a few times.

"Ivan," he wheezed, "you gave me a start. I thought you were in Moscow. What are you doing here in my room?"

Ivan was slender, a little less than tall, with features that suggested slightly the crafty pointed countenance of a fox. But there was about him—aside from the gun—nothing especially menacing.

"The report," he murmured. "The report that is being brought you tonight on Russia's atomic strength. I thought it would be safer in my hands than in yours, my American friend."

Ausable moved to an armchair and sat down heavily.

"I'm going to raise hell with the management this time, and you can bet on it," he said grimly. "The second time in a month somebody has gotten into my room off that confounded balcony!"

Fowler's eyes went to the single window of the room. It was an ordinary window, against which now the night was pressing blackly.

"Balcony?" Ivan said, with a rising inflection. "No, a passkey. I did not know about the balcony. It might have saved me some trouble had I known."

"It's not my damned balcony," Ausable said with extreme irritation. "It belongs to the next apartment."

He glanced explanatorily at Fowler.

"You see," he said, "this room used to be part of a large unit, and the next room—through that door there—used to be the living room. *It* had the balcony, which extends under *my* window now.

"You can get onto it from the empty room two doors down—and somebody did, last month. The management promised me to block it off. But they haven't."

Ivan glanced at Fowler, who was standing stiffly a few feet from Ausable, and waved the gun with a little peremptory gesture.

"Please sit down," he suggested. "We have a wait of half an hour at least, I think."

"Thirty-one minutes," Ausable said moodily. "The appointment was for twelve-thirty. I wish I knew how you learned about that report, Ivan."

The other smiled without mirth.

"And we wish we knew how it was gotten out of Russia," he replied. "However, no harm has been done. I will have it back where it belongs—eh, what is that?"

Unconsciously Fowler, who was still standing, had jumped at the sudden rapping on the door. Ausable yawned.

"The gendarmes," he said. "I thought that so important a paper as the one we are waiting for might well be given a little extra protection tonight."

Ivan bit his lip in uncertainty. The rapping was repeated.

"What will you do now, Ivan?" Ausable asked.

The man's face was black as he backed swiftly toward the window. With his hand behind him he flung it up to its full height, and swung one leg over the sill.

"Send them away!" he rasped. "I will wait on the balcony. Send them away or I'll shoot and take my chances!"

The rapping on the door came louder. And a voice was raised.

"M'sieu! M'sieu Ausable!"

Keeping his body twisted so that his gun still covered the fat man and his guest, the man at the window grasped the frame with his free hand and swung his other leg up and over the sill.

The doorknob turned. Swiftly Ivan pushed with his left hand to free himself from the sill and drop to the balcony outside. And then, as he dropped, he screamed once, shrilly.

The door opened and a waiter stood there with a tray, a bottle and two glasses.

"M'sieu, the cognac you ordered for when you returned," he said. He set the tray upon the table, deftly uncorked the bottle, and retired.

White-faced, Fowler stared after him. "But—" he stammered," the police—"

"There were no police." Ausable sighed. "Only Henri, whom I was expecting."

"But won't that man out on the balcony—" Fowler began.

"No," Ausable said," he won't return. You see, my young friend, there is no balcony. . . . What is Boston like these days?"

—Continued from back cover

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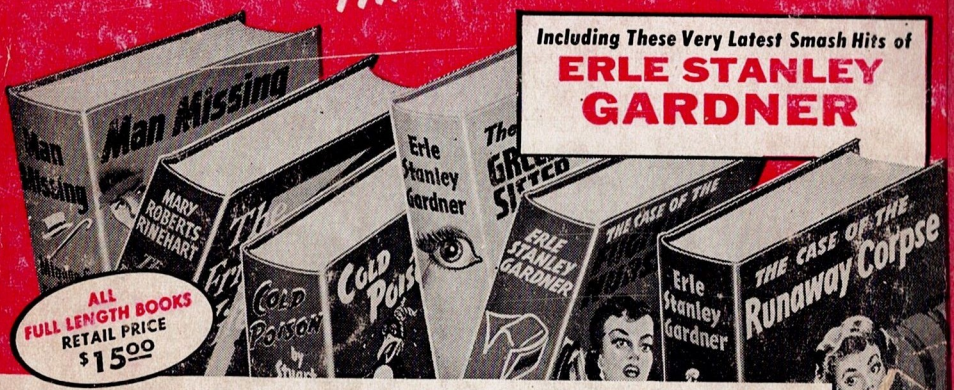

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