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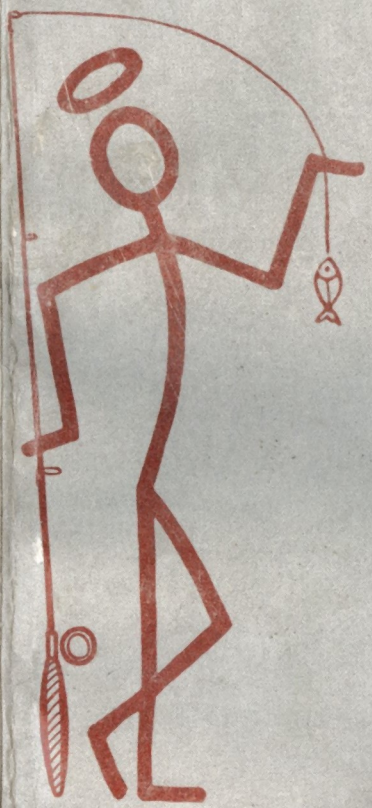
THE saint MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS



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SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

"Ah, sweet mystery of life, at last I've found you," vocalized Victor Herbert, thereby establishing for all time that a song-writer can have the jump on all the top-lofty biologists, who are still fumbling around with the enigma.

The mystery of life leads presently to the correlated mystery of death, when it ends; and when this happens as a result of human malice, its complications become the crux of the majority of mystery or detective stories, to which this Magazine is dedicated.

Usually the story problem can be summarized in the definition word of the genre, "whodunit?" — or, sometimes, "how was it done?" But a number of scientific achievements considerably more recent than anything known to the early masters have had me wondering why some modern innovator with legal training doesn't explore the possibilities of whether a murder can be committed without a dead body

I am not of course referring to that old delusion about the lack of a *corpus delicti*, which by this time almost every reader must have heard does not mean an actual slaughtered corpse but only a reasonably conclusive proof that the crime has been committed: thus, if a dozen unimpeachable witnesses saw you push somebody into the crater of a live volcano, you would not beat the rap simply because the body could never be produced. What I am thinking of is a number of cases in which people who have been medically diagnosed as dead have been brought to life by some new surgical or electrical or other space-age technique – a feat which is bound to be repeated with increasing frequency as research makes more break-throughs in its tireless assault on all secrets. Indeed, it is no longer a fantasy of science fiction to envisage a day when no simple injury, no matter how radical, will necessarily be fatal if it can be dealt with in time.

The religious argument may be that all life is the gift of God, and only a divine miracle can raise the dead; therefore if a dead man is scientifically "brought back to life", and no divine intervention is claimed, it only proves that he was never really dead anyway. But the Law, I think, would have to take the more materialistic stand, that if a man has stopped breathing, and has no reflexes, and his heart has stopped beating, and the doctors have tried every kind of resuscitation and given up, then he is dead.

But suppose someone else comes along, and tries something different, and the corpse wakes up?

If a man's heart is irreparably smashed by a bullet, but he can be revived and kept alive with a mechanical pump circulating his blood, was he killed or not? Can the man who shot him plead any lesser degree of guilt merely because some scientific (or divine) miracle undid the death, by definition, which he caused? Could the resurrected victim be a witness for the prosecution against his own killer?

If this inspires one of our lawyer readers to indulge a secret ambition to write a mystery story, all I ask for the idea is the first offer of the result.

Erle Stanley Gardner

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the darker drink

by Leslie Charteris

This could have been the story to end all Saint stories . . .

SIMON TEMPLAR looked up from the frying pan in which six mountain trout were developing a crisp golden tan. Above the gentle sputter of grease the sound of feet on dry pine needles crackled through the cabin window.

It didn't cross his mind that the sound carried menace, for it was twilight in the Sierras, and the dusky calm stirred only with the rustlings of nature at peace.

The Saint also was at peace. In spite of everything his enemies would have said, there actually were times when peace was the main preoccupation of that fantastic freebooter; when hills and blue sky were high enough adventure, and baiting a hook was respite enough from baiting policemen or promoters. In such a mood he had jumped at the invitation to join a friend in a week of hunting and fishing in the High Sierras—a friend who had been recalled to town on urgent business almost as soon as they arrived, leaving the Saint in by no means melancholy solitude, for Simon Templar

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So when that Angel of the Darker Drink
At last shall find you by the river-brink
And, offering his Cup, invite your Soul
Forth to your lips to quaff — you shall not shrink. —Omar Khayyam

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could always put up with his own company.

The footsteps came nearer with a kind of desperate urgency. Simon moved the frying pan off the flames and flowed rather than walked, to where he could see through windows in two directions.

A man came out of the pines. He was travelling on the short side of a dead run, but straining with every gasping breath to step up his speed. He came, hatless and coatless, across the pine-carpeted clearing towards the cabin door.

He burst through it; and in spite of his relaxation the Saint felt a kind of simmer anticipating approval. If his solitude had to be intruded on, this was the way it should happen. Unannounced. At a dead run.

The visitor slammed the door, shot the bolt, whirled around, and seemed about to fold in the middle. He saw the Saint. His jaw sagged, swung adrift on its hinges for a moment, then imitated a steel trap.

After the sharp click of his teeth, he said: "How did you get in here? Where's Dawn?"

"Dawn?" Simon echoed lazily. "If you're referring to the rosy-fingered goddess who peels away the darkness each morning, she's on the twelve-hour shift, chum. She'll be around at the regular time."

"I never dreamed you here," the man said. "Who are you?"

"You dropped a word," the Saint said. " 'I never dreamed you *were* here' makes more sense."

"Nuts, brother. You're part of my dream, and I never saw you before. You don't even have a name. All the others have, complete with backgrounds. But I can't place you. Funny, I— Look here, you're not real, are you?"

"The last time I pinched myself I yelped."

"This is crazy," the man muttered.

He walked across the pine floor to within a couple of feet of the Saint. He was breathing easier now, and the Saint examined him impassively.

He was big, only a shade under the Saint's six feet two, with sandy hair, a square jaw, and hard brown eyes.

"May I?" he said, and pinched the Saint. He sighed. "I was afraid this was happening. When I put my arms around Dawn Winter in my dreams, she——"

"Please," the Saint broke in. "Gentlemen, don't go into lurid detail after the lady has a name."

"Oh, she's only part of my dream." The stranger stared into space, and an almost tangible aura of desire formed about him. "God!" he whispered. "I really dreamed up something in her."

"We must swap reminiscences

some day," the Saint said. "But at the moment the pine-scented breeze is laden with threshings in the underbrush."

"I've got to hide. Quick! Where can I get out of sight?"

The Saint waved expressively at the single room. In its four hundred square feet one might hide a large bird if it were camouflaged as an atlas or something, but that would be about the limit.

The two bunk beds were made with hospital precision, and even a marble would have bulged under their tight covers. The deck chairs wouldn't offer sanctuary for even an undernourished mouse, the table was high and wide open beneath the rough top, and the small bookcase was made to display its contents.

"If we had time," the Saint mused. "I could candy-stripe you—If I had some red paint—and put on a barber's smock. Or—er—you say you're dreaming all this?"

"That's right."

"Then why don't you wake up—and vanish?"

The Saint's visitor unhappily gnawed his full underlip.

"I always have before when the going got tough, but . . . Oh, hell, I don't know what's going on, but I don't want to die—even in my dream. Death is so—so——"

"Permanent?"

"Mmm, I guess. Listen, would you be a pal and try to steer these guys away? They're after me."

"Why should I?"

"Yeah," the man said. "You don't owe me a damn thing, but I'm trying to help Dawn. She ——"

He broke off to fish an object out of his watch pocket. This was a small chamois bag, and out of it he took something that pulsed with incredible fires. He handed it to the Saint.

"That's Dawn."

The circular fire opal blazed with living beauty—blue, green, gold cerise, chartreuse—and the Saint gasped with reverent wonder as he looked at the cameo head carved on the unbelievable gem.

There is beauty to which one can put a name. There is beauty that inspires awe, bravery, fear, lust, greed, passion. There is beauty that softens the savage blows of fate. There is beauty that drives to high adventure, to violence.

That stone, and above all the face cut eternally on its incandescent surface, was beauty beyond belief. No man could look on that face and ever know complete peace again.

She was the lily maid of Astolat, the lost loveliness that all men seek and never find, the

nameless desire that haunts the ragged edge of sleep, that curls a lonely smile and sends vacant eyes searching far spaces.

Her face was made for—and of? the Saint asked himself—dreaming.

"Count me in, old boy."

He went outside. Through the dusky stillness the far-off, unseen feet pounded nearer.

The feet were four. The men, with mathmatical logic, two. One might be a jockey, the other a weight-lifter. They tore out of the forest and confronted the Saint.

"Did you see a kind of big, dopey-lookin' lug?" the jockey asked.

The Saint pointed to the other side of the clearing where the hill pitched down.

"He went that way—in a hell of a rush."

"Thanks, pal.'"

They were off, hot on the imaginary trail, and the sounds of their passage soon faded. The Saint went inside.

"They'll be back," he said. "But meanwhile we can clear up a few points. Could you down a brace of trout? They've probably cooled enough to eat."

"What do you mean, they'll be back?"

"It's inevitable," Simon pointed out as he put coffee on, set the table, and gathered cutlery. "They won't find you. They want to find you. So they'll be back with questions. Since those questions will be directed at me, I'd like to know what not to answer."

"Who are you?"

"Who are you?" the Saint countered.

"I'm—oh, blast it to hell and goddam. The guy you're looking at is Big Bill Holbrook. But he's only something I dreamed up. I'm really Andrew Faulks, and I'm asleep in Glendale, California."

"And I am the Queen of Rumania."

"Sure, I know. You don't believe it. Who would? But since you've got me out of a tight spot for the time being, I'd like to tell you what I've never told anybody. But who am I telling?"

"I'm Simon Templar," said the Saint, and waited for a reaction.

"No!" H o l b r o o k-F a u l k s breathed. "The Saint! What beautiful, wonderful luck. And isn't it just like a bank clerk to work the Saint into his dream?" He paused for breath. "The Robin Hood of Modern Crime, the twentieth century's brightest buccaneer, the devil with dames, the headache of cops and crooks alike. What a sixteen-cylinder dream this is."

"Your alliterative encomia," the Saint murmured, "leave me as awed as your inference. Don't you think you'd better give out

with this—er—bedtime story before that unholy pair return with gun-lined question marks?"

The strange man rubbed his eyes in a dazed, helpless way.

"I don't know where to begin," he said conventionally.

But after a while, haltingly, he tried.

Andrew Faulks, in a normal course of events, weathered the slingshots and arrows of outrageous playmates and grew up to be a man.

As men will, he fixed his heart and eyes on a girl and eventually married her. As women will, she gave birth in due course to a boy, Andy Jr., and later a girl, Alexandria.

He became a bank clerk, and went to and from home on an immutable schedule. He got an occasional raise; he was bawled out at times by the head teller; he became a company man, a white-collar worker, and developed all the political ills that white-collared flesh is heir to.

And he dreamed. Literally.

This was what Big Bill Holbrook told the Saint in the mountain cabin to which Simon had retired to await the blowing over of a rather embarrassing situation which involved items duly registered on police records.

"In the first dream, I was coming out of this hotel, see. And whammo! Bumping into her woke me— Oh, the hell with it. Whoever was dreaming woke up, but it was me bumped into her. And I was sorry as hell, because, brother, she was something."

Some two weeks later, Big Bill said, he bumped into her again. The dream started exactly as its predecessor, progressed exactly to the point of collision.

"But I didn't awaken this time. We each apologised all over the place and somehow we were walking along together. Just as I was about to ask her to have dinner, I woke up again."

"Or Andy did," the Saint supplied.

"Yeah. Whoever. Now this is what happened. Every ten days or two weeks I'd be back in this dream, starting out of the hotel, crashing into her, walking along, having dinner, getting to know her better each dream. Each one started exactly the same, but each one went a little further into her life. It was like reading the same book over and over, always starting back at the beginning, but getting one chapter further every time. I got so used to it that I'd say to myself, 'This is where I woke up last time,' and then after the dream had gone on a bit further I'd begin to think, 'Well, I guess this must be getting near the end of another instalment,' and, sure e-

nough, about that time I'd wake up again."

The accidental encounter began to develop sinister ramifications, picked up unsavoury characters, and put Big Bill Holbrook in the role of a Robin Hood.

"Or a Saint," he amended, "rescuing a beautiful dame from a bunch of lugs."

And there was, of course, the jewel.

It had a history. The fire opal which seemed to be eternal yet living beauty had carved upon it the likeness of Dawn's great-great-grandmother, of whom the girl was the living image.

The talented Oriental craftsman who had chiselled those features which were the essence of beauty—that wily fellow had breathed upon the cameo gem a curse.

The curse: It must not get out of the procession of the family —or else.

Death, deprivation, and a myriad other unpleasantries were predicted if the stone fell into alien hands.

The name of Selden Appopoulis sort of slithered into the tale. This was a fat man, a lecherous fat man, a greedy fat man, who wanted—not loved—Dawn; and who wanted—*and* loved—the cameo opal. In some fashion that was not exactly clear to the Saint the fat man was in a position to put financial squeeze on her. In each succeeding dream of Andrew Faulks, Glendale bank clerk, Dawn's position became more and more untenable. In desperation she finally agreed to turn the jewel over to Appopoulis. The fat man sent for the jewel by the two henchmen whom the Saint had directed off into the Holbrook-bare woods.

"Now in this dream—this here *now* dream," Holbrook said, "I took it away from him, see? Andy Faulks went to sleep in Glendale Saturday night and—say, what day is it now?"

"Tuesday."

"Yeah, that's the way it seems to me, too. And that's funny. If you're really part of this dream you'd naturally think it was Tuesday, because your time and my time would be the same. But you don't seem like part of a dream. I pinched you and—oh, nuts, I'm all mixed up."

"Let's try and be clear about this," said the Saint patiently. "You know that it's Tuesday here, but you think you're dreaming all this in Glendale on Saturday night."

"I don't know," said the other wearily. "You see, I never dreamed more than one day at a stretch before. But tonight it's been going on and on. It's gone way past the time when I ought to have woken up. But I don't seem to be able to wake up. I've

tried . . . My God, suppose I don't wake up! Suppose I never *can* wake up? Suppose I never can get back, and have to go on and on with this, being Big Bill Holbrook—"

"You could take a trip to Glendale," Simon suggested gravely, "and try waking Faulks up."

Holbrook-Faulks stared at him with oddly unfocused eyes.

"I can't," he said huskily. "I thought of that—once. But I couldn't make myself do it. I—I'm scared . . . of what I might find. . . . Suppose—"

He broke off, his pupils dilated with the formless horror of a glimpse of something that no mind could conceive.

Simon roused him again, gently: "So you took the jewel—"

Holbrook snapped out of his reverie.

"Yeah, and I lammed out for this cabin. Dawn was supposed to meet me here. But I guess I can't control all these characters. Say," he asked suddenly, "who do you suppose I am? Faulks or Holbrook?"

"I suggest you ask your mother, old boy."

"This ain't funny. I mean, who do you *really* suppose I am? Andy Faulks is asleep and dreaming me but I've got all his memories, so am I a projection of Andy or am I me and him both? None of these other characters have any more memories than they need."

Simon wondered if the two men chasing Holbrook were his keepers; he could use a few. In fact, Simon reflected, keepers would fit into the life of Holbrook-Faulks like thread in a needle. But he sipped his brandy and urged the man to continue.

"Well, something's happened," Holbrook-Faulks said. "It never was like this before. I never could smell things before. I never could really feel them. You know how it is in a dream. But now it seems like as if you stuck a knife in me I'd bleed real blood. You don't suppose a—a reiterated dream could become reality?"

"I," said the Saint, "am a rank amateur in that department."

"Well, I was too—or Andy was, whichever of us is me—but I read everything I could get my hands on about dreams—or Andy did—and it didn't help a bit."

Most men wouldn't have heard the faint far-off stirring in the forest. But the Saint's ears, attuned by long practice to detect sound that differed from what should be there, picked up evidence of movement towards the cabin.

"Someone," he said suddenly, "and I mean one, is coming. Not your pursuers—it's from the opposite direction."

Holbrook-Faulks listened.

"I don't hear anything."

"I didn't expect you to—yet. Now that it's dark, perhaps you'd better slip outside, brother, and wait. I don't pretend to believe your yarn, but that some game is afoot is so obvious that even Sherlock Holmes could detect it. I suggest that we prepare for eventualities."

The eventuality that presently manifested itself was a girl. And it was a girl who could have been no one but Dawn Winter.

She came wearily into the cabin, dishevelled, her dress torn provocatively so that sunbrowned flesh showed through, her cloud of golden hair swirled in fairy patterns, her dark eyes brooding, her mouth a parted dream.

The Saint caught his breath and began to wonder whether he could really make Big Bill Holbrook wake up and vanish.

"Do you belong to the coffee and—or brandy school of thought?" he asked.

"Please." She fell carelessly into a chair, and the Saint coined a word.

She was glamorous beyond belief.

"Miss Winter, pull down your dress or I'll never get this drink poured. You've turned me into an aspen. You're the most beautiful hunk of flesh I've ever seen. Have your drink and go, please."

She looked at him then, and took in the steel-cable leanness of him, the height of him, the crisp black hair, the debonair blue eyes. She smiled, and a brazen gong tolled in the Saint's head.

"Must I?" she said.

Her voice caught at the core of desire and tangled itself forever there.

"Set me some task," the Saint said uncertainly. "Name me a mountain to build, a continent to sink, a star to fetch you in the morning."

The cabin door crashed open. The spell splintered into shining shards. Holbrook-Faulks stood stonyfaced against the door.

"Hello, Bill," the girl said, her eyes still on the Saint.

"I came, you see."

Bill's gaze was an unwavering lance with the Saint pinioned on its blazing tip.

"Am I gonna have trouble with you too, Saint?"

The Saint opened his mouth to answer, and stiffened as another sound reached his ears. Jockey and weightlifter were returning.

"We'll postpone any jousting over the fair lady for the moment," Simon said. "We're about to have more company."

Holbrook stared wildly around.

"Come on, Dawn. Out the window. They'll kill us."

Many times before in his chequered career the Saint had had to make decisions in a fragment of time—when a gun was levelled and a finger whitening on the trigger, when a traffic accident roared towards consummation, when a ship was sinking, when a knife flashed through candlelight. His decision now was compounded of several factors, none of which was the desire for self-preservation. The Saint rarely gave thought room to self-preservation—never when there was something more important to preserve.

He did not want this creature of tattered loveliness, this epitome of what men live for, to get out of his sight. He must therefore keep her inside the cabin. And there was no place to hide. . . .

His eyes narrowed as he looked at the two bunks. He was tearing out the mattresses before his thought was fully formed. He tossed the mattresses in a corner where shadows had retreated from the candle on the table. Then he motioned to Holbrook.

"Climb up. Make like a mattress."

He boosted the big man into the top bunk, and his hands were like striking brown snakes as he packed blankets around him and remade the bed so that it only looked untidily put together.

"Now you," he said to the girl.

She got into the lower bunk and lay flat on her back, her disturbing head in the far corner. The Saint deposited a swift kiss upon her full red lips. They were cool and soft, and the Saint was adrift for a second.

Then he covered her. He emptied a box of pine cones on the mattresses and arranged the whole to appear as a corner heap of cones.

He was busy cleaning the dishes when the pounding came on the door.

As he examined the pair, Simon Templar was struck by the fact that these men were types, such types as B pictures had imprinted upon the consciousness of the world.

The small one could be a jockey, but one with whom you could make a deal. For a consideration, he would pull a horse in the stretch or slip a Mickey into a rival rider's sarsaparilla. In the dim light that fanned out from the door his eyes were small and ratlike, his mouth a slit of cynicism, his nose a quivering button of greed.

His heavier companion was a different but equally familiar type. This man was Butch to a T. He was large, placid, oafish,

and an order taker. His not to reason why; his but to do—or cry. He'd be terribly hurt if he failed to do what he was ordered; he'd apologise, he'd curse himself.

It crossed the Saint's mind that a bank clerk such as Andrew Faulks had been described would dream such characters.

"So you lied to us," the little man snarled.

The Saint arched an eyebrow. At the same time he reached out and twisted the little man's nose as if he were trying to unscrew it.

"When you address me, Oswald, say 'sir'."

The little man sprang back in outraged fury. He clapped one hand to his injured proboscis, now turning a deeper purple than the night. The other hand slid under his coat.

Simon waited until he had the gun out of the holster, then leaped the intervening six feet and twisted it from the little man's hand. The Saint let the gun swing from his finger by its trigger guard.

"Take him, Mac!" grated the disarmed man.

Mac vented a kind of low growl, but did nothing but fidget as the Saint turned curious blue eyes on him. The tableau hung frozen for a long moment before the little man shattered the silence.

"Well? Ya afraid of 'im?"

"Yup," Mac said unhappily. "Criminy, Jimmy, 'f he c'n get the best uh you, well, criminy, Jimmy."

Jimmy moaned: "You mean you're gonna stand there and let just one guy take my gun away from me? Cripes, he ain't a army."

"No," Mac agreed, growing more unhappy by the second, "but he kind of seems like one, Jimmy. Didja see that jump? Criminy, Jimmy."

The Saint decided to break it up.

"Now, Oswald—"

"Didn'ja hear Mac? Name's Jimmy."

"Oswald," the Saint said firmly, "is how I hold you in my heart. Now, Oswald, perhaps you'll pour oil on troubled waters before I take you limb from muscle and throw you away."

"We don't want no trouble," Jimmy said. "We want Big Bill. You got him, but we got to take him back with us."

"And who is Big Bill, and why do you want him, and why do you think I have him?"

"We know you got him," Jimmy said. "This here's Trailer Mac."

The Saint nodded at Mac.

"Charmed, I'm sure."

"Hey, Jimmy," Mac broke in, this guy's a phony." Jimmy blinked.

"Owls," Mac explained, "can't swim."

"What the damblasted hell has owls to do with it?" Jimmy demanded.

"He said pour owls on the something waters. So that," Mac said in triumph, "proves it."

This, the Saint thought, wanders. He restrained Jimmy from assaulting Mac, and returned to the subject.

"Why should the revelation of this gent's identity be regarded as even an intimation that I have —what was the name?—Big Bill?"

"Holbrook," Jimmy said. "Why, this is Trailer Mac. Ain't you never heard of him? He follered Loopie Louie for eighteen years and finally caught 'im in the middle of Lake Erie."

"I never heard of him," Simon said, and smiled at Mac's hurt look. "But then there are lots of people I've never heard of."

This, he thought as he said it, was hardly true. He had filed away in the indexes of his amazing memory the dossiers of almost every crook in history. He was certain that he'd have heard of such a chase if it had ever occurred.

"Anyway," Jimmy went on, "we didn't go more'n a couple of miles till Mac he says Big Bill ain't here, 'n he ain't been here, neither. Well, he come this far, 'n he didn't go no farther. So you got him. He's inside."

"The cumulative logic in that series of statements is devastating," the Saint said. "But logicians veer. History will bear me out. Aristotle was a shining example. Likewise all the boys who gave verisimilitude to idiocy by substituting syllogisms for thought processes, who evaded reality by using unsemantic verbalisms for fact-facing and, God save the mark, fact-finding."

Mac appealed to the superior intellect in his crowd.

"Whut'n hell's he talkin' about, Jimmy?"

"I mean," the Saint said, "Big Bill ain't here. Come in and case the joint."

"Whyn't cha say so?" Mac snarled, and pushed inside.

They searched nook and cranny, and Mac fingered a knothole hopefully once. They gave the bunk beds a passing glance, and were incurious about the seeming pile of pine cones in the corner. Mac boosted Jimmy up on the big central beam to peer into ceiling shadows, and they scanned the fireplace chimney.

Then they stood and looked at the Saint with resentment.

"Sump'n's fishy," Jimmy pronounced. "He's got to be here. This here"—he pointed—"is Trailer Mac."

"Maybe we better go get the boss, huh, Jimmy?"

"Yeah," Jimmy agreed. "He'll find Big Bill."

"Who," the Saint inquired, "is the boss?"

"You'll see," Jimmy promised. "He won't be scared of you. He's just down the hill in the town. Stopped off to play a game of billiards. So we'll be seein' ya, bub."

They went off into the night and the Saint stood quite still for a moment in a little cloud of perplexity.

Never before had he been faced with a situation that was so full of holes.

He added up known data: a man who had a fabulous jewel who claimed to be the projected dream of his alter ego; a girl of incredible beauty said to be another creation of that dream; and two characters who were after the man and/or the jewel and/or—perhaps—the girl.

Mac and Jimmy had searched the cabin. They professed to have overlooked an object the size of Big Bill Holbrook. Their proof that they had overlooked him: "This here's Trailer Mac." They assumed he would remain here while they walked four miles to the settlement and back with their boss who was said to have stopped off to shoot a game of billiards.

But would a man on the trail of that fire opal stop off to play billiards? Would two pseudo-tough guys go away and leave their quarry unguarded?

No, the Saint decided. These were the observable facts, but they were unimportant. They masked a larger more sinister pattern. Great forces must be underlying the surface trivia. Undeniably, the jewel was a thing to drive men to madness. It could motivate historic bloodshed. The girl, too, possessing the carven features of the gem, could drive men to—anything. But for the life of him the Saint could not get beneath the surface pattern to what must be the real issues. He could only cling to the conviction that they had to exist, and that they must be deadly.

He turned back to the bunk beds.

"Come on out, kids," he said. "The big bad wolves have temporarily woofed away."

Fear lingered in the dark depths of Dawn Winter's eyes, making her even more hauntingly beautiful. The Saint found strange words forming on his lips as if some other being possessed them.

He seemed to be saying: "Dawn . . . I've seen the likeness of every beauty in history or imagination. Every one of them would be a drab shadow beside you. You are so beautiful that the world would bow down and worship you—if the world knew

of your existence. Yet it's impossible that the world doesn't know. If one single person looked at you, the word would go out. Cameramen would beat a path to your door, artists would dust off their palettes, agents would clamour with contracts. But somehow this hasn't happened. Why? Where, to be trite, have you been all my life?"

He couldn't define the expression which now entered her eyes. It might have been bewilderment, or worry, or fear, or an admixture.

"I—I—" She put a hand as graceful as a calla lily against her forehead. "I—don't know."

"Oh, don't let's carry this too far." It sounded more like himself again. "Where were you born, where did you go to school, who are your parents?"

She worried at him with wide, dark eyes.

"That's just the trouble. I—don't remember any childhood. I remember only my great-great-grandmother. I never saw her, of course, but she's the only family I know about."

Big Bill's facial contortions finally caught the Saint's eye. They were something to watch. His mouth worked like a corkscrew, his eyebrows did a can-can.

"I gather," said the Saint mildly, "that you are giving me the hush-hush. I'm sorry, comrade, but I'm curious. Suppose you put in your two cents."

"I told you once," Big Bill said. "I told you the truth."

"Pish," Simon said. "Also tush."

"It's true," Big Bill insisted. "I wouldn't lie to the Saint."

The girl echoed this in a voice of awe.

"The Saint? The Robin Hood of Modern Crime, the twentieth century's brightest buccaneer, the"—she blushed—"the devil with dames."

It occurred to Simon, with a shock of remembrance, that her phrases were exactly those of Big Bill's when he learned his host's identity. And even then they had been far from new. The Saint thought of this for a moment, and rejected what it suggested. He shook his head.

"Let's consider that fire opal then, children. It's slightly fabulous you know. Now, I don't think anybody knows more than I do about famous jools. Besides such well-known items as the Cullinan and the Hope diamonds, I am familiar with the history of almost every noteworthy bauble that was ever dug up. There's the Waters diamond, for example. No more than a half dozen persons know of its existence, its perfect golden flawless colour. And the Chiang emerald, that great and beautiful stone that has been seen by

only three living people, myself included. But this cameo opal is the damn warp of history. It couldn't be hidden for three generations without word of it getting out. In the course of time I couldn't have helped hearing about it. But I didn't. . . . So it doesn't exist. But it does. I know it exists; I've held it in my hand——"

"And put it in your pocket," Big Bill said.

The Saint felt in his jacket.

"So I did." He pulled out the chamois bag with its precious contents and made as if to toss it. "Here."

Big Bill stopped him with flared hands.

"Please keep it for me, Mr. Templar. Things will get rather bad around here soon. I don't want Appopoulis to get his fat hands on it."

"Soon? Surely not for a couple of hours."

Big Bill frowned.

"Things happen so quickly in dreams. This may *seem* real, but it'll still hold the screwy pattern you'd expect."

The Saint made a gesture of annoyance.

"Still sticking to your story? Well, maybe you're screwy or maybe you just think I am. But I'd rather face facts. As a matter of fact, I insist on it." He turned back to the girl. "For instance, darling, I know that you exist. I've kissed you."

Big Bill growled, glared, but did nothing as the Saint waited calmly.

Simon continued: "I have the evidence of my hands, lips and eyes that you have all the common things in common with other women. In addition you have this incredible, unbelievable loveliness. When I look at you, I find it hard to believe that you're real. But that's only a figure of speech. My senses convince me. Yet you say you don't remember certain things that all people remember. Why?"

She repeated her gesture of confusion.

"I—don't know. I can't remember any past."

It would be a great privilege and a rare pleasure," the Saint said gently, "to provide you with a past to remember."

Another low growl rumbled in Big Bill's chest, and the Saint waited again for developments. None came, and it struck the Saint that all the characters in this muddled melodrama had one characteristic in common—a certain cowardice in the clutch Even Dawn Winter showed signs of fear, and nobody had yet made a move to harm her. It was only another of the preposterous paradoxes that blend-

ed into the indefinable unreality of the whole.

Simon gave it up. If he couldn't get what he thought was truth from either of these two, he could watch and wait and divine the truth. Conflict hung on the winds, and conflict drags truth out of her hiding place and casts her naked before watching eyes.

"Well, souls," he said, "what now? The unholy three will be back sometime. You could go now. There is the wide black night to wander in."

"No," Big Bill said. "Now that you're in this, give us your help, Saint. We need you."

"Just what, then," Simon asked, "are we trying to prevent, or accomplish?"

"Selden Appopoulis must not get his hands on the opal or Dawn. He wants both. He'll stop at nothing to get them."

"I believe you mentioned a curse breathed on this gewgaw by some Oriental character."

Dawn Winter's voice once more tangled itself in Simon's heart. As long as he could remember that quality—of far-off bells at dusk, of cellos on a midnight hill—time would never again pass slowly enough.

"Death shall swoop on him," she chanted, "who holds this ancient gem from its true possessor, but all manner of things shall plague him before that dark dread angel shall come to rest at his shoulder. His nights shall be sleepless with terror, and hurts shall dog his accursed steps by day. Beauty shall bring an end to the vandal."

The mood of her strange incantation far more than the actual words seemed to linger on the air after she had finished, so that in spite of all rationality the Saint felt spectral fingers on his spine. He shook off the spell with conscious resolution.

"It sounds very impressive," he murmured, "in a gruesome sort of way. Reminds me of one of those zombie pictures. But where, may I ask, does this place me in the scheme of dire events? I have the jewel."

"You," Big Bill Holbrook said, "will die, as I must, and as Trailer Mac and Jimmy must. They stole it from Dawn; I stole it from them."

The Saint smiled.

"Well, if that's settled, let's pass on to more entertaining subjects bordering on the carnal. Miss Winter, my car is just down the hill. If Bill is resigned to his fate, suppose we leave him and his playmates to their own fantastic devices and drift off into the night."

Her face haloed with pleasure.

"I'd like it," she said. "But I—I just can't."

"Why not? You're over three

years old. Nobody is sitting on your chest."

"I can't do what I like, somehow," she said. "I can only do what I must. It's always that way."

"This," the Saint said to nobody in particular, "sounds like one of those stories that fellow Charteris might write. And what's the matter with you?" he demanded of Holbrook. "A little earlier you were eager to get rough with me because I admired the lady. Now you sit listening with disgusting indifference to my indecent proposal. I assure you it was indecent from your viewpoint."

Big Bill grinned.

"It just occurred to me. She can't go with you. She must do what she must. She can't get out of my sight. Good old Andy,' he added.

The Saint turned his eyes away and stared into space, wondering. His wandering gaze focused on a small wall mirror that reflected Dawn Winter. Her features were blurred, run together, an amorphous mass. Simon wondered what could have happened to that mirror.

He swung back to face Bill Holbrook.

"I'm afraid," he said softly, but with the iron will showing through his velvet tones, "that we must have some truth in our little seance. Like the walrus, I feel the time has come to speak of many things. From this moment you are my prisoners. The length of your durance vile depends on you. Who are you, Miss Winter?"

The look she turned on him made his hands tingle. Hers was a face for cupping between tender palms. Dark and troubled, her eyes pleaded for understanding, for sympathy.

"I told you all I know," she pleaded. "I've tried and tried, ever since I could remember anything, to think of—well, all those things you think of at times."

Again she passed a hand across her face, as if wiping away veils.

'I don't ever remember snagging a stocking on the way to an important appointment," she said. "And I know that girls do. I never had to fight for my"—she coloured—"my honour, whatever that is. And I know that girls like me have fought for this something I don't understand by the time they've reached my age. Whatever that is," she added pensively. "I don't even know how old I am, or where I've been."

A pattern suddenly clicked into place in the Saint's brain, a pattern so monstrous, so inhuman as to arouse his destructive instincts to the point of homicidal mania. The look he turned

on Big Bill Holbrook was ice and flame.

His voice was pitched at conversational level, but each word fell from his lips like a shining sword.

"Do you know," he said. "I'm beginning to get some new ideas, chum. And if I'm guessing right about what you and your fellow scum have done to this innocent girl, you are liable to cost your insurance company money."

He moved towards Holbrook with a liquid grace that had all the co-ordination of a panther's movement—and the menace. Big Bill Holbrook leaned back from it.

"Stop acting the knight in armour," he protested. "What in hell you talking about?"

"It should have been obvious before," Simon Templar said. "Up on your feet, Holbrook."

Holbrook remained at ease.

"If you've got an explanation for all this that doesn't agree with mine, I want to know it."

The Saint paused. There was honest curiosity in the man's voice—and no fear. That cowardice which had characterised him before was replaced with what seemed an honest desire to hear the Saint's idea.

"This girl," the Saint said, whoever she is, has breeding, grace, and beauty out of this world. She has been brought up under expensive and sheltered surroundings. You can see that in her every gesture, every expression. She was bred to great wealth, perhaps nobility, or even royalty."

Big Bill leaned forward in almost an agony of concentration. Every word of Simon Templar's might have been a twenty-dollar gold piece, the way he reached for it with every sense.

The Saint patted his jacket pocket.

"This jewel is the symbol of her position—heiress, princess, queen or what have you. You and your unsavoury companions kidnapped her and are holding her for ransom. That would be wicked enough; but you've done worse. Somewhere in the course of your nasty little scheme, it seemed like a good idea to destroy a part of her beauty that could be dangerous to you and your precious pals. So you destroyed her mind. With drugs, I have no doubt—drugs that have dulled her mind until she has no memory. Your reasons are clear enough—it was just a sound form of insurance. And now your gang has split up, fighting over the spoils. I don't know who would have come out on top, if you hadn't happened to run into me. But I know what the end is going to be now—and you aren't going to like it. Get on your feet!"

The command was like a pistol shot, and Big Bill Holbrook jumped. Then he leaned back again and chuckled in admiration.

"Everything that's been said about you is true. There's nobody like you. That's so much better than Andy Faulks did there's no comparison. Say, that really would have been something, and look, it'd have explained why she couldn't remember who she was. Saint, I got to hand it to you. Too bad you're not in bed in Glendale."

For once of a very few times in his life, the Saint was taken aback. The words were spoken with such ease, such sincerity, that Simon's deadly purpose cooled to a feeling of confusion. While it is true that a man who is accustomed to danger, to gambling for high stakes with death as a forfeit, could simulate feelings he did not actually feel, it is seldom that a man of Big Bill Holbrook's obvious IQ can look annihilation in the face with an admiring grin.

Something was still wrong, but wrong in the same way that everything in the whole episode was wrong—wrong with that same unearthly off-key distortion that defeated logical diagnosis.

The Saint took out a cigarette and lighted it slowly; and over the hiss of the match he heard other sounds which resolved themselves into a blur of footsteps.

Simon glanced at his watch. Jimmy and Mac had been gone lesse than half an hour. It was impossible for them to be returning from the village four miles away.

What had Holbrook said? Something about everything happening faster in dreams? But that was in the same vein of nonsense. Maybe they'd met the boss at the foot of the hill.

Holbrook said: "What is it? Did you hear something?"

"Only your friends again."

Fear came once more to Holbrook and Dawn Winter. Their eyes were wide and dark with it, turning instantly towards the bunk beds.

"No," Simon said. "Not this time. We'll have this out in the open."

"But he'll kill us!" Holbrook began to babble. "It's awful, the things he'll do. You don't know him, Saint. You can't imagine, you couldn't—"

"I can imagine anything," said the Saint coldly. "I've been doing that for some time, and I'm tired of it. Now I'd prefer to know."

He crossed the room as the footsteps outside turned into knuckles at the door.

"Welcome to our study club," the Saint said.

Trailer Mac and Jimmy preceded an enormous hulk through the door and, when they saw Holbrook and Dawn, charged like lions leaping on paralysed gazelles.

The Saint moved in a lightning blur. Two sharp cracks of fist on flesh piled Mac in one corner, Jimmy in another. They lay still.

A buttery chuckle caused the Saint to turn. He was looking into a small circular hole. A .38, he computed. He raised his eyes to twins of the barrel, but these were eyes. They lay deep in flesh that swelled in yellowish-brown rolls, flowing flatly downward to describe one of the fattest men the Saint had ever seen. They could only have belonged to a man called Selden Appopoulis.

"Mr. Sydney Greenstreet, I presume?" Simon drawled.

The buttery chuckle set a sea of flesh ebbing and flowing.

"A quick action, sir, and an efficient direction of action. I compliment you, and am saddened that you must die."

The Saint shrugged. He knew that this fat man, though butter-voiced, had a heart of iridium. His eyes were the pale expressionless orbs of a killer. His mouth was thin with determination, his hand steady with purpose. But Simon had faced all those indications before.

"I hate to disappoint you, comrade," he said lightly, "but that line has a familiar ring. And yet I'm still alive."

Appopoulis appraised and dismissed the Saint, though his eyes never wavered. He spoke to Holbrook.

"The opal. Quickly!'

The butter of his voice had frozen into oleaginous icicles; and Holbrook quailed under the bite of their sharp edges.

"I haven't got it, Appopoulis. The Saint has it."

Simon was astonished at the change in the fat man. It was subtle, admittedly, but it was there nonetheless. Fear came into the pale grey eyes which had been calmly contemplating murder as a climax to unspeakable inquisitions. Fear and respect. The voice melted butter again.

"So," he said warmly. "Simon Templar, the Robin Hood of Modern Crime, the twentieth century's brightest buccaneer, the—ah—devil with dames. I had not anticipated this."

Once more it struck the Saint that the descriptive phrases were an exact repetition of Holbrook's And once more it struck him that the quality of fear in this weird quintet was not strained. And once more he wondered about Holbrook's fantastic tale. . . .

"You are expecting maybe Little Lord Feigenbaum?" Simon

asked. "Or what do you want?"

"The cameo opal, for one thing," Appopoulis said easily. "For the other, the girl."

"And what do you intend to do with them?"

"Cherish them, sir. Both of them."

His voice had encyclopedic lust and greed, and the Saint felt as if small things crawled on him.

Before he could make an answer, stirrings in their respective corners announced the return of Mac and Jimmy to another common plane of existence. Without a word they got groggily to their feet, shook their heads clear of trip hammers, and moved towards the Saint.

"Now, Mr. Templar," said Appopoulis, "you have a choice. Live, and my desires are granted without violence, or die and they are spiced with emotions at fever heat."

Mac and Jimmy had halted: one small and thunderstruck, one large and paralysed.

"Boss," quavered Jimmy, "did youse say Templar? Da Saint?"

"The same." Simon bowed.

"Chee!" Mac breathed. "Da Saint. Da Robin Hood of Modern Crime, da—"

"Please," Simon groaned. "Another record, if you don't mind." mind."

"Boss, we ain't got a chanct," Jimmy said.

Appopoulis turned his eye on the little man.

"He," the boss said, "has the opal."

This news stiffened their gelantinous spines long enough to set them at the Saint in a two-directional charge.

The Saint swerved to meet it. He held Jimmy between himself and the unwavering gun of Appopoulis with one hand. With the other he wrought havoc on the features of Mac.

It was like dancing, like feathers on the breeze, the way the Saint moved. Even to himself it had the kind of exhilaration that a fighter may only experience once in a lifetime. He had a sense of power, of supernatural co-ordination, of invincibility beyond anything he had ever known. He cared nothing for the knowledge that Appopoulis was skipping around on the outskirts of the fray, trying to find an angle from which he could terminate it with a well-placed shot. Simon knew that it was no fear of killing Jimmy that stayed the fat man's finger on the trigger—it was simply the knowledge that it would have wasted a shot, that the Saint could have gone on using Jimmy as a shield, alive or dead. The Saint knew this coolly and detachedly as if with a mind separate from his own, while he battered Mac's face into a vari-coloured pulp.

Then Mac's eyes glazed and he went down; and the Saint's right hand snaked hipwards for his own gun while his left flung Jimmy bodily at the paunch of Appopoulis.

And that was when the amazing, the incredible and impossible thing went wrong. For Jimmy didn't fly away from the Saint's thrust as he should have, like a marble from a slingshot. Somehow he remained entangled with the Saint's arm, clinging to it as if bogged in some dissoluble birdlime with a writhing tenacity that was as inescapable as a nightmare. And Simon looked down the barrel of Appopoulis's gun and saw the fat man's piggy eyes brighten with something that might have been lust. . . .

The Saint tried to throw a shot at him, but he was off balance, and the frenzied squirming of his erstwhile shield made it like trying to shoot from the back of a bucking horse. The bullet missed by a fraction of an inch, and buried itself in the wall beside the mirror. Then Appopoulis fired back.

The Saint felt a jar, and a flame roared inside his chest. Somehow, he couldn't pull the trigger any more. The gun fell from his limp fingers. His incredulous eyes looked full in the mirror and saw a neat black hole over his heart, saw it begin to spread as his life's blood gushed out.

It was strange to realise that this was it, and it had happened to him at last, as it had always been destined to happen some day, and in an instant he was going to cheat to the back of the book for the answer to the greatest mystery of all. Yet his last conscious thought was that his image was sharp and clear in the mirror. When he had seen Dawn's reflection, it had been like one seen in an agitated pool. . . .

When he opened his eyes again it was broad daylight, and the intensity of the light told him that it must have been twelve hours since he had been shot.

He was lying on the floor of the cabin. He felt for his heart. It was beating strongly. His hand did not come away sticky with blood.

His eyes turned hesitantly down to his shirt. There was no hole in it. He jumped to his feet, felt himself all over, examined himself in the mirror. He was as whole as he'd ever been; and he felt fine.

He looked around the cabin. The mattresses were piled in the corner under the pine cones, the bunk unmade. Otherwise there were no signs of the brawl the night before. No trace of Jimmy

and Mac, or Appopoulis. No Big Bill Holbrook. No Dawn. . . .

And no hole in the wall beside the mirror where his hopeless shot at Appopoulis had buried itself.

The Saint shook his head. If it had all been a dream, he might have seriously to consider consulting a psychiattrist. Dreams reach only a certain point of vividness. What he remembered was too sharp of definition, too coherent, too consecutive. Yet, if it wasn't a dream, where were the evidences of reality, the bullet hole in his chest, in the wall?

He went to the door. There should be footprints. His cabin had rated with Grand Central Station for traffic last night.

There were no footprints, other than his own.

Simon reached for a cigarette, and suddenly sniffed it suspiciously before he put it in his mouth. If some joker, either in fun or malice, had adulterated his tobacco with some more exotic herb. . . . But that, too, was absurd. A jag of those dimensions would surely bequeath a hangover to match; but his head was as clear as the mountain air.

He fumbled in his pocket for a match. Instead, his questing fingers touched something solid, a shape that was oddly familiar —yet impossibly alien. The tactile sensation lasted only for an instant before his hand recoiled as if the thing had been red hot. He was afraid, actually afraid to take it out.

The address of Andrew Faulks was in the Glendale directory. The house was a modest two-bedroom affair on a side street near Forest Lawn Memorial Park. A wreath hung on the door. A solemn gentleman who looked like and undoubtedly was an undertaker opened the door. He looked like Death rubbing white hands together.

"Mr. Faulks passed on last night," he said in answer to the Saint's query. Unctuous sorrow overlaid the immediate landscape.

"Wasn't it rather sudden?"

"Ah, not exactly, sir. He went to sleep last Saturday, passed into a coma, and never awakened."

"At what time," Simon asked, "did he die?"

"At ten-forty," the man replied. "It was a sad death. He was in a delirium. He kept shouting about shooting someone, and talked about a saint."

Simon had moved into the house while listening to the tale of death, and found himself looking off the hallway into a well-lighted den. His keen eyes noted that while most of the shelves were gay with the lurid jackets of adventure fiction, one

section was devoted to works on psychology and psychiatry.

Here were the tomes of Freud, Adler, Jung, Brill, Bergson, Krafft-Ebing, and lesser lights. A book lay open on a small reading table.

The Saint stepped inside the room to look at it. It was titled *In Darkest Schizophrenia* by William J. Holbrook, Ph.D.

Simon wondered what the psychic-phenomena boys would do with this one. This, he thought, would certainly give them a shot in the aura.

"Mrs. Faulks is upstairs, sir," the professional mourner was saying. "Are you a friend of the family? I'll be glad to ask whether she can see you."

"I wish you'd just show her this." Simon forced one hand into a pocket. "And ask her——"

He never finished the question. Never.

There was nothing in the pocket for his hand to find. Nothing to meet his fingertips but a memory that was even then darkening and dying out along his nerves.

NEXT MONTH —

SERPENT WIND
by SAX ROHMER

REPRIEVE
by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

THE LAST MAN ALIVE
by CRAIG RICE

THE VANISHED MAN
by MELVILLE DAVISSON POST

YOU GOTTA BE TOUGH
by GEORGE HARMON COXE

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW
by ED LACY

and

THE PRODIGAL MISER

A NEW SAINT STORY by LESLIE CHARTERIS

—in the April issue of THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

the rocket's red glare

by Robert Plate

"I don't care," I said. "I'm going to the ball game.'

The Chief flushed. The strain of the forty-eight hours since he'd flown in from Washington showed on his drawn face.

"Isn't that rather frivolous, Stark?" he said. "Your entire career may blow up in your face."

Let it blow, I thought wearily. For ten solid days and nights I'd undergone the equivalent of being dragged across a desert of stones and cactus. I'd had it.

He frowned. Maybe he thought my bloodshot eyes and trembling hands came from a hangover instead of ten days of frenzy and sleepless non-stop search.

"Your career, of course," he said icily, "is unimportant. There happens to be a greater interest —your country's. A slight matter of an investment of a billion or two, and the labor of thousands of devoted and brilliant men. Your country's prestige, and very likely its security, is at stake. It's no time to pamper yourself!"

I shrugged. If you can't go on,

How do you really identify a spy? We do not suggest that Andrew Stark has hit upon the one infallible method — more than this should prove necessary to identify the men and the women who've passed through the meticulous training given them in East Germany or Russia. But Stark may have something there . . .

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you can't. I wanted to go to the ball game.

The Chief fell silent, and glowered at me in disgust. It was easy to picture his thoughts:

Andrew Stark, age 28, a promising prospect—once. Science degree, Physics major, able to pull his weight in the labs of these confounded mysterious and menacing projects. But with detective savvy, too. Ideal man for this post. But at the first sign of trouble he's crumpling like a paper bag.

Once again the Chief gloomily reviewed the facts:

Astromatics, Inc. was the brain center of a daring effort to propel us far ahead in the space race—Operation Stardust. Hundreds of scientists from all over the world worked here on a project so secret that it made the old Manhattan Project seem like an effort to gain publicity.

My job, while ostensibly working as a scientist, was to maintain security. I ran the most rigid security checks that man could devise. Everybody in the plant had been investigated by several different agencies. Spot checks were constant. I'd have sworn that even the mice in that building were good risks.

Nevertheless, ten days ago a foreign agent had been picked up at Idlewild, bound for Europe with microfilms of the most heavily guarded work at Astromatics.

Since then life had been hell. Every man in Astromatics had been re-checked. Files were studied; neighbors of employees were discreetly questioned; secret movies were made of the comings and goings of key workers; phones were tapped; suspects were tailed ;rumors of the silliest and most far-fetched sort were treated like nuggets of gold and hunted to their sources. All of us knew the leak had to be plugged quickly, before it drained the reservoir dry. Directing the operation, I labored around the clock, occasionally falling asleep at my desk.

For ten days I had concentrated exclusively on the spy.

Results: nil.

A man can carry on just so long on two hours of sleep daily, a diet of coffee and cigarettes, and a mood of constant tension. Eventually there's got to be some diversion—like a ball game.

As I arose from my desk my knees almost caved in.

We're still grilling the agent," the Chief said. "If he cracks and tells—"

"He won't even know," I said. My head ached. Too much worry and speculation had been stuffed in for one skull to hold. Twelve hours of sleep might help—except that I'd surely dream of faceless monsters pick-

ing the brains of Astromatics and jeering at me.

Without some change soon I'd snap like an overloaded stick. The blissful commonplaces of a game at the Stadium had begun to seem like a sanity saver.

"The boys are waiting," I said. "Happy hunting."

"I am deeply disappointed," the Chief said as I left. I could almost feel his eyes spearing me in the back.

In the parking lot I slid into Walter Biddle's waiting car with some friends from the plant. On the ride to the Stadium I shut my eyes and tried to nap. No luck.

Clickety-click-click went the file cards in my brain:

Aaron, the little German refugee at my left. An immense IQ, a dazzler at mathematics, a lover of Mozart. How come *he* wanted to see the Yankees? Was he trying to prove something?

Walter Biddle, a rosy-cheeked all-American youth from Connecticut, and a good lab technician. What was *he* so cheerful about, when everybody knew our project was in jeopardy?

MacNamara, master of solid state physics, but with a slightly pink past—and the usual odor of Scotch on his breath.

Sam Benson. Steady Minnesotan. So quiet who knows what he feels? Strange, though, that on his vacation he visited Moscow——

I cursed silently. If I got canned for failure, good! How corrupted I must be when even old friends seemed to be wearing false faces!

The strained muscles in my stomach felt like misplaced ribs. A pain lurked there uneasily—probably a budding ulcer. The game, I thought, had better be a humdinger, because if I didn't forget this mess I'd blow higher than——

"I hope Mantle blasts one out of the lot," said Biddle. "I don't care what you say, he's got it all over Maris."

"Ja," said Aaron, "but figures don't lie. Maris hit more!"

"Break up the Yankees," said MacNamara. "I love to see the Yanks get smeared." He pulled out a pint bottle. "Who wants a jolt?"

Mac wants the Yanks to be beaten, I thought blearily. Could that be a subconscious revelation of his feeling toward the United States?

I drowsed, hating myself and my job, and finally we were filing up a ramp in the Stadium, just a few minutes before game time. A horrifying thought suddenly hit me.

"Excuse me," I said, and dashed for a phone booth.

Jenny's voice cut like a razor.

"Why, Mr. Stark. How very *nice* of you to call."

"Jenny honey," I begged. "You don't know the strain I've been under. I'm crushed. I feel like an old cigar butt. I've been going night and day, with the world on my shoulders——"

"We had a date," she said. Wednesday night. This is Friday."

"There's hell to pay at the plant," I said. "My God, Jenny, I can't tell you on the phone, but everything's gone wrong——"

My voice cracked. Some of my panic got through to Jenny. Her voice softened.

"Andy, I'm sorry," she said. "If you're chained to your work, okay. But after all, we *are* engaged, and all it takes is a phone call——"

I babbled to her of my love and devotion, and she cooed sympathetically, and after awhile she asked, "Where are you, darling?"

"Yankee Stadium. The ball game's about to start——"

She gasped. The phone clicked. The line went dead. One more blunder, I thought dismally. One more proof I was cracking, overlooking the important and the obvious.

With job gone, reputation gone, girl gone, I reached my seat as everybody rose at the opening strains of *The Star Spangled Banner.* While it echoed over the stadium, Mac surreptitiously took a swig from his bottle. Benson stood silent. Biddle sang lustily though off-key ". . . On the shore dimly seen through the mist of the deep, Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes . . . ." He enjoyed all three stanzas but Aaron feebly mouthed a few words, then moved his lips in a pretense of singing the rest.

Frankly, I've never thought much of the national anthem as a piece of music. I could hardly wait for it to end so I could at last sit down and escape from worry and defeat.

The first inning went by uneventfully. In the second Mantle led off with a lofty homer into the left field stands that brought me yelling to my feet. My blood tingled, I smiled, I felt almost human. For the first time in days I forgot Operation Stardust.

But then, as the others settled back, I suddenly sprang to my feet again. The others looked at me questioningly. Maybe my staring red-rimmed eyes worried them.

"Got to call my girl back," I said. "She hates me."

I put a call through and returned to the stands before the third inning began. The game took a fairly fast two hours and twenty-three minutes, but it seemed endless. I don't recall

one play, though once Mac looked at me and laughed, "Andy, you're taking it too hard—chewing your nails as if it's the World Series!"

I grinned vacantly, feeling the ulcer bloom in my belly. If my long shot gamble lost—

When the game ended—the Yanks won, probably—we filed out. The Chief and a half dozen ordinary-looking men met us at the exit and quietly closed in on Walter Biddle. I followed them to their long black sedan.

"Good tip, Andy," the Chief said approvingly. "We tore his place apart. Found microfilm and some very interesting leads. He's our boy!"

"It's a lie!" cried Biddle. For a moment fear and guilt twisted his face, then he turned impassive. "It's a frameup. I want a lawyer."

In the two hours since my call the Chief and his men had worked like fury. Now they were ready to bet that the real Biddle, who had no living relations, had disappeared on a trip to Europe, and that our "Biddle" was only a facsimile, meticulously trained in the lingo and customs of America.

My ulcer stopped gnawing. I felt my body deliciously turning to rubber, to mud, to water. I wanted to spread like a puddle and just lie still until I dried up.

"Chief," I muttered. "Will you put in a word with my ,girl I—"

"Yeah, sure, glad to. But first, what made you suspect this perfect little poser?" he said, and jabbed Biddle.

"He was too perfect," I said. "I suppose there are some, but I never met a native American who can sing the entire *Star Spangled Banner* letter perfect—did you?"

NEXT MONTH –

THE SAINT THOUGHT HE KNEW EVERY GET-RICH-QUICK SCHEME THAT EVER PLUCKED A PIGEON. BUT THIS WAS THE FIRST ONE THAT SEEMED TO PAY OFF.

THE PRODIGAL MISER

A NEW SAINT STORY by LESLIE CHARTERIS

—in the April issue of THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

adventure of the fatal glance

by August Derleth

"Surely that was a shout," said Solar Pons, coming to a pause and turning.

We stood on the moor road at Askrigg Town Head and, looking back down the precipitous descent toward houses rising on both sides of the street against the hillside, we saw a cyclist coming toward us.

"Isn't that Constable Lambert?" said Pons. "We had a game of darts last night at the Crown."

"I hope you'll remember you came to Askrigg for a holiday," I said, pointedly.

"We've had three days without a single thought but of resting in this Yorkshire country," said Pons. "Very trying days, if I may so. I'm never certain why I let you talk me into these holidays from time to time. But here he is."

Constable Lambert came up and slid off his bicycle. He was a young man, whose plain, freckled face customarily wore an expression of almost apologetic honesty. This morning there was trouble in his eyes.

"I wondered when I caught

Solar Pons occupies a unique place in the deductive Hall of Fame. Close to twenty years ago Vincent Starrett called his initial adventures the "best substitutes for Sherlock Holmes known to this reviewer". In the years that have passed others (including the readers of SMM) have welcomed these pastiches by August Derleth, long acknowledged as Wisconsin's most famous living author.

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sight of you, Mr. Pons, whether I could persuade you to come along," he said, and added—"It looks like my first murder, sir."

"Ah," said Pons sharply, his eyes lighting up. "Let us hear about it."

"I don't know much, and that's a fact," replied the Constable. "But we can talk while we walk. It's just up ahead, at Thornhill Hall."

He started forward as he spoke, wheeling his bicycle beside him; we fell into step. The road curved and dipped here between walled pastures and meadows on its way toward the moor above Askrigg, passing the last few isolated houses on the edge of the village, a group of larches, and one or two groves of bushes and small trees. Our destination was visibly the country house set back from the moor road among trees perhaps half a mile out of Askrigg.

"It's the Squire, Mr. Pons," resumed Constable Lambert. "Dr. Scarr telephoned me—says he's been murdered."

"You've not seen him, then?" asked Pons.

The Constable shook his head. "I've only just now had the call. Hawgood found him lying dead in the study—Hawgood's the Squire's man. Miss Emily called the doctor. Dr. Scarr saw right off it was a case for the police."

"Did he say how the Squire was killed?"

"Well, he did, sir—but I don't quite understand it. Doesn't seem to have been shot—or anything, as you might say, simple. As nearly as I could follow Dr. Scarr, the Squire was killed by a pair of binoculars."

"Capital! Capital!" murmured Pons. "Something new under England's sun. Who would have had motive?"

"Mr. Thornhill wasn't a popular man," said the Constable dryly. "Who *wouldn't* have motive would be easier to say. There's one man likes him—that's Hawgood; he swears by him, for all that the Squire got young Hawgood sent up six months for pilfering. They do say even his own daughter can't stand him, and village talk has it that his late wife died to be free of him. There's Fred Mason, a gardener he sacked without reference—and Alistair Robson—the Squire knocked him down a week ago or thereabouts—oh, there's plenty with motive, Mr. Pons. The Squire was a hard man, and not one to cross."

We reached the gate opening on to the flagstone walk that led to Thornhill Hall. Constable Lambert pushed it open and stood aside for Pons to walk through.

Our approach had been observed, and the door was op-

ened to us by a square-jawed man with the expressionless face of a long-time servant. Though he had been expecting only Constable Lambert, nothing but the flickering of his glance toward us betrayed his surprise at facing three men instead of one.

"Good morning, Hawgood. He closed the door behind us, then came around to lead us. "Right this way, if you please, gentlemen."

From the broad hall, Hawgood led us to the right, through a small sitting-room into what was manifestly the study. There Dr. Scarr waited—a burly, ruddy-faced man in his middle years, standing like a sentinel on guard beside the cloaked mound which was the body of Squire Thornhill.

"Most shocking thing I've ever seen." he said, after introductions had been exchanged. "Man cut down like this in his prime! I've survived the war, gentlemen —never saw anything like it.

He bent and flicked the cloak aside, disclosing the body.

It was that of a robust man of middle age clad in riding clothes. He lay partly on one side, with his head at an abnormal angle. Save for the awkwardness of his position, the Squire might have been sleeping. It was only at second glance that I saw the lines of blood from the mutilated eyes. Not far from the body lay the instrument of death—a pair of binoculars, from the eye-pieces of which projected needles of at least four inches in length.

"Will you examine him, Doctor?" asked Dr. Scarr.

I dropped to my knees for a closer look. But there was nothing more to be seen than had already been disclosed, and it was perfectly evident that the dead man had come to his death by means of the lethal binoculars. Since the body lay just before open French doors, it was logical to assume that the Squire had taken up the binoculars for a glance outside, and that, very probably at his manipulation of the focussing wheel, while the glasses were at his eyes, the mechanism within had released the fatal needles which had plunged into his brain through his eyes. I said as much.

"Horrible," muttered the Constable.

Pons came forward now and in turn examined the body and the binoculars. He looked toward Hawgood.

"Have you seen these before, Hawgood?" he asked.

"No sir."

"They were not Mr. Thornhill's?"

"No, sir."

Pons moved away from the body, his keen eyes darting here and there. He made a quick cir-

cuit of the room, pausing to pick up a little rectangle of paper on the carpet near the fireplace, and stopping finally at the hearth, where he crouched to look at the remains of a fire.

"Paper was burned here this morning," he said, flashing a glance at Hawgood.

"I burned nothing, sir," said Hawgood at once.

Pons came back to where we waited. "You found the body, Hawgood?"

"Yes, sir. I came into the room and saw him."

"Mr. Thornhill could hardly have died without sound. You heard nothing?"

Hawgood paused uncertainly, biting at his lower lip.

"Come, come, man—what did you hear?"

"I couldn't say, sir—but I thought—*after* I found him—that I had heard him cry out. Just once."

"I see." From his pocket Pons took the rectangle of paper he had picked up. "Have you seen this before, Hawgood?"

The rectangle was a piece of stout linen card on which had been written: *From an admirer.*

"No, sir."

"Does it not seem likely that it came with the binoculars?"

"I don't know, Mr. Pons."

"Did you receive the post this morning?"

"No, sir. Mr. Thornhill did."

Pons took another turn around the room, while Constable Lambert watched curiously.

"What do you make of it, Lambert?" he asked, as he came back to stand before the constable.

"Mr. Pons, it looks as if somebody made Mr. Thornhill a present of these binoculars. They were intended to kill him, and when he took a glance through the binoculars, he was killed as he tried to focus them. They could have been sent or brought by anyone."

"Do you think so?" asked Pons dryly. "Surely only a man with some skill in mechanics could have devised this fatal instrument."

"He could have been hired to do so,' said the constable.

"Capital!" cried Pons. "Just so." He turned abruptly again to Hawgood. "Let us return for a moment to the cry you fancied you heard. Did you respond to it?"

"No, Mr. Pons. It was too indefinite. It might have been a dog somewhere."

"I see. So that some time elapsed before you found Mr. Thornhill?"

"Yes, sir. I'd guess it *was* half an hour after he might have cried out. I was at work below stairs."

Pons regarded him thoughtfully for a moment before he

spoke again. "In that case, Hawgood, you must have heard him fall."

"Sir," said Hawgood stiffly, "I was under the left wing. The Squire was in the right. If I had heard anything I'd lay it to his stomping around or turning something over—he'd do that if he were upset or angry."

"You are not only then the Squire's butler?"

"No, sir. I do whatever's needing to be done. I was just at the foot of the stairs when I heard the postman's ring this morning. I heard the Squire stomping around to get the post. Then I went on into the left wing belowstairs and didn't hear much of anything else. I suppose the Squire went back to the study to open the mail, as he usually did. I knew his habits. I've been his man ever since the war."

"You were his orderly in service?"

"Yes, sir."

"And general factotum ever since?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you fond of him, Hawgood?"

"Sir, I was used to him," answered Hawgood stiffly.

"Mr. Thornhill was always kind and considerate?"

"I would not say so."

"Oh. What would you say, Hawgood?"

"The Squire was a rough man. He had certain principles and he lived up to them. Rough as he was, he meant well."

"Autocratic, would you say, Hawgood?"

"Quite, sir."

"Accustomed to obedience, and outraged at any defection. Self-righteous. Perhaps a martinet?"

"I suppose he was all that, sir." said Hawgood cautiously.

At the point, Dr. Scarr interposed. "If you'll forgive me, gentlemen are you finished here? Mr. Thornhill's body should be removed."

"By all means, Doctor," said Constable Lambert. "Will you attend to it? In the meantime, I'd like a word with Miss Thornhill—if you'll lead the way, Hawgood."

Dr. Scarr left the room, followed by Hawgood and Constable Lambert.

Pons flashed me a quick, quizzical look. "A morbid little puzzle, eh, Parker?"

"Horrible," I said.

"I noticed your concentrated silence. What conclusions have you drawn?"

"Only that someone must have hated this man with singular passion," I said.

"You do not think it odd that this should be so?"

"I don't follow," I said.

"Forgive me. I failed to make myself clear. I submit that this

is a curious method of seeking revenge on a man like the Squire. The Squire was given to abrupt, disagreeable reactions—the kind which would inspire equally quick anger and, if vengeance at all, sudden violent action—a blow with a poker, seized on the place, a shot from a handy gun, or stabbing with a convenient weapon. Such premeditation as is implied in the use of this weapon indicates something more than sudden blind rage."

"Perhaps that's true for most occasions when the Squire had an outburst of rage," I said. "But not all. Consider young Hawgood, for instance, who had six months in quod to brood about his father's employer."

"Remote—but a possibility," conceded Pons.

"Moreover," I pressed my point with some asssurance, "it took premeditation to work out such a diabolical plan for murder as this."

Pons smiled. "I believe I made the same point for a different effect," he said. What we shall have to have, I fear, is some sort of record of the Squire's outbursts."

"Perhaps I can help you, Mr. Pons," said a feminine voice from the threshold of the study.

"Miss Emily Thornhill," said Constable Lambert at her heels.

The attractive young woman advancing toward us, her dark eyes flashing, continued, "I learned you were on the premises, Mr. Pons. I do not propose to be interrogated twice. Please come to the drawing-room, gentlemen."

"As you wish, Miss Thornhill," said Pons.

Our hostess led the way with an almost feline grace. She was attractive, too, in a curiously feline way—with high cheek bones, a narrow face, and a kind of petulant, sensuous mouth.

The drawing-room was in the wing opposite the study. Once there, Miss Thornhill asked us to be seated, making a sweeping motion with her right arm.

"Mr. Lambert, if you please," she said.

"I wanted to ask whether you knew who might wish to see your father dead, Miss Thornhill."

"At least a score of people—and I—think I am being conservative."

"Could you be specific?"

"Let me get my diary."

She excused herself and went out.

"Miss Thornhill strikes me as considerably more her father's daughter than she may think," said Pons dryly.

Constable Lambert raised his eyebrows and nodded.

"Capable," Pons went on, "of

anything the eternal feminine is capable of doing."

We fell silent, and in a few moments Miss Thornhill returned, carrying a hasped, leatherbound, book. Her manner was coldly business-like, as if she were determined to get this unpleasantness over with as soon as possible.

"Ever since my mother died, I have kept a record of Father's rages," she said with an almost chilling matter-of-factness. "Where would you like me to begin?"

The Constable glanced at Pons.

"A fortnight ago," said Pons.

She gave him a calculating glance, then opened her book.

"Twelfth," she said. "Nothing pertinent.

"Thirteenth. Father sacked Fred today—that's Fred Mason, who was our gardener. He would not give him reference. Fred left in a towering fury.

"Fourteenth. Father struck John this morning. John Blakiston was Fred's assistant. John quit.

"Fifteenth. Nothing.

"Sixteenth. Father quarrelled with the postman."

"Mr. Quigg?" interrupted the Constable.

"Yes, Mr. Lambert. Father expected a letter he didn't receive in the mail that morning. Characteristically, he blamed the postman for it. One word led to another. They all but came to blows."

"Go on, Miss Thornhill, please."

"Seventeenth. Father dressed down poor Keith for presuming to have fallen in love with me. It was especially hard on him after what I had told him."

"What had you told your father?" asked Constable Lambert.

"Not Father—Keith Hallis. That was my fault, really. Keith is our head trainer, Mr. Pons. I suppose he thought himself in love with me—and perhaps I did encourage him a bit." She smiled. "I fear that's the nature of a woman. That morning Keith asked me to go to the Ascot with him. I always go, of course—but it was quite impossible to do as he asked. I'm afraid I found it necessary to quite unforgivably brutal. It was afterward that Father had words with him. He wanted to discharge him, but of course, that was absurd—he's our best trainer, so good with the horses, and such a handyman."

"I see. Pray continue," said the Constable.

Eighteenth. Father and Alistair Robson quarrelled. Father knocked him down.

"Nineteenth. Nothing.

"Twentieth. Father humiliated Hawgood by ragging him

about Alan. That's Hawgood's son. Father had him in gaol six months for stealing some trifle from the study."

"Did Hawgood ever protest this action?" interposed Pons.

"He pleaded with Father, of course—but I'm sure Hawgood knew it was of no use to do so. He offered to pay many times what the thing was worth, but Father said the law must take its course."

"What was the object stolen?" asked Pons.

"An inlaid dagger, Mr. Pons."

She went on. "Twenty-first. Nothing.

"Twenty-second. Father and I had words today. He referred to me with his usual endearments."

She paused, leafed over three pages, and finished with, "That sems to be all, gentlemen."

"If I may ask, Miss Thornhill —what were those 'usual little endearments'?"

"If you must know, Mr. Pons, my father was quite often in the habit of referring to me as 'My little bitch' or 'My damned slut'."

"Thank you."

"Is there anything more?"

"I think not," said Pons before the Constable could speak.

"Then, if you'll excuse me, I'll return to my room. Good day, gentlemen."

We came to our feet and stood while she left the drawing-room. Then Constable Lambert turned to Pons.

"You'll want to speak with some of these men, I suspect, Mr. Pons. Hallis and young Hawgood are on the grounds. We can begin with them."

"If you don't mind, Constable—I have a fancy to begin with Mr. Quigg. Do you know where we might find him at this hour?"

After he had recovered from his astonishment, Constable Lambert took out his watch and consulted it. "He should be in the vicinity of West End House," he said, "at the far end of Askrigg."

"Let us just see whether we can intercept him on his way back from there to the Post Office. I take it that is his course, Constable?"

"Yes, Mr. Pons."

"Let us not forget to impound those lethal binoculars," said Pons.

"I have no intention of forgetting them."

"And, before *I* forget, Constable," continued Pons, "you should have this. Its script may prove of singular importance."

He gave to Constable Lambert the little rectangle of linen paper he had picked up from the carpet in the study.

"Thank you, Mr. Pons."

Within a few minutes we left the house, Squire Thornhill's body having preceded us on its

way to the undertaker's.

Constable Lambert wheeled his bicycle for a way down the road in silence. But his curiosity finally got the better of him.

"If you don't mind my asking, Mr. Pons—despite my knowing something of your methods—but why Mr. Quigg before anyone else?"

"Ah, that is elementary, Constable. I am looking for the most direct path to the identity of the murderer. Let us first then fix upon the source of the binoculars. Did they come by hand or by post? I should think it highly unlikely that they came by hand, in the circumstances. That leaves us the post."

"I see, Mr. Pons." But it was perfectly evident on Constable Lambert's honest features that he did not see any more than I.

We walked in silence, save for the cries of birds, the occasional barking of a dog from behind a hedge, and the rising sound of traffic from the street before us. Constable Lambert walked in manifest perplexity, and Pons went along, his grey eyes dancing, an annoyingly suggestive smile touching his thin lips, as if he cradled some knowledge which had escaped us.

We descended into the village, crossed the High Bridge over Askrigg Beck, passed the Crown Inn, passed Robinson's Gateways and the Post Office, and then, as we were approaching the Conservative Club, saw the postman bearing down upon us from the opposite direction.

"There's Quigg," said the Constable.

"Capital!" cried Pons, quickening his steps.

"Quigg!" called the Constable, and, having succeeded in getting his attention, he added, "We'd like a word with you."

The red-haired young man waited upon us.

"Mr. Quigg," said the Constable, as we came up, "this is Mr. Solar Pons. He'd like to know about that quarrel you had with the Squire."

Quigg's face colored hotly "Go ask *him!*" he said, in manifest irritation.

"Squire's dead," said the Constable bluntly.

"Dead!" cried the postman.

"Murdered," said the Constable.

"I'm not surprised," said Quigg tartly.

"Forgive me," said Pons. "Constable Lambert mistook my intention. I have no interest in any words you had with Mr. Thornhill."

"Yes, sir. What then?" Quigg waited.

"This morning you delivered at Thornhill Hall a package addressed to Miss Emily Thornhill, did you not?"

"Yes, Mr. Pons."

"Did you happen to notice where it was posted?"

"London, E. C. 4. Didn't see any return address."

"Thank you, Mr. Quigg. Be on your round."

"Miss Emily!" cried Constable Lambert, as the postman walked away.

"The binoculars were intended for her, Constable. Keith Hallis is your man. She struck his vanity a cruel blow. Her father, characteristically, accepted the package, tore it open, burned the wrappings, and was slain as he focused the glasses while taking a glance out the windows.

"I thought it extremely unlikely that an anonymous gift would be sent to the Squire or any other man with a card inscribed in a masculine hand: *From an admirer.* You should have no difficulty gathering the evidence to convict Hallis—turning up the manufacturer of the glasses, tracing Hallis's movements on his last visit to London, sampling his script. I commend the patient task to you."

For a long minute Constable Lambert goggled at Pons, but at last he said, "Mr. Pons, I don't know how to thank you."

"Say nothing, Constable. The deduction is easy, if logical. The task of assembling the evidence to convict is rather more difficult."

"I would never have thought it, Mr. Pons!"

"Come, come—it would inevitably have occurred to you, Lambert." Pons turned to me. "I think, Parker, we have ample time in which to complete our little jaunt."

Scotland Yard Man to National Gallery

The National Gallery in London has appointed as its first security officer Mr. Stanley Wheal, a former Scotland Yard superintendent. The appointment of Mr. Wheal, who had spent thirty-two years with the police before retiring, was described as an extension of the gallery's security system subsequent to the Goya theft and the realization, in the Government, that security measures at the Gallery (and at other institutions in the metropolitan area) were extremely inadequate. Former Superintendent Wheal, who has the Queen's Police Medal for distinguished service, spent his last eight years of duty with the Yard's research and planning department.

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the man who ate oysters

by Wenzell Brown

I fully recognize that I cut a somewhat ludicrous figure and, inasmuch as I am subject to ridicule anyway, I see no reason why I should not indulge my idiocyncracies.

I sport a paunch, have a fringe of rusty hair around a nearly bald pate and waddle when I walk. Also I am fond of oysters.

Lymie's Bar and Grill, two blocks away from my walk-up apartment, serves excellent seafood. Other than that the place is intolerable. The air is stuffy. The juke-box is too loud. The red-and-white checked table cloths are rarely changed. And, worst of all, the waiters are insolent.

The most obnoxious of the lot is a thin, wiry man with a long, lugubrious face who is known to his fellows as Little Joe Stapley. I invariably sit at his table because it annoys him so. Of course I never tip and therefore it seems only fair that I should select the waiter who is most distasteful to me.

In the last two years my order has never altered—two dozen

Wenzell Brown has made a unique contribution to American letters with his several studies of the minds and mores of our teen-age criminals whose reasons for striking out against a society which rejects them are so often ignored as unimportant. But here, once more, the author of the superb WITNESS TO MURDER (SMM, July 1958) again explores the world of still another lonely person.

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oysters on the half shell. I am an orderly man. I arrive at Lymie's on the dot of twelve. When Joe sees me coming, he goes through an elaborate pantomine. He spreads his hands in a gesture of despair, shrugs his shoulders and rolls his eyes at the other waiters. Once I am seated, he bustles forward, flourishes the jumbo-sized menu in my face and, with mock solicitude, offers suggestions regarding the specialties of the day.

I brush the menu aside and give my order in a toneless voice.

His reply is unctious. "Yes, sir. Certainly, sir. Anything else, sir?"

"Nothing."

"Some coffee, perhaps. Some dessert?"

"Nothing."

The conversation is ended and none of Joe's wiles can bring it to life again. He departs for the kitchen with a crestfallen look.

The oysters are served without undue delay. There was a time when Joe tried to stall but I am a doggedly patient man. I would sit throughout the noonday rush, glowering at anyone who threatened to share my table. Joe is greedy and his livelihood derives largely from tips. He has learned that it is best to be done with me as quickly as possible.

Not that I hurry. I mix horseradish into the Worcestershire sauce and stir it slowly. Each oyster must be dipped and redipped in the sauce, then transported to the mouth with care. The succulent bivalve should not be bitten into, but held against the roof of the mouth and squeezed gently with the tongue until the last goodness is drained from it, after which it should be swallowed whole.

The consumption of oysters is time-consuming as a brief interval must elapse to savor the aftertaste of each one before the preparation of the next is started. Under ideal circumstances my meal takes exactly fifty-eight minutes.

Despite my natural reticence, I have become something of a "character" at Lymie's. The waiters nudge other customers and whisper. On occasion when I glance up I find eyes glued upon me as though there were something spectacular about a man eating oysters. I have learned to ignore the curious gazes and apply myself fully to the pleasure of my meal.

Nevertheless, for many months past, I have been aware that, to those who frequent Lymie's, I am "the man who eats oysters." In some perverse way this has labeled me as an eccentric. And because eccentricity and wealth are inextricably linked in the

common mind, I have also been deemed rich. The tales were mildly disconcerting but not sufficiently so as to interfere with my dietary habits.

Although I am a non-communicative man, I am not unobservant and I have not been deaf to the rumors that circulate about me. These stories have a cumulative effect as each new teller adds details of his own devising. In the course of time, the legend has developed that I am a miser, who, distrusting banks and the stock market, keep my liquid assets close at hand, hidden in my shabby two-room apartment.

Unfortunately these rumors, though falsely arrived at, are true. My life-time investments are contained in a rather tawdry wall safe inadequately concealed behind a reproduction of a Van Gogh painting in my front room.

I was quick to recognize my danger. A man of reputed wealth is a natural target for the unsavory hangers-on who frequent Lymie's bar. However, I was not seriously alarmed until a few weeks ago when I had an intuitive sense of being followed on my regular evening stroll. Once having been alerted by the slightly unnatural tread of footsteps which dogged my own, my conclusions were inevitable. My pace is slow and somewhat pontifical. It is difficult for a younger and more energetic man to accommodate himself to it without a series of hesitations and a dragging of feet.

To turn or otherwise show evidence of my aroused suspicions would only serve to increase my immediate danger. As calmly as possible I proceeded at my customary pace to the protection of the well-lit cross street a block and a half away. The trailing footsteps did not close in, nor did they drop behind.

I gave a sigh of relief when I entered a pool of light shed by a street lamp. I turned slowly so that my back was protected by the post and fumbled through my pockets for my pipe to make my delay seem natural. There were a sufficient number of passers-by so that I doubted an immediate attack.

The footsteps behind me had stopped too, but for a moment, I could see no one. Then I glimpsed the dim figure of a man, black against the dark gray shadows of a projecting balcony. I remained still, looking blankly ahead, as though lost in reverie.

The man shifted his weight and grit crackled beneath the soles of his shoes. He moved forward, hesitantly at first, then quite boldly. He gave me a cocky grin as he passed, which

I ignored. He was Little Joe Stapley.

Could it be coincidence that he was behind me? Could his hesitation be nothing more than his reluctance to greet an unpopular customer on the street? I remembered the lagging footsteps and the derisive grin. Embarrassment, I was sure, was unknown to Little Joe Stapley. That could only mean that he was trailing me with deliberation. But why? As he knew full well, I never carry more than a few dollars in my battered pigskin wallet. Such a small haul would scarcely tempt a man to rob me on the streets.

Then the answer came to me. My key-ring was in my pocket. With the keys, he would have no difficulty in searching my apartment. But that meant he would have to put me out of commission for a long time, perhaps permanently. The conclusion was depressing. It quite destroyed the pleasure of my stroll.

For the next few days I curbed my nightly rambles and remained in my quarters, rereading my favorite book, *The Golden Ass of Apuleius.* Perhaps it was as well. On the second night I heard surreptitious sounds on the landing outside my door. The scarcely audible creak of a board. The muted shuffle of rubber soles on the threadbare carpet.

The danger was not imminent. The door is of solid oak and is fitted with a specially contrived Bingham lock which I have been assured, is burglar proof. Nevertheless, a feeling of queasiness passed through me as the knob turned ever so slowly and a tiny thudding sound indicated the pressure of a body squeezing against the oak panel.

Moving as silently as I could, I edged to the door. I thought I could hear breathing from outside although admittedly this could have been the product of my imagination. The knob was released even more slowly than it had been turned. A moment later the tread of feet descending the stairs was unmistakable.

I hurried to the window for a view of the intruder as he left the front door. I confidently expected to see Little Joe Stapley but I was in error. The man who emerged onto the street was taller and much broader across the shoulders. He was wearing a black jacket, dark slacks and a leather cap with a narrow bill. He cut across the street at an angle and a second figure stepped out of a recessed doorway to join him.

As the pair walked away, they passed beneath the neon glow of a bar sign and I recognized them. The taller man was often at Lymie's. According to remarks

which I had overheard, he had a long police record and bore the unlikely name of Percy Baritoe. His companion was Joe Stapley. I should have known that the little man would not have the courage to tackle me alone.

The necessity to take precautions was more urgent than before. I had felt myself capable of coping with the greed of Little Joe Stapley, but I doubted that I was a match for an underworld character such as Baritoe. My trepidation was increased a few nights later. It has long been my custom to view my most prized possessions nightly before retiring. On this occasion, I proceeded as usual, pushing aside the Van Gogh to reveal the safe. I twirled the knob and listened to the click of the tumblers. I was about to open the door when some sixth sense warned me that I was under observation.

On the surface this seemed unlikely. The only windows that overlook my own are those of the condemned building next door. The last family was evicted more than a year ago. The panes of glass are criss-crossed with tape. Otherwise, they are blank and lifeless. Occasionally derelicts crawl into the basement to sleep but, to the best of my knowledge, none of them had ever penetrated the upper floors.

Nevertheless, as I stared at the dark building, I thought I saw the blur of a pale face behind the grimy glass of the window opposite mine. Before I could be certain, the blur faded as though the watcher had drawn back into the protective shadows of the empty room.

I crossed to the window and pulled the blind, but I was deeply disturbed. It was possible that I was a victim of my own imagination. Or a tramp might have found his way to the room. But I could not dismiss my conviction that Stapley and Baritoe had set up an observation pose and, in that case, the damage was already done. At the very least, they would know the location of the safe and would need to waste no time in a search.

In the morning, I decided that it was time to request protection. The block is patrolled at irregular intervals by a prowl car. By dint of wild gesticulations I persuaded the driver to angle the car to the curb while I unburdened myself to his partner.

Officer Gribbin's slab-like face remained expressionless during my recital. I do not think he was convinced of my danger. He knew my reputation as a crackpot and probably believed me to be suffering from hallu-

cinations. For this reason I was reluctant to disclose the names of the men whom I suspected of intent to rob me. If Gribbin questioned them, I feared that an element of revenge would be added to their natural greed.

When I had finished, Gribbin said laconically, "Okay, dad. We'll keep an eye on your place. But if you really got loot up there, take my advice and stash it in a bank."

I did not deign to answer. What he referred to as my "loot" had an estimated value of thirty thousand dollars, but I could not endure the thought of being separated from my treasures. Therefore, I realized that I would be forced to rely upon my own wits and the black snub-nosed revolver which I keep in the drawer of my roll-top desk for protection. That night I cleaned and oiled the gun. A long time has passed since I have used it but once I was a rather good shot.

Despite my preparations, when the attack came it took me by surprise. Danger has always been associated with darkness in my mind. That the threat should take place in broad daylight had not occurred to me.

At twenty minutes before noon I was preparing to set out for Lymie's, giving myself a few minutes to spare in case I should be diverted along the route. I got no further than the hallway.

As soon as I stepped out onto the landing I had a premonition of danger. The naked, twenty-five watt bulb that dangles from the ceiling by a cord had been extinguished, leaving the hall a murky gray.

I made an effort to jerk back into the apartment but already it was too late. The masked figure of a man crouched beside the balustrade. The gun in his hand was pointed directly at my mid-riff. Despite the mask, I recognized the man as Percy Baritoe.

He growled, "Take it nice and easy, Pops. Step back inside and don't try any funny business with the door. Do as you're told and you won't get hurt."

I was certain that he lied. The risk of identification was too great. It would be far safer to eliminate me after the robbery. Nevertheless, there was nothing to do but obey.

As I backed up slowly, I shot a glance down the stairs. A second man stood blocking the vestibule. His back was toward me but I had no doubt that he was Joe Stapley and that he was acting as look-out.

Baritoe crowded me and gave me a hard shove that sent me reeling to the middle of the room. He stepped into the apartment and pulled the door shut

with a resounding slam.

"All right, fat boy. Open up the safe. And no stalling. I know right where it is."

Anger, I am convinced, rather than fear made my hands shake. It took me three tries before the numbers clicked home and the door of the safe swung back.

Baritoe had circled round behind me. He was a dozen feet away but he had a clear view of the safe's interior. It was empty except for a chamois bag.

I heard him swear under his breath. "What kind of a dodge is this? Where's the dough?"

I lifted the bag and held it in my palm as though weighing it but I was loosening the drawstring and widening the slit I had cut in the chamois some nights before.

"This is all," I said.

Baritoe grunted. "Okay, Fatso. Give it here."

I tossed the bag to him. He caught it with his free hand, his eyes still on me.

His fingers squeezed the chamois. There was a series of tinkling, gurgling, bubbling sounds as the pearls poured through the slit in the bag, cascading to the floor, bouncing and rolling all about him.

His eyes darted to the floor, then back at me. I had sidled away, just enough to distract his attention.

"Hey, what're you tryin' to pull?" he bellowed, and took a threatening step toward me.

His foot landed on a pearl and he flung out his arms trying to catch his balance. The bag with the remaining pearls went sailing across the room. His hand was clutching at air and his mouth was agape with surprise. He almost righted himself and stepped upon another pearl. His leg shot out from under him and his body performed a perfect parabola before he hit the floor with a thud that jarred the whole building. His gun went skittering across the room.

Usually I do not move rapidly but I had ample time to reach into the drawer of my desk for my revolver before he recovered. His mask had fallen off and he was shaking his head from side to side as though trying to clear it. When he looked up, my gun was sited on his chest.

The incredulity in his eyes changed to swift panic. "Don't shoot," he screamed.

I didn't answer but held the revolver steady.

He scrambled back toward the door, using his elbows and his legs to put distance between us.

I followed him cautiously, wary of his flailing feet, careful not to let the gun waver.

When he reached the wall beside the door, I said, "Get out!"

He couldn't quite believe his good luck but he hesitated only a moment. Then he scrambled to his feet, wrenched the door open and darted into the hall.

He must have scuffed one of the pearls ahead of him for at the top of the stairs he seemed to dive forward. He shrieked at the top of his lungs as he plummeted downward. Thumps and thuds punctuated his fall, ending in a sickening pulpy sound as his head crashed against the newell post.

I went as far as the door, my revolver still in my hand. Baritoe sprawled at the foot of the stairs, lying very still. There was no sign of Little Joe Stapley.

Doors were opening throughout the building and people were starting to straggle into the vestibule from the street. Everybody was shouting, wanting to know what happened.

A pearl lay at my feet. I scooped it up and returned to my room, locking the door behind me. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled about the floor, picking up the pearls, examining each one with loving care before replacing it in the chamois bag. One was missing and the surfaces of two others were damaged. I sighed and put the bag back in the safe.

For some minutes there had been a heavy pounding at my door. I went to it and opened it. Officer Gribbin was standing there. He said, "Are you all right?"

I nodded and told him briefly what had happened, then I stepped past him and started down the stairs.

Percy Baritoe had stumbled to his feet. Blood clotted the side of his head. He strained forward at sight of me, his eyes ugly, his mouth twisting. But I was in no danger. He was handcuffed securely to the railing and Officer Gribbin's partner was standing guard over him.

"Wise guy," he jeered. "The man who eats oysters! What you going to do now?"

I drew myself up straight. "You weren't very clever," I said. "You should know that a man who loves oysters would collect pearls. There's an affinity between the two."

For some reason that I could not fathom, my words seemed to infuriate Baritoe.

"Why, you stupid jerk," he yelled. "I ought to kill you." The railing creaked as he tried to throw himself upon me. But the handcuffs held him back and Gribbin's partner gave him a push that sent him staggering to his knees.

"Cut it out," the officer said, "you're not killing anybody. Besides, you got this guy wrong. He's not stupid. Just pompous. There's a difference, you know."

Baritoe began to shout again but I didn't listen. I started for the street and the crowd made a path for me.

I was half-way along the block heading for Lymie's Bar and Grill when I heard the slap of heavy boots on the pavement behind me. I turned to face Officer Gribbin.

"Look, dad," he said. "You can't just walk away. You got to come down to the station and file a complaint."

"It can wait until I've had my lunch, can't it? I'll come then."

Officer Gribbin scratched his head. "Well, sure I guess so. But don't forget."

I walked on. I was wondering if Joe Stapley would be at his old stand. He could not be sure that I suspected him of complicity in the crime and, if Baritoe remained true to the code of the underworld, he would not inform on his accomplice. Joe might be clever enough to go back to Lymie's and pretend that he had been there all the time. I was hoping that he would. As I have said, I am a man of habit. I had grown accustomed to having Joe serve my oysters.

I saw him the moment I came in. A thin film of sweat coated his face and his skin had a greenish tinge. At the slightest hint of danger I think he would have turned tail and run. He sidled up to my table but he managed to spread the menu in front of me with a flourish.

My eyes met his and an understanding passed between us.

I gave my order.

For once, Joe made no superfluous comments. He served the oysters promptly and in silence.

They were delicious.

Shades of Conrad

It brings back memories to see in a recent British newspaper the report of the commitment to trial in Suva, Fiji, of the twenty-year-old engine-room oiler of a British liner. He was charged with having murdered a twenty-one-year-old Scottish shipmate.

The sentence which attracted my attention was the last one.

"He is accused of stabbing" him "at the Golden Dragon Night Club, Suva."

Wonder what the Golden Dragon is like . . . .

st. petersburg

by John Stephens

You and I know all about White Russian Generals, and so did Miss Clarissa Thorpe—but it used to give her a very pleasant thrill of excitement when she ate sometimes at the St. Petersburg and was served by solemn grey-haired Nikolai — Nikolai who had been with the Czar until that dreadful night . . . . Miss Clarissa was not sufficiently familiar with the story of the last days of the Romanovs to know that only the Reds had been near the Emperor those last sad days; neither did Miss Clarissa know that Nikolai—but more about that later . . . .

The St. Petersburg was located in the 70's, therefore not too far away from her work. Friday afternoon, Miss Thorpe told her Secretary to telephone the restaurant to say that she would be there at 7. Her Secretary forgot to telephone, and Miss Thorpe reached the restaurant at five minutes to seven.

The door was closed and the curtains were down. Miss Thorpe looked around and then knocked on the door. She could

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Geoffrey Bailey's superb THE CONSPIRATORS (Harper, 1960), in addition to discussing the Russian Secret Service's infiltration of White Russian circles abroad, also described the interest of the Nazis, in exploiting, for their own purposes, the potentials of the White Russian emigres. Twenty years ago, John Stephens wrote this account of one meeting, in New York, of those whose aid the Nazis sought.

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hear noises inside—the noise of talk, the noises of apparently quite a crowd. Nikolai came to the door after a while and looked out—oh yes—it was Miss Thorpe! "The Miss Thorpe would perhaps be gracious—enough to forgive" but there was a private party there this evening—a reception for Her Imperial Highness . . . .— "Miss Thorpe will understand?"

Miss Thorpe did and Miss Thorpe didn't, but as she stood there irresolutely Nikolai suddenly stiffened in the salute of a soldier. A little man with greying hair and mustache stood behind Miss Thorpe. He acknowledged Nikolai's salute and then turned to Miss Thorpe. There was something awfully familiar about the man— she knew she'd met him somewheres. He spoke —"Did you wish to go in, Miss Thorpe?" He knew her name!

"Why yes—"

"Then, Lieutenant, Miss Thorpe is joining me as my guest!" There was a courtliness and a grace in his bow that suddenly brought back memories of very many years ago. Her eyes were a little dim as she preceded him into the foyer . . . .

The great "saal" was ablaze of lights. Most of the men there seemed to be in uniform, and the women in rather ornate gowns. The owner of the restaurant was in civilian clothes, and was running around excitedly—apparently serving people. A man she recognized as the Head Waiter was seated at one of the tables—a young girl of about 15 facing him. He was in a black velvet uniform, glittering with gold and orders. Every now-and-then somebody would come up to him—whisper briefly—and depart.

He was obviously rather astonished when he saw Miss Thorpe. He jumped up quickly —strode through the crowd— and, facing Miss Thorpe's escort, began to talk to him in Russian. After a minute he shrugged his shouders, turned to her with a bow, and began— "His Highness assures me that you realize the private nature of this gathering, Dr. Thorpe. It is possible that the evening's discussion may prove to be a little excitable; to a certain extent, therefore, it *is* perhaps good that you—an American—are here. We may need to be reminded—if you will forgive me for saying so—that this is not 1911 . . . . "

It's unnecessary to add that Miss Thorpe didn't know what it was all about. She longed to nod graciously to this man who certainly *was* the Head Waiter, and tell him what she wanted to eat, but somehow she couldn't. Some strange waiters were standing behind a buffet table

over by the wall, and she allowed the pressure of the elderly gentleman's arm to influence her. As they neared the table, the people in their way made way for them, bowing,—looking almost expectantly at her. Miss Thorpe, who was quite as elderly as her escort, and normally very-very prim, felt a very pleasant blush developing. It was quite some years since men had looked on her with interest—and not just with respect . . . .

Forty-five minutes later Miss Clarissa Thornton-Thorpe, senior lecturer at the Museum, found herself sitting on a gold brocaded chair next to her—as yet unknown—escort. She knew by now he was a Highness. He must be a very important one, indeed, for everyone had been very polite to him. Nikolai had turned up from somewhere and was standing behind their chairs now.

As far as she could tell, the room was full with Generals and Princesses, jewelry and black silk. Most of the men, and many of the women were wearing mourning bands. Most of the people there were middle-aged. Some few were youngsters—and they were sticking together in one corner, talking tensely among themselves.

All the talking stopped suddenly—and everyone faced the doorway. Those who were seated rose—all bowed. A girl was standing there in the doorway, a slim young girl with great black eyes, dressed in a bright white uniform coat. A girl who might have been twenty or so, her coat a gleaming white and gold, a solitary magnificent Order on her breast. She seemed such a young girl—such a very young and unhappy and determined girl—as she began to speak—

"We thank you all! We thank you my uncle" (and the elderly man next to Miss Thorpe bowed silently), "we thank you all who have been good enough to come!"

"I am here tonight with a message of hope—a message that should stir the blood of all of you who were born in exile or who are of the older generation. Our brother Vladimir is in Berlin now, and has asked me to give to you in America this message."

"Berlin marches on Soviet Russia within a month! Berlin strikes, as Europe will strike, in a Holy Crusade against the Communist Devils who murdered my grand-uncle and all of his family. Today Berlin fights our fight—that is my brother's message, as well as that of the Grand-Dukes, Paul and Ivan. I am authorized to offer you commissions in this coming army of Liberation!"

"My uncle—this is your nephew Vladimir's message . . . ."

There was silence. The younger people were moving nearer to the girl. Some were some men in their thirties—suave men—slim men—men —whom Miss Thorpe couldn't help thinking looked very unpleasant. The young girl was standing there a little apart from the these new-found silent allies—somehow she looked very young and very courageous and very much near tears . . . .

The elderly gentleman who had been Miss Thorpe's escort had risen, and the buzz of conversation was stilled. All faces were turned towards him as he began to speak, like the girl, in the language of Voltaire—not Goering . . . .

"My child, we were gathered here this evening to welcome you—to take you into our hearts and into our homes—to perhaps almost worship you a little, seeing in you the eternal youth of our Mother Russia. But it seems that back in Europe you—or perhaps rather your brothers—have found friends,—friends after a fashion who will have told you young people many fascinating stories and made you many dazzling promises. And because this seems to be a new era and a new day—you have chosen to ignore the fact that these men and women are servants-born who wish to dominate the world —betrayers of military honor—the betrayers or the sons of the betrayers who financed the Bolshevists!"

"You ask us to profit by this invasion of Russia by these ghouls! You and your brothers want us to follow in their footsteps—like jackals—and rebuild our lives on the foundation of the blood and gutted homes of our peasantry! My child—you are too young—for you have never seen Russia except in our eyes when we met in the evenings to remember . . . . We will not go back to Russia as conquerors! We go back there only at the demand of the people!"

"We will pray for you, my child—pray that the Eternal God may guide you along your chosen path . . . ."

The girl still stood there—silent and immobile—her eyes misty—her face dead white. The people who had moved near her were back in their shadows. She stood alone.

Two elderly women nearby were crying softly, and somehow Miss Thorpe knew they must have known the girl's mother. The old man himself was still standing—but his eyes had a far away appealing look in them, as if perhaps he too saw another girl standing next to this young one—

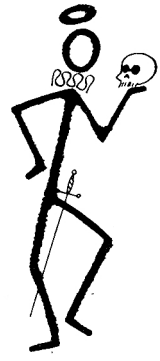
Miss Thorpe knew she was a

stranger. Miss Thorpe knew she hadn't even any business being there. But Miss Thorpe was at that age where she was accustomed, sometimes, to permit herself some lapses from manners. She thought she'd start crying herself if she had to stand there any longer watching that young girl's white face and the stricken stiff look on the old man's—

Nobody was moving as Miss Thorpe stepped down on the dance floor and marched resolutely across to the entrance. She took the young girl by the hand, and began to bring her back with her across the great gleaming floor—the little conservatively dressed American woman leading by the hand this apparition in white.

When Miss Thorpe neared the old man she muttered hastily—"here she is"—and then remembered to add "Your Highness" and bobbed a half-courtsey. And so she turned and walked out of the restaurant.

Naturally nobody noticed her. They were all too excited. But as she turned around a minute later she saw the young girl in the old man's arms. They were both crying. Everyone seemed to be crying. And as she neared the door, someone began to play a very stirring march of some sort and everyone began to sing — — — Miss Thorpe's eyes blinked a little as she went out into the cold night air . . . .



THE MURDER OF ERIK XIV

It is now definite that Erik XIVth, King of Sweden in the 16th Century, *was* poisoned.

Who did it — and whether the poison was given him in his pea soup as legend has it — will probably never be known, but examination of the four hundred year old remains in Vasteras, in 1958, has shown sufficient arsenic comparable to what is found in present-day arsenic poisoning cases. More than thirty experts collaborated in the examination, the details of which have now been published in Sweden, and which are held to confirm the previous theory that the king was poisoned.

The presence of arsenic in the remains (in the case of Napoleon in hair cut from his body just after his death) has of course been held to be proof of arsenic poisoning. In each case however, both in the case of King Erik XIVth and of the Emperor Napoleon, no attention seems to be paid to the possibility that these men could have been given arsenic by their doctors in the course of treatment and that, over the years, a high tolerance of arsenic would develop.

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the law of drifting sand

by Erle Stanley Gardner

Out to the West stretched the desert, silent, inscrutable, cruel. The town hung to the edge of the desert. It was a gold town; the place lived, breathed, ate and thought gold.

Men came to this town, stayed for a space, then were drawn out in the grim silence of the desert, just as iron filings are drawn to a magnet. Some came back. Some didn't. Occasionally the desert would give up a part of its hoard to some favored one. Occasionally the buzzards would circle over a staggering figure that ran aimlessly, its swollen tongue turning black, its glassy eyes staring at the white expanse of glittering torture.

Such is the way of the desert.

There were hard-bitten men in that little desert town. They were the men who had learned much of the laws of the desert. They had survived. There were also the bloated, soft parasites who fed upon those who work,

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There is a theory that authors are not always remembered as individuals, but by the names of the characters whom they have created. Perry Mason is so much a part of the folk-lore of our times that one would expect this to be true here also—but it is not. Mr. Gardner has for years fought for justice for men entitled to it under the law—but themselves unable to initiate such a fight He is also the author of books such as the recently published THE HIDDEN HEART OF BAJA (Morrow, $7.50) and of studies of the area described in this story.

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and tenderfeet who were being tempered by the desert fires.

The man who came in on the stage from Las Vegas was new to the desert. That much could be seen in his sun-tortured visage. His skin was crimson, the bloodshot rims of the eyes had gazed too long upon white wastes. He had not stood the trip well.

There was a scar on his forehead, a jagged, irregular scar, and the blistering sun had made that scar stand out as a white star against the red of his forehead. Except for that scar he would have been considered handsome, judged by the standards of the ballroom. He had an erect figure, a certain self assurance, a jaunty set to his head which even the long stage trip hadn't conquered—and the trip by auto-stage from Las Vegas was cruel beyond belief to those who had never been adopted by the desert.

He came in to the Pay Dirt Cafe as I was eating. He hitched himself aboard one of the high stools, planted an elbow on the imitation mahogany counter, and grinned familiarly at Bessie O'Day.

He was good looking and young, not over twenty-five at the most. His manner was that of one who is accustomed to have women fall all over themselves being nice to him. His voice was deep, richly resonant, the sort of a voice that stirs the romantic thoughts in a woman's breast. There was just a little undertone of harsh selfishness in that voice, but that note was almost drowned out by the rich resonance.

"Roast beef, and a smile," he said.

He got them both. The smile was only a lip smile, but he didn't notice that.

"Know a man named Bloom?" he asked the girl as he picked up knife and fork.

"Harry Bloom? He's dead," said Bessie. "He was murdered. Somebody ambushed him and killed him with one shot from a rifle."

The man with the scarred forehead shoved in another mouthful. "Yeah," he said indifferently. "How'd it happen?"

Bessie's eyes were troubled.

"Nobody knows. Harry Bloom had been out on a prospecting trip. He was coming back. From the way his packs were arranged, and the stuff that had been thrown away, the old timers figured he'd made a strike and was bringing in the gold. They don't know. Somebody shot him, not ten miles from town. They found his body, lying just as it had been pitched down from the saddle. There was one bullet hole in the side of the head."

The man nodded. "What happened to his stuff?" he asked.

"You mean the burros, the saddles and the canteens?"

"Yeah. I guess so, whatever it was he had."

"The coroner took charge of it."

The young man speared the last of the roast beef, scooped the mashed potatoes on it with a swipe of his knife, opened his mouth and shoved in the whole thing.

"Wasn't there something else?" he asked. "Wasn't there an ore sample?"

She shook her head. "Not that I know of."

I joined the conversation.

"There was just one rock, and it wasn't ore," I said. "I saw them when they brought the body in. Harry Bloom had one jagged chunk of rock in his poke, an that was all."

The youth looked at me. "What happened to that?" he asked, scraping his plate with his knife, sliding the knife along the edge of the fork and swooping down on the fork with eager mouth.

"A Mex got it." I said. "Jose Diaz, the gambler. He thought there might be some charm to the thing, the only rock brought in by a murdered man."

The man with the scarred forehead pushed back his stool, sized me up.

"Yeah?" he said.

Bessie O'Day asked him a question.

"You interested in Harry Bloom?—Know him, or related to him or something?"

"Nope. Just read about the case in the newspapers," he said. "There was a paragraph. It mentioned the name of this place, and said it was one of the typical desert, wide-open mining towns. I thought I'd come on and see what a wide-open mining town looked like. I'm a curious cuss, myself."

And he flipped a half dollar on the counter and strode to the door.

Bessie looked at me.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"He's good looking—if it wasn't for that scar," she said.

"He looks like a matinee idol," I told her. "We'll wait and see what the desert does to him. So far as I'm concerned, it's character on a man's face that makes him handsome."

I saw him again that evening. He was over in the Miner's Retreat, talking earnestly, as though he was trying to sell something, and Jose Diaz seemed reluctant.

The Miner's Retreat was one of those places. There was a bar and a stack of bottles behind the bar. There were some round tables in the back, covered with green cloth, and with hanging lights dangling from the ceiling

over the tables. Men sat at those tables and played poker, hour after hour, night after night. There were men with pale complexions, nervous hands and big eyes. They always won. There were just two ways of making a living in the camp. Either make it from the desert, or make it from those who made their livings in the desert.

Jose Diaz finally went out. The man with the scarred forehead sat at the table, waiting. Poker games were going on all around him.

Diaz came back, his pocket bulging. He passed something over under the table.

The man with the scarred forehead made little shoulder motions as he turned the object over and over in his hands. He talked. I could see that his lips were speaking in numbers. The eyes of the gambler glittered with greed, but he shook his head.

After a while the man with the scarred forehead passed the mysterious object back under the table. Jose Diaz took it, crammed it in his pocket, got up, flashed his teeth in a grin, and went to a poker game.

The man with the scarred forehead got up, started for the door. Seeing me he came over.

"I talked with you in the restaurant," he said.

"I remember," I replied.

He thrust out his hand. "Trask is my name. Fred Trask."

"Zane, Bob Zane," I said, and shook hands.

His hand was firm and strong. The fingers wrapped around my hand, gave a firm pressure. He was looking me straight in the eyes, but his voice was not so richly resonant as it had been in the restaurant. It had an undertone of harsh, grasping greed.

"I want you to do something for me," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"That Mex has got that bit of rock which came from the body of the murdered prospector. He won't sell it for anything reasonable. I can't get him to name a price, even. He's turned down twenty dollars. I don't want to arouse his suspicions, but I want that rock. I'll pay a hundred dollars for it, if I have to go that high. He knows I'm a greenhorn, and he's trying to hold me up. I want you to buy the rock for me."

He pushed over a roll of bills.

"There's the hundred. Get the rock, and you can keep the hundred. If you get it for any less, it's your profit."

"You offered him twenty?" I asked.

"That's all. Five at first, then ten, then twenty."

"Where'll I meet you when I get the rock?" I wanted to know.

"Over at the hotel," he said. "And make it as snappy as you can."

"It's going to take a little while," I warned him. "I've got to wait until Jose has a run of poor luck at cards, and then I'll sit in the game and tear into him for all I can. I'll tell him he's having bad luck because the murdered man's ghost is haunting the rock."

His voice was impatient. "I don't care how you get it.—I want it."

I didn't like him and I didn't like his tone. But when a man comes to camp and offers to pay a hundred dollars for a chunk of rock that was the only thing which was found in the poke of a murdered prospector, I aim to get a look at that rock if it's at all possible. And buying this particular rock seemed about the only way I could get a look at it.

I'd seen it before, when they brought Harry Bloom's body in. The whole camp had seen it. It was just a chunk of plain rock, and it wasn't even mineralized. It really wasn't rock, but conglomerate, hard and jagged.

I strolled over to the table to watch Jose's luck at the cards. Jose grinned at me, scraped back his chair, flashed his teeth at me with a smile.

"He is a poor liar, that boy," he said.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Yes," he said. "And I saw him talking with you. He has asked you to buy the rock for him. No?"

I wasn't going to lie to Jose. "What if he did?" I asked.

He rippled a laugh. "He offered me twenty, fifty, seventy-five dollars," he boasted. "Am I a fool to sell a plain rock for that money? If the rock is worth that much it is worth more."

I was mad. Jose had his faults, but he wouldn't lie, not to me.

"So he offered you seventy-five dollars, eh?"

"*Si, senor,* he did that! And I told him that I would not sell for less than a hundred and twenty-five dollars."

I put my cards on the table.

"He told me he hadn't offered you more than twenty," I said. "He gave me a hundred to buy it with. I was to keep any difference."

Jose chuckled. He was in fine humor.

"Do you know why he did that?" he asked me.

"He said he thought you were trying to hold him up," I replied. "He said he thought I could buy it cheaper than he could."

Jose nodded. "He did it because I told him I would not sell the rock at all unless some one who was very expert upon the value of stones told me it was not worth money for the ore that was in it. He asked me if I thought you knew stones, and I told him that your judgment was good anywhere in the des-

ert. That is why he went to you, *amigo*.

"But this matter has become very peculiar," he continued. "We will not trust to any one's offhand judgment. We will go to an assayer—The only difficulty is that the man refused to pay anything for the rock if it was broken. Can you imagine that? —He is crazy, and he is a liar. He has tried to deceive you; therefore we shall put all of our cards down together. Come, and we will see Senior Garland, the assayer."

I nodded.

We hunted up Phil Garland, who is big, fat, good natured and honest.

"We've got to know what's in a rock, without smashing it up," I said.

Garland looked at us suspiciously, then led the way over to his little office, in a shack with a galvanized iron roof, where he did most of his work at night. The place was too hot, daytimes.

We went in. Jose Diaz produced the rock. Garland took it in his hands.

"It's the rock they found in Harry Bloom's saddle bag, ain't it?" he asked.

I nodded. He sat down and looked at it.

"Funny," he said. "You know, I thought there might be something of value in this thing, and I looked it over pretty carefully for metal at the time it was found. I'll look it over again, though."

He sat down at his bench, put the rock on scales to weigh it. Then he took a glass jar, filled the jar with water, weighed the jar and the water, then dropped in the rock. A lot of the water overflowed. Garland weighed the water that was left and the rock. He scratched his head.

He took the wet rock, studied it, dried it, looked at it with a magnifying glass, and shook his head.

"The darn thing is just a chunk of conglomerate," he said. "There's miles and miles of it around here. From the texture of this, though, I'd make a guess that it came from around Hole in the Rock Springs. But there isn't any mineral in it, and there wouldn't be anything worth while even if there had been any mineral in it. It's nothing but a sort of a natural cement, holding together a smear of round stones. —You can see the cement-like nature of the binding material and these round pebbles are gripped here by a natural cement. They were picked up by the binding material a few million years ago; and the fact that one of the little rocks might be pure gold wouldn't mean anything at all, so far as mining operations as concerned."

Jose grinned at me.

"One hundred and twenty-five dollars, Senor Zane, and

that is my limit. I am a gambler. The rock is worth nothing to me; but I know it is worth a hundred to the man with the scar on his forehead, and I think you are curious enough to invest twenty-five dollars of your own money."

I knew Jose. He was bluffing his way through, figuring, just as he said, that I would put in twenty-five dollars of my own money. But he was a good gambler. If I refused, he'd sit tight and hold that rock until he died.

"You are a good judge of human nature, Jose" I said, and handed him a hundred and twenty-five dollars.

"I have to be," he said, "in my profession."

He handed me the rock, pocketed the money, and went back to the gambling games.

I walked directly over to the hotel. They called it a hotel; it was really a ramshackle structure put up over a stone store, and divided into little cubicles. There was a pitcher and a bowl in each room, a table, a chair and an iron bed. Sheets were unknown.

Fred Trask was registered. He sat on the straight backed chair in his room, waiting. He'd picked up an iron mortar and a pestle from some miner, and he had it on the floor at his feet all ready for me.

His eyes lit up when he saw me bring in the rock.

"You got it?" he said.

"I got it," I told him. "But I found you'd offered more than twenty-five dollars for it."

"Who told you that? he asked. reaching for the rock.

"Jose Diaz did," I said.

"He's a liar," said Trask, speaking easily, as though the words were of no particular import. He picked up the iron pestle and started mashing up the rock. It was pretty hard, and I noticed he struck light blows.

"Here," I said, reaching for the pestle. "You can't get anywhere that way. There's nothing in the binder, anyhow. If there's anything worth while, it'll be in some of the small rocks that . . ."

He pushed me away, snarling.

"Who's doing this?" he rasped, and his lips drew back from his teeth, his eyes glittered, and the deep timbre had entirely gone from his voice. The words were just barked out.

As he spoke, the pestle came down hard on the conglomerate and a piece broke off. That piece was a chunk that had a round pebble about the size of a very small potato in the center.

Something else rolled out, too: a chunk of pure gold. I've seen gold too much not to know it when I glimpse it. This was gold, all right; and it had a peculiar, rippled appearance. The nugget was as big around as a half dollar, and a little thicker.

It was bent a trifle, and the top surface was all waves and ripples. The gold was all shiny and new looking on top. A strange looking nugget.

Fred Trask swooped for that bit of gold and scooped it into his hands. His eyes stared at me and were hostile.

"I knew that rock was mineralized," he said. "Now get out of here!"

I got out of there. I'd invested twenty-five dollars, and it was a worth while investment.

I waited around the hotel. Fred Trask came out in about fifteen minutes. His feet were pounding the ground like those of a man who's going places in a hurry. He went over to the Miner's Rest and got hold of the bartender. They chatted for a while, and then the barkeep called over Dick Rose.

Rose was a man who hung around on the edges and snapped up anything that offered a long profit with no investment. He wasn't scrupulous in his business dealings, and he'd had a couple of enemies who had been mysteriously shot from ambush. No one could prove anything on Dick Rose, and they didn't try particularly hard; but we local men all knew him and gave him a more or less wide berth. Not that we were afraid of him. It was just the way we felt toward rattlesnakes. We didn't like 'em.

Rose and Fred Trask had a drink. Then they went off into a corner and talked. Trask did most of the talking. He was voluble and convincing, but full of words. Dick Rose stared at him with eyes that were slitted and glistening. Eyes that glittered like diamonds through the blue haze of cigarette smoke.

After half an hour or so of talk, they had a couple more drinks. But Dick Rose kept his eyes half closed, and they still had that diamond hard glitter in them when the two men at length left the saloon.

The next morning they were gone. They'd pulled out in the early dawn. Dick Rose had gone to the hotel with a string of burros and he'd had Sam Pitch along. Sam was an old buzzard who'd have shot his own grandmother in the back for fifty cents cash and a drink of whisky.

I thought over the fact that they'd pulled out. Then I went to the hotel, on a hunch, and looked around under the window of the room that Trask had occupied.

I found what I wanted, a bunch of rounded rocks and some jagged binder. It was the last of the pounded up conglomerate. I also found the piece that had clung to the big rock, the one that was the size of a small potato and had masked the chunk of gold. I examined that piece. Looking at it from the

back side and in the daylight, it seemed different. The side that had been on the outside of the chunk of conglomerate looked natural; but there was a peculiar, colorless something on the back of the rounded rock.

I pocketed it and hunted up Garland. He was asleep, after a night of work, and some drink. I shook him awake.

"Take a look at this," I told him.

His eyes focused on the rock "Banquo's ghost!" he said.

"Go on," I told him. It may keep turning up but there ain't no banquet."

"That's right," he said, and reached for his boots.

In his little office he looked the thing over more carefully.

"Well," he said, at length, "it's been doctored—salted and all that sort of stuff. But what the hell a man would want to salt conglomerate for is more than I know. Every once in a while you come on a piece where the sun or moisture has rotted the cement out of a round rock, so that the rock can be pulled out. That's what happened to this rock. Then somebody evidently hollowed out the chunk, working through the hole left by the removal of this little rock. The gold was then inserted, and this rock cemented back into place. That's what this stuff is that you see on the back of the round rock—cement."

"Thanks," I said. "Go back ot sleep."

I handed him ten dollars, which gave me a thirty-five dollar investment in something that wasn't even a salted mine.

Of course, the purchase of the rock had made news in the little town, sprawled in the sun on the edge of the desert. Everything that pertained to gold had the highest news value. If this rock had been anything but conglomerate, there would have been some action. But when the boys figured it out, they figured that it was just another case of a tenderfoot going goofy.

I yawned and shrugged my shoulders. I didn't tell anybody about the gold, nor about the cemented rock. And I knew that Garland wouldn't talk.

I didn't want to leave too soon after Trask; so I waited until night, and then slipped out into the desert, taking advantage of a half moon.

The desert was cold and still, like the surface of some vast tombstone that stretched out cold in the moonlight. The utter silence, the lack of life, the big expanse of space gripped me. I always feel like that when I'm starting out into the desert. There's the sense of being all alone, yet not being alone. A man comes to know himself when he's in the desert. Lots of himself is a lot littler than he ever thought, and a lot of him-

self is a lot bigger. It's the little part that shrivels away and the big part that grows and becomes company when a man gets out into the desert.

Unless, of course, a man's just naturally a little man all the way through, and then the little part comes leering out through the cracks of the character, sees the naked desert, and gets out of control, like the fabled genie that came out of a bottle.

I made camp when the moon went down, and got a few hours of sleep before the first crack of cold dawn. Then I got up the burros, lashed on the packs and started. I was headed in the general direction of the Hole in the Rock Spring, and for the surface of the desert which lay down below the level of the sea. I was traveling fast, too, and I had a pair of powerful binoculars on the horn of my saddle.

The sun grew hot and the desert seethed in the dazzling glare of day. The last of the Funeral Range topped the sky before me. I swung through a pass and looked down on Death Valley.

I don't care how often a man sees Death Valley. When he looks down on it from the top of either the Funerals or the Panamints, something happens inside of him. It's as though his insides looped the loop and left him without any breath.

There weren't any tracks in the pass. I got the binoculars and looked down on the floor of the valley. Nothing moved. It lived up to its name, a valley of death. For many years now it had been luring men to destruction.

I swung the glasses in a survey of the passes, boring into the black shadows that seemed inky after the glittering flood of sand-reflected light.

Nothing moved.

Putting the glasses away, I went down into the valley. That night I slept beneath the blazing stars. When they had receded to pin points with the coming of dawn, I was once more on my way. I was headed toward the north.

The heat robbed the air of oxygen. The hot air, rushing upwards, was as devoid of life giving qualities as the air which rushes up the flue of a furnace. I took it pretty slowly, which is the real way to make haste in the desert.

There was a queer, droning sound. At first I thought it was the sound of the blood pounding through the arteries in my ears. I stopped and listened. The sound came and went, droning into a crescendo of pulsating noise, then dying away. I looked upward, but I couldn't see any plane.

I paid no further heed to it, and plugged on. The burros

wagged their ears, cast short shadows, inky black. I could feel the hot sand burning up through the soles of my shoes.

Then the sound came to me louder and louder. I knew it then for what it was, a motor toiling through the sand. The engine sounded pretty b a d. There wasn't any road within a matter of miles. I wondered what sort of fool would push a car through the floor of the valley in the heat.

I rounded a spur of drifting sand. The car was ahead, a black dot against the shimmering outlines of the sand hills. It was coming toward me, and not making very much headway.

Four times, while I pushed on toward it, the motor stopped. Whenever it did that a black figure would run out to the front of the car. I knew what was happening; a man was pouring fresh water into the boiling radiator.

At last the motor gave a series of backfires. Something harsh and metalic made clanging noises, far louder than the roaring pulsations of the hot motor. It was a bearing. There was a moment or two of that noise, and then a terrific bang.

A dense cloud of white steam and smoke puffed out from the hood of the car like a mushroom, and then there was silence.

The car was still some distance away. I dipped down into a wind ravine between two sand hills, and found firm footing. I followed the windings of that ravine.

After a while I figured I must be pretty close to the car. I angled up the slope of sand, and found that it was less than two hundred yards away.

There were two figures out in front of that car, staring at it after the manner of stranded motorists the world over. It seemed as if they thought they could get the thing started just by staring at it, if they stared long enough and hard enough.

The sad truth dawned on them as I got within earshot.

"We've got to walk," said one of the figures. And I could tell from the voice that this one was a young woman, although she was dressed in boots and breeches.

The man's voice sounded frightened. "Walk *back*," he said.

"We can't be far now," the woman told him.

"But we're out of water, in the desert . . ."

Then the sound of slithering sand as my burro train pushed its way along the white hot sand hill carried to their ears. They turned and stared at me with big eyes.

They'd evidently been a day or two in the desert, and the sun had done things to their

skins. The woman was of that brunette type that simply browns, and her face was as brown as a berry, her eyes big black pools. She had adapted herself naturally to the desert, but as far as her complexion was concerned, she'd soon come to look like an Indian.

The man wasn't of that type. He'd peel and blister. His face was swollen, red and painful. His eyes were watering. The lips were beginning to crack. Neither one of them was over twenty-five.

"Did you use all the water you had in filling the radiator?" I asked them.

The woman answered me. "Yes," she said. "The car took every drop. Then we ran out of water, and that's when it burned out the bearings."

I nodded.

"We've got to get out of the desert," said the man.

I'd heard people talk like that before. His words were coming rapidly, and his eye shifted a little bit as he talked. He was afraid, and the fear was getting bigger as he tried to fight it down.

"It's a long way to water," I said.

"Why, we passed a watering station not over two hours ago!" the girl said.

"Two hours in an automobile, and two hours walking are two different things, ma'am."

She thought that over, turned to look at the fellow who was with her. "Let me talk with you a minute, Ted."

He joined her. They walked forty or fifty yards away and started whispering. They pulled out a paper, started pointing, then rubbering around at the mountains that rimmed the valley. There were the Panamints on one side, the Funerals on the other, and both ranges were dancing about in the heat, the horizons twisting and writhing grotesquely.

The woman reached the decision. I could see her lips snap out the words. Then the man nodded ,and the woman came striding over toward me.

"Do you know this section of the desert?" she asked.

"I've been through it a few times."

"Do you know of a twisting canon that makes a right-angled bend just beyond the shifting sand hills?"

I puckered my forehead. "I don't remember anything like that offhand."

She bit her lip. "How far are the drifting sand hills from here?"

"You're getting into 'em now, ma'am. They're off here to your right. I made a swing so as to avoid 'em."

She batted those big eyes of

hers steadily, searchingly. After a second or two she nodded her head.

"I'm Lois Beachley," she said. "The man with me Ted Wayne. We want to find that canyon over beyond the drifting sand. Some one sold me a site for a homestead somewhere over in there."

I kept my eyes on hers. "You mean a gold mine, don't you?"

Her eyes were steady, unwavering. "Yes, I mean a gold mine."

"It'd be a hard trip to get there. You'd have to travel light."

"I can travel light."

"I couldn't very well guide you there, ma'am. I'm sorry, but I got some business of my own down here. People don't come here this time of year unless they've got business."

I could see her eyes wince.

"How can we get there?" she asked.

"You can't. Not with that outfit you've got."

She sighed. "Well, then," she wanted to know, "how can we get back to water?" And that question showed me just where I stood.

"You can't, ma'am, not with the outfit you've got," I replied. "I guess I've got to take charge of you. My name's Bob Zane. I'll just let my own business go for a while."

I did some internal cussing, kissed a thirty-five dollar investment good-by, and wished to thunder they'd passed a law keeping tenderfeet and fools out of Death Valley after it warms up. Seems like I've tried to prospect some during my life, but I've never done over a few hours of it. Most of the time has been spent getting to the place I wanted to prospect, running out of grub, chasing burros, getting back and ready for another start, chasing more burros, and rescuing fool tenderfeet that go busting into the desert without knowing what they're there for.

"We'll pay you," she said.

I nodded. They could pay me, but never enough ot make up for what I was missing. I had a hunch that the man with the scarred forehead had been pulling a fast one, another hunch that my thirty-five dollar investment, if played right, would have netted me a big return and given me the laugh on some of the wise guys at camp. But it was gone now. I had to chaperon these two tenderfeet to water; and by the time I'd done that, it'd be too late to do anything with the other. So I figured I might as well go whole hog as nothing, and guide 'em in to where they wanted to go.

They had the car loaded with the sort of provisions that weren't much good in the desert; heavy canned stuff, fruits that were put up in a heavy, sicken-

ingly sweet syrup. There were only two cans of tomatoes.

"You should have brought more tomatoes and not so much sweet stuff," I said.

The girl stared.

Ted Wayne shook his head. "I like sweets," he said, "and I don't like tomatoes."

I shrugged my shoulders, took my knife and opened the cans of tomatoes. The way we were traveling, we weren't going to be able to load the burros with canned stuff.

The girl tackled the tomatoes without enthusiasm. Then, as she got a couple of swallows, her eyes brightened. She lowered the can.

"Why," she said, "they're delicious—the most wonderful things I ever tasted!" She passed the can over to Wayne.

He shook his head. "I'll taste 'em," he said. Then the aroma struck his nostrils. He took a gulp, looked surprised, and drained the can. We killed the other can in record time. Then I gave them their first lesson on the desert.

"When you get out in the desert you sweat a lot. That leaves a lot of acid stuff in the body. The only thing that'll cut that is the right kind of fruit. Tomatoes are better than anything I know of. Orange juice'd be great, only you can't carry it. Load up with canned tomatoes when you head for the desert. Now we'll start."

We started. I'd had to pack my saddle burro with the extra stuff I'd taken for the pair, and we were all walking. It wasn't pleasant walking. If there'd been any shade, I'd have given them a rest; but I knew the chap was going to be pretty well all in, and I wanted to haze him along before he got to the point where he'd blow up.

Starting the way I did, they'd have the cool of the evening for the last part of the drag. They'd need it.

I hadn't gone a mile before I saw what was happening. The desert was getting Wayne. He was afraid of it. Fear was in his eyes, in the too rapid steps which he took, in the frightened glances he gave over his shoulder, and in the way he kept trying to talk—not saying anything—just listening to the sound of his own voice.

The desert does that to people. The first time you see it, you're either afraid of it or else you feel a strange fascination for it. And when I say "see it," I mean get out in it. Anybody who whizzes through the desert on an improved road in an automobile, or rolling along in a shaded Pullman car, has never really seen it. The only way to see the desert is to get out on foot; out where the eternal silence grips you; out where the heat makes

the horizons dance and the mirages glitter; where you get that feeling of being less than a needle point in the universe, and then feel that needle point shrivel away to nothing. A man has to fight to keep from feeling that he's going to shrivel on himself until there's nothing left. It's a funny feeling. You can't tell about it. You've got to experience it to know what it is.

But the girl looked at it the other way. She was one of those who sees the desert, likes it, and fits right into it.

The desert's that way. Some she adopts and takes to her breast without a murmur. Some she fights and burns, and strips away the veneer until she's got just the naked soul to deal with. Sometimes she rebuilds on the foundation of that naked soul, and sometimes the soul just shrivels and vanishes. The desert's the kindest mother a man ever had, because she's the cruelest. Things seem sort of out of place to us when they're cruel. That's because we're soft. But it's cruelty that develops character. Man learns by fighting.

I've seen men stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon and say that it was a manifestation of the Eternal, a temple of nature and so forth. It's all of that. It's God, showing himself. But those same people turn away with a shudder when they see a cat torturing a mouse. If they only knew it, there's just as much of God manifesting himself in that as there is in the Grand Canyon. It's the law of life.

The reason men don't know the law of life is because they're afraid to look Eternity in the face. Out in the desert they have to look at Eternity. It's on all sides of them, they can't turn their eyes away. That's the spell of the desert.

We got into the drifting sand in about an hour. Those are the sand hills that drift on the wind, marching across the face of the desert, always shifting, never stopping, a ceaseless slithering march of hissing sand.

Lois Beachley was dead game. She would have gone on until she dropped; and she was almost ready to drop. She hadn't accustomed her muscles to walking, and walking in sand isn't the same as walking on pavements. Wayne was stronger physically, but it was his nerve that I was afraid of. There was a light in his eyes that I didn't like. The girl was walking because she wanted to make good. The young man was walking because fear was spurring him on.

The sun was casting shadows from the big sand dunes. I dropped the outfit down into a little gully between the sand hills, where purple shadows broke the glare of the light.

"We camp here to-night," I said. "If you'll show me the map, I think I can take you to the place you want to go to-morrow."

"Map?" said Lois Beachley.

"Yeah," I told her. "Don't think I'm a fool."

She hesitated a minute, then took out the map. It had been drawn in pencil. I looked at it and didn't say anything.

"How about water, for washing and drinking and washing dishes and all that?" asked Ted Wayne.

"Plenty of water for drinking, if you drink desert style. You can have a cupful to moisten a rag with, if you want to scrub off. Dishes won't get washed because they won't need it. We will scour 'em out with sand, give 'em a dry cleaning. Anyway, there won't be many dishes."

Wayne looked at me, and I could see the panic in his eyes. Lois dropped down into the sand, scooped out a little hollow and relaxed. I could see that her knees were pretty weak. I unsaddled the burros and looked around for firewood.

Firewood is a problem in those sand hills, though there are some places where sagebrush grows on stilts. Sounds funny, but that's exactly what it does. It begins to grow like ordinary sage. Then the wind comes along and blows the sand away from the roots. The sage pushes the roots down deeper into the sand, and the wind blows away some more sand. It gets to be a race between the sagebrush and the wind; the old struggle between life and death that characterizes the desert life everywhere you find it, whether it's human, animal or plant.

I got a little fire going. It wasn't over eight inches in diameter, for we had to be careful of fuel there in the desert. We had supper that was perhaps less than they expected; but I knew it would keep their strength up. Most people eat too much anyway and their bodies can't handle the poisons that are generated from the waste. But I can tell you when they're camping with me in the desert they don't eat too much.

The sun went down and the stars came out and silence gripped the desert. The girl dropped off to sleep. Ted Wayne tried to keep talking. It's a way they have in the desert. When they make noises with their mouths they feel they're entities. When they keep quiet and the silence grips them, they can feel their souls shrivelling.

After a while sheer fatigue had its way. I got Wayne to lie on his blanket and talk. He got his words twisted, the talk got

thick, and then quit altogether. He snored.

Damn him! He couldn't keep quiet even when he slept.

About midnight, just as the moon was getting pretty well down, the desert itself began to talk. The wind hissed the sand along, and the sand gave forth whispers. The desert always talks when the wind blows and the sand starts to drift along. Sometimes it's just the sand rustling against the dry leaves of sage or the stalks of cacti. But out in the land of the drifting sand hills, it's the sound of sand slithering along on sand, a hissing whisper that almost seems to make words and sentences.

Men that have lived long in the desert absorb its personality. They get gray of eye and their voices get that whispering undertone in them. Such men will swear to you that those sand whispers mean something. They'll tell stories of hearing the sand say things they can understand, just when they're dropping off to sleep.

I lay in my blanket and listeened to the sand whispers as the moon slid down. I like to hear the soft sound of slithering sand rustling along on sand; a dry, hissing whisper that's only heard in the desert.

I knew Wayne was awake because I could hear him move, and he'd quit snoring. Then I thought I heard a distant voice. It wasn't a whisper. It sounded human. And there seemed to be steps sounding through the noises made by the sand.

I sat up. I'm not overly given to imagination, and I certainly thought I'd heard steps.

I rolled out of the blankets, pulled on my boots, and started slipping along the little ravine between the two big sand hills where I'd made camp. Then I got a hundred yards from camp, I climbed up on top of the ridge. The desert stretched out, silent and desolate. The sand hills were like the waves on some great white ocean, lashed mountain high, and then suddenly frozen. The moon was just angling down the edge of the Panamints.

I thought I saw specks off to the southwest, specks that moved, black things that were just moving into the black rim of the surrounding night. Then the moon dropped out of sight, and that gripped everything. I sat there was a hushed blackness and listened, and the night got darker and darker. Then I heard steps again.

This time there could be no mistake. They were running steps, and they were close. They crunched in the sand, floundered down hills, toiled up hills, swung to the left, circled, came toward me.

I crouched. I could hear the running body, the thudding crunch of the feet, even catch the panting intake of the laboring breath. Then a shape loomed up against the glow of the sky.

"Ted Wayne," I said, "come here."

He gave a mighty bound. A wild deer couldn't have been more startled, nor given a quicker reaction to fear.

Then he stopped, quivering, gasping.

"Come on over here," I repeated, keeping my voice perfectly normal, not showing that I felt there was anything at all unusual about a man running around in the desert. "I'm afraid our outfit's been stolen."

The words brought him to me, panting, shivering; but the full significance of those last words, about the outfit having been taken, did not register.

"I couldn't sleep," he said.

"Sit down," I told him.

He sat down

"Now just why," I asked him, "should any one want to follow us and steal our outfit?"

He didn't answer that question. He sat there panting and quivering, like a horse that's just begun to run a race and has then been pulled out of it.

He didn't answer me, and I didn't say anything more. He got his breath. The desert got blacker and blacker until only the very faintest tinge of gray marked the outlines of the sand hills, which were now illuminated only by the light of the stars. Then he burst out into speech, and his words were the words of panic.

"It's got me! I'm a coward—I'm a failure! Lois sees that I'm a coward, and she's scornful. I can't help it. It's too big. It's too God-awful empty. The silence, the big spaces, the cruelty of it! Then, when the wind comes, the sand starts to mock me. It whispers threats to me, makes me feel that it's lying in wait for me!"

He stopped his mad torrent of words, choked back a sob, and flung himself erect, poised, ready to start running again, seized by that blind panic which grips men when they find their entities slipping from their grasp, being absorbed in the Infinite.

I began to talk to him, to make soothing sounds, not caring particularly what I said, but knowing that the mere sound of my voice would hold him, just as a trainer talks to a highly strung race horse.

"Did you ever hear of the law of drifting sand?" I asked him. "The noises you heard when the wind blew were the noises of the marching sand hills. They keep moving—at the rate of half a

mile a year. It's all been figured out.

"The railroads wanted to run through the desert, and the drifting sand worried them. They got a young engineer who loved the desert, a man who had something of the Arab temperament in his nature. His name was Randall, and he didn't know what failure or fear meant.—They sent him into the desert to stay until he found out how to conquer the drifting sand. He lived among the sand hills, and he developed the greatest gift the desert can give to any man, the gift of patience. He lived with the sand, and he worked out a law, the law of drifting sand.

"He found that the hills were whisked about by the wind, that they drifted half a mile a year, until they piled up to a certain height. After they reached that height they didn't drift any more. They absorbed the other drifting sand hills that were pushed up against them. And from the data he got while he lived in the desert, he found the law of the drifting sand; that the big ones don't move. It's only the little ones who drift. That law, which he discovered has been the basis of road construction in the desert.

"Now you ought to sit down and take stock of yourself. You've never done it before. You've been drifting through life, making motions because everybody else around you was making the same sort of motions. When you get out in the desert and find that there aren't a lot of people all around you who are doing the same things you are, you get frightened.—But always remember that the desert is the best mother a man ever had. Remember that she's cruel, and that cruelty is the essence of kindness. It's the law of nature that only the fittest survive.

"Man gets to be the fittest by fighting. That's what the desert does to you. It makes you fight for existence. That's why she's so kind. You stay here, and quit trying to avoid the desert. Get right down on the surface of the desert and talk to it. Remember what I said to you about cruelty being kindness, and remember that it's only the little ones who drift around with every passing wind."

I got up and walked away. It was a cruel thing to do, all right, but I was practicing a little of what I preached. It is true that the desert is kind just because it's cruel, and I was handling him the same way the desert would. I knew that we were up against something, that it was going to be a hard fight if we were going to win out. Some one had been following us, keeping us spotted, and that some one

had swooped down and lifted our stock. That was serious. It was certain to mean suffering, and it might mean death. I owed it to the girl and I owed it to myself not to complicate things any by having a desert-frightened tenderfoot running around in circles, screaming with fear. That's what the desert will do to a tenderfoot such as this one, if he tries to get away from it. It's only human nature for a man to react that way. When he becomes afraid of something, he wants to get away from that something. When he starts to get away, he wants to run. When he starts to run from the desert and finds that it's all around him, he goes clean batty.

I walked back to camp. By that time the girl was sitting up. I could see her form blotched against the slithering sand.

"What is it?" she asked in a low voice.

I sat down beside her. "I don't know," I said.

"Because there's so much about you that I don't know."

"Yes?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "When I met up with you, I figured that your business was your business, and mine was mine. You could mind yours and I'd attend to mine. I didn't ask you how come you happened to be running around the desert with a young man. I didn't ask whether you were engaged, or brother and sister, or husband and wife. I didn't even ask what you were doing here.

"When you pulled that story on me about the homestead, I didn't ask any questions, although I wanted to make certain it was a mine you were looking for, because there wouldn't have been any use going on if it had been a homestead. No one could live in this country; it would be impossible to raise enough to feed a hungry grasshopper.

"But now things are different. Some one's snooped around here and nosed us out and swiped my burros. Maybe I can trail 'em in the morning when it gets light. Maybe I can't. I've got a six-gun, and that's all. Maybe I'm running up against rifles.—Furthermore, we've got precious little water here in camp, and we don't stand a very good chance of walking out to where there's water. If we make it, it'll be because we travel light and go without food. We can't carry any weight and make it.

"I've got to reach a decision. If we're going back for water, we should start right away and take advantage of the cool night. If we're going to try and get our stock, I want to swing out to a spot where they won't be looking for me, and I'll have to do it before daybreak."

I said that much and then I

quit talking. The silence of the desert weighted down the darkness, made it seem like a black velvet blanket.

She sighed, "You wouldn't be helped any by what I know. It's nothing that concerns the present situation."

"No?" I said, and my tone was sarcastic.

"No," she said.

I kept still for a time, and the desert, too, was still.

That silence started things. The girl drew in her breath as though she was going to start talking, then waited a minute, then made another start. At last she got out the words.

"I'll tell you the whole truth," she said. "I think I can trust you, and I don't usually make a mistake in judging men. I'm a stenographer. I worked in a big office. I knew a man named Bloom —Harry Bloom. He was a friend of my father's."

I straightened up. "Huh?" I said.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. Go on."

She went on, talking in a level monotone, her knees crossed, her hands holding them with interlocked fingers. She seemed to take to the desert, to be a part of it.

"Harry Bloom wrote to me and asked me to finance him on a trip. He called it 'grubstaking' him. He didn't need much money, and he seemed sort of hopeless, inclined to quit. I had a little money, and I sent it to him. —Then I got a letter from him, —a long while later. That letter had been carried around by some man who wasn't very clean. The envelope was all grimed with dirt and smeared up with smudges from the penciled address. In it he said that he'd struck it rich, that he'd started back with a whole burroload of gold, and that his heart had commenced to go bad on him. He'd fainted twice, and he was afraid he'd die in the desert, and that some one would find his body and the gold, and that I'd never get my share.

"So he'd buried the gold, and had written me the letter to tell me about it. He was going to leave that letter near a cross-trail which he was coming to, and he knew that some teamster or prospector would come along within a day or two and pick it up.

"But in that letter he didn't dare to tell me the secret of where he'd buried the gold, for fear some person might open it. He said he'd communicate with me again and let me know where the gold was buried. He said the second letter would just be a brief line that wouldn't mean anything to anybody else if they should open it. It'd take

the two letters put together to make sense.

"Of course I was all excited when I got that letter, and I could hardly wait. I figured there wasn't much chance he'd die from his heart, not if he took it easy. I waited, expecting to get a wire from him when he reached a town. Then I got another letter. This time it was in a cleaner envelope, and it looked as though it had been purchased in a store, then dropped in a post office without having been carried around any.

"That letter just had a scrawl which read: 'Here it is.' That was all the letter said; but there was a map in it, and this is the map."

She took out the map that she'd shown me before, the one that had been scrawled in pencil.

I struck a match and studied the map by the light of that match, and when it burnt down lit another one. The more I saw of the map the funnier it looked.

"I don't know any canyons that look like those," I said, "and I don't like the way they drain. They don't look natural. That right-angled turn in the canyon where the mine's supposed to be or where the gold's supposed to be buried, doesn't mean a thing, except a double-cross . . ."

I broke off and looked over toward her. Her face was startled, the eyes wide. Then the match went out.

"Do you know a good looking fellow who's built for dancing?" I asked suddenly. "He's a man who has a deep, thrilling voice, a well-shaped mouth, and on his forehead a scar shaped like a star. Maybe he got it when he was pitched through a windshield."

She gasped. "Why that description fits Fred Trask!" she said.

"I thought it would," I told her, "and I take it that Fred Trask works in the same office you do, and that your mail came to the office. Maybe Fred had been trying to make love to you, and was jealous?"

She was leaning forward now, and I could hear the quick breathing as she stared into the darkness, trying to see my face. "Yes," she said. And then, after a moment, "Why?"

I laughed. "Because," I told her, "Fred Trask was jealous. He saw how excited you got when you received that grimed-up letter in a man's handwriting, and he decided that he'd see who the letter was from. You probably put the letter in your purse, and Fred had a chance to steal a look at the purse.

"Knowing what to expect, he watched your mail; and when the second letter came, he simply kept it from you. He got it first and kept it."

She spoke slowly. "But I received the second letter. That was how I got the map."

"No," I explained, "that second letter was pocketed by Trask. He knew you'd be expecting a second letter, and so he doped up this letter with the phony map. That lulled your suspicions. Then, I presume, you heard of Bloom's murder."

"Yes," she admitted. "I read of it in the papers.—And Ted Wayne had been a very good friend of mine. He liked me, and I liked him. He wouldn't listen to my coming out here alone. He had the car, and he said he was going to drive me and see that nothing happened to me.—Fred Trask laid off from work because he was sick. How did you know that I knew him, or that he'd mixed into this thing?"

"Because of certain information," I told her, "for which I paid thirty-five dollars. And now it looks as though the investment had been increased slightly."

I stopped talking. For a few minutes we both kept silence. Then I heard four shots, muffled by the distance—*powieee, powieee, powicce, powieee!*

She jumped to her feet. "Shots!" she said.

"Yes," I told her. "Four shots—one for each burro. My thirty-five dollar investment has been increased by the price of four burros." I went over to my bed and buckled on my six gun.

A quavering voice sounded from the darkness. A moment afterward there came another call, louder, stronger. I answered with a "Hulloa!"

"Who is it?—Ted?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Do you like him as much as you did?"

I could see the outline of her shoulders against the gray background of fine sand as she shrugged.

"I don't like cowards!" she said.

"Sometimes people get branded as cowards when they're only sensitive," I said. "I've seen people like that before. Some of them are just so sensitive that some sudden new experience jars them. It isn't that they're afraid. It's just that their systems are more highly strung."

She turned away and didn't answer.

Ted Wayne called again, this time closer. I answered again. I could hear his feet then, and a minute later he showed up against the blank gray of the sand.

"I heard shots," he said.

"Yes," I told him. "Somebody was celebrating the Fourth of July. Sit down and take a load off your feet, I'm going out to explore. You can't come with me, because you'd get lost."

He didn't sit down. "Why

can't I come, and what's it all about?"

"You're entitled to know," I said. "You're probably going to be shot in order to keep your lips from giving damaging testimony. Or else you're going to be left out in the desert to die of thirst.—You may as well know what it's all about." Then I told them the whole story.

Neither one of them interrupted me. I told them all about meeting the man with the scarred forehead, the attempts to buy the chunk of conglomerate from Jose Diaz, the gambler; and the finding of the disk of gold concealed inside that chunk of rock.

"So you think that disk of gold held the key to the location of the buried gold?" asked Lois Beachley, when I finished.

"Yes," I said.

"And you think that Fred Trask stole our burros?" Ted Wayne wanted to know.

"Not exactly," I said, "but Fred Trask is behind it, and he's taken the other two into his confidence. They're Sam Pitch and Dick Rose, who stole the burros. They've been sitting up here on some of these points, looking through glasses at us. They saw us make camp, knew just where to come to make their raid. Now they've left us in the desert, where we can't carry any grub or blankets. We'll have to fight for life."

"Then," said Lois, "we'd better start going for water right away, and let the mine go."

"That's the wise thing," I told her. "Only I think I'd better go and look the ground over first."

"You're the doctor," she said. "But I thought you yourself said that if we were going to have to go for water it'd be better to start while it was cool."

"I've sort of changed my mind," I said.

She sighed. "Go ahead then, and look around."

"I want to go, too," said Ted Wayne.

His voice was quiet, controlled, seemed to have something of power in it.

"Yes," I said. "I've changed my mind on that, too. I want you to come."

The girl pulled her blanket over her shoulders. "Well, I'll be here when you get back. Don't take chances."

We started out, climbing over the sand hills.

Ted Wayne tugged at my sleeve. "Thanks for what you said about the desert," he said. "I was all worked up, nervous—frightened, I guess. Then I sat down in the silence, and I thought over what you said. All of a sudden things seemed to change. It was just like being turned around, and then sudden-

ly seeing something that puts you straight on your directions. Everything seemed to whirl for a minute, and the desert didn't seem to be anything to be afraid of any longer."

"Attaboy!" I encouraged him.

He was going to need all his nerve before we got out of there.

"Wait a minute!" he went in. "I want to tell you. I know what you're holding back."

I stopped in my tracks. "You know what?"

"What you're holding back. There was a murder done, remember. Harry Bloom didn't die from his heart. He was shot because somebody thought he had the gold with him. It was probably one of those two men who are guiding Fred Trask. They don't want us to testify after-leaving the desert, they'll see that we die some other way. That's why you're trying to go to them instead of trying to get to water."

I saw that he knew so much that I let him have the real truth.

"You're only partly right, Ted," I told him. "If we weren't interfering with those men, they'd have let us alone. Now that map the girl has was forged before Fred Trask got the gold disk and knew where he wanted to search. It was drawn by a desert man, so Trask probably had Sam Pitch in with him all the time, after he got that first letter.

"They steered you folks out to these drifting sand hills so they could get you on a false trail, out of the way. Then they got that gold disk, and we find that they've gone into the desert, that we're crowding right on their trail. We make a camp, and they come along and run off our burros, shoot them, and try to stampede us. What's the reason?

"The reason is," I went on, not waiting for an answer, "that we're camped right near the locality they want to search. If we don't start moving, they'll try to attack. If we do, they may kill us or they may not.—Now, I figure they're coming in to camp here in order to see what's happened. I'm going to sort of look around. I want you to go and get Lois and take her out some place where you can sit tight until you hear from me. There's no use alarming her.—Will you do that?"

"Can I do more good doing that than helping you?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

He gripped my hand.

"Then that's what I'll do. Good-by, until I see you again."

'So long," I said.

I listened to him trudge back. Then I sneaked along behind him. He didn't know that I was

anywhere around. I followed him in to the camp, hid behind the ridge of a sand hill while he talked with the girl, heard them move away.

After that I began to do something that was difficult and a little dangerous. I began to bury myself in the sand, just as kids do at the beach. Only this time, I was worming my way into the slope of a dry sand hill, with sand pouring down over me evtry time I made a move.

I not only wanted to get in out of sight, but I wanted to leave the slope of the sand hill so that it wouldn't show that it had been disturbed. The sand was dry and fine. It ran like water. I worked my way back into the side of the hill, cascading sand down on my body until only my arms were free. I had my six-gun in my right hand, and I worked with my left.

By the time I finished, I was fairly well concealed, but I couldn't make any sudden moves, except with my right hand and the six-gun.

I waited. The sky became gray in the east, and the silhouettes of the mountains stood out against the flare of color that followed the gray. The desert was whispering again, the wind whipping the sand, wiping out trails, smoothing over the tracks that I'd left when I wormed my way into the sand. It was a break for me—but the desert always gives me the breaks.

The light became stronger. Then I could feel little jarring noises that thudded along through the sand. They seemed to come as impulses along my spine before they reached my ears as sound. They were footsteps. I got ready.

I'd holed in where I could see the camp. It looked pitifully meager, the saddles and blankets, the few dishes and the little sacks of provisions.

Then a man walked down the little wind ravine between the sand hills.

"I told you I saw 'em walking away. Caught a glimpse of 'em against the sky."

It was Dick Rose who spoke.

"Well, they'll start for water—and they won't make it."

That would be Sam Pitch.

There was a laugh, and I knew who would give that scornful, sneering, reverberant laugh. It would be Fred Trask.

"What gets me," said Rose, "is that they had to make their camp right where we figured the gold had been cached. It ain't a hundred yards from here—not the way I dope it out."

"Well, it ain't luck," said Pitch. "That damned Zane has some way of getting what he wants in the desert. They say the sand whispers secrets to him, and tells him what to do. I've about

come to the conclusion that that's about what happens."

Dick Rose rasped out a single word. "B a l o n e y!" he said. "You're gettin' superstitious. Get these burros ready to pack up that camp equipment. No use leaving it here. Somebody might stumble on it and ask embarrassing questions."

I could see the string of burros now, plodding along not far behind, on the end of a lead rope. I drew in my breath, ready to play my final card. But I wanted a little more information first, if I could get it before that fateful command of "hands up" would start the action.

However, I didn't get the information—not directly—and I never shouted the command. There was a whirling cloud of sand, then a black figure plunged down over the crest of one of the sand hills. Ted Wayne had found a stick of wood and a stone, and he'd tied the stone to the end of the wood, Indian fashion, making a very effective war club.

The sudden attack, the very unexpectedness of it, carried his first objective. F r e d Trask yelled, leapt to one side, and the rock crashed a blow on his forehead.

He went down like a sack of sugar being dumped on the scales.

Ted charged, swung his club. A revolver roared. Then they were too close for shooting. It was a case of clubbed guns against stone war club, of man against man. Nor could I shoot. The three were mixed in a whirling gyration of flying arms and legs, of faces that were distorted with effort.

It was Sam Pitch who got him pinioned, but the kid had inflicted a lot of damage in the meantime. There were some casualties on the other side, too.

Dick Rose raised his revolver. "You damned whelp!" he observed.

Ted Wayne stood there smiling. I heard the girl scream. She had been watching it all over the crest of the sand hill.

Dick Rose snapped a command to his lieutenant. "Grab that girl," he said, "as soon as I kill this swine. Bob Zane's around here somewhere. Get to one side, so the bullet doesn't go through and hit you . . ."

Then I spoke, keeping my tone low, so it would be the more difficult to locate me.

"Drop that gun, or you're a dead man!"

He hesitated, pursed his lips, whirled. "Drop it!" I snapped.

But he had located me, perhaps because of some flicker of sunlight on the barrel of the gun which I held. Perhaps it was just the sound of my voice.

He fired, and the bullet

thunked in the sand within a matter of inches from where my head was held imprisoned by the burden of the sand.

He fired again and ducked to one side for shelter. Matters had gone far enough. I squeezed the trigger of my gun—I heard the bullet strike, saw Dick Rose spin to one side, stagger, slump to his knees. For a moment his graying face, twisted with hatred, stared at me. He tried to raise the gun for a third shot, and failed. He pitched forward, on his face.

Sam Pitch flung Ted Wayne to one side, took a snap shot at me, then swung his gun toward the lad. I fired. The bullet clipped Pitch on the shoulder. I was ready to fire again, when Ted Wayne swung his club. The stone hit Pitch a glancing blow on the ribs, knocking the wind out of him.

The next moment Ted was on him like a tiger. He flung the war club to one side, using his fists.

I floundered out from the sand slope, and it was slow work, for the sand held me like silken—bonds.

Ted was sitting astride of Sam Pitch when I reached him. The girl was laughing and crying all at once. I took some rope from the pack saddle and tied up Pitch. Then I went over to Fred Trask and tied him up. There wasn't any need to tie up Dick Rose.

I went back to Trask, searched his pockets, found what I wanted. Sam Pitch stared with sullen eyes while I studied what I had found. It was a map, a map made from a button of hammered gold. The surface had been carved into a relief map, and there were three bearings scratched on it, with the point of intersection marked.

That point of intersection was in the slope of a sand hill, one of the big ones that wouldn't move.

I looked down at Sam Pitch. "You'll hang for the murder of Harry Bloom," I said.

His lips twisted. "I didn't kill him. It was Dick Rose who did that. He was on the trail of the gold that Bloom was supposed to have had. Then he found he'd been tricked out of it.—Along comes this boob, to play into our hands. We were going to get the gold, and then kill the boob."

I nodded. It had happened just the way I had figured the play.

I looked at Ted Wayne. He had a cut on the side of his head. His lips were puffed out, and one eye was swelling shut. But there was something proud and self-reliant in his bearing.

"You were going to keep the girl safe," I told him.

He stared at me, unflinchingly. "We knew you were coming back to face danger. We knew they didn't intend to let any of us get away. So we decided to come back and see it through with you, shoulder to shoulder."

I sighed. "You had the breaks. You should have done what I told you to do. If those crooks had used any sense, and deployed, you'd have been shot down like a jackrabbit."

He grinned. "Anyway, we got away with it! And I guess, from the looks of your face when you inspected that g o l d button, we're as good as sitting on the gold right now!"

I looked at him. He was grinning, battle scarred, a n d I thought of the change that had come over him. The desert had adopted him, and the law of drifting sand had impressed itself upon him. The big ones stay put. Only the little ones are whisked this way and that by the changing winds of adversity.

My eyes drifted to the girl. I saw that she, too, was cognizant of the change that had taken place in her companion. Her lips made no sound. They didn't need to. The story was in her eyes.

I knew that the desert had done its work well. When you burn off the veneer of convention in the tempering fires of the desert you find what's underneath. When t h a t engineer named Randall discovered the law of drifting sand for the railroad companies he discovered a law that relates to other things than sand hills. It's a law that applies to character as well as to sand. Little characters are whipped about by winds of adversity. The big ones stay firm.

BRITISH POLICEMEN GET PAY RISE

Eighty thousand policemen in England won a six percent pay increase just as we were going to press. While the decision meant Government will have to pay a total of Twelve and a Half Million Dollars a year more in salaries, it is a shade less impressive when translated into what it will mean to the average policeman who will now be paid roughly twelve shillings more per week (ie., One Dollar and Sixty-Eight cents). A rookie policemen will now get (in our currency) One Thousand Seven Hundred and Eighty Dollars a year, an increase of a Hundred and Ten Dollars. Without being promoted, he can get as much as Two Thousand Eight Hundred and Seventy-Eight Dollars. Higher ranks were to receive comparable increases in salary.

the third volley

by George Fielding Eliot

Marvin Griscom stood beside the open grave, lined up with the other aging members of Valley City Post's renowned Honor Guard. They had come there to do honor to a departed comrade, as they had done often through these past few years.

All but Marvin Griscom. Marvin Griscom had come there to do murder.

In a few minutes, he knew, the minister would drone to the end of the service. Then old Jubal Tarrant, captain of the Honor Guard, would take over. His cracked voice would give the order: "Fire three volleys. With blank cartridge – load! Aim! Squad – fire!"

But on the third volley it would not be a blank cartridge which Marvin Griscom would slip into the chamber of the Springfield rifle he held. Nor was that rifle the one which was registered against Marvin Griscom's name on the records of the Post. The number of the rifle in his hand would be found opposite the name of his cousin Egbert Logan.

George Fielding Eliot, the distinguished military analyst and historian, is the author of several works including VICTORY WITHOUT WAR (U. S. Naval Institute, 1961). He will be remembered by readers of this magazine for his THE WATCHERS AT THE GATES (SMM, July 1962) and the earlier HARBOR OF HATE (SMM, Sept. 1962).

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It had been easy enough to pick up Bert Logan's rifle instead of his own as they left the funeral parlor after paying their last respects. Bert hadn't noticed. Not sloppy Bert. Griscom stole a side-wise glance at his cousin, standing next to him in the line. His lip curled with faint disdain as he took note of the wrinkled uniform, the grease-spots, the untrimmed hair—and the tears that were creeping down the plump cheeks. Sloppy inside and out, that was Bert Logan. A disgrace to the Honor Guard, as Jubal Tarrant had said often enough. The last man on earth to take note of small details: such as having the wrong rifle in his hand.

Well, when the smart young deputy down at the Sheriff's office got through matching the bullet that they'd pick out of the wall behind great uncle Daniel against test bullets fired from each of the eight rifles of the Honor Guard, Egbert Logan would be on his way to the gallows and Marvin Griscom could relax and enjoy the fruits of his well-laid plan. About half-a-million dollars' worth.

Griscom looked across the road and up the hill a piece to where his great uncle Daniel sat on the porch of the house that faced the church-yard. He'd sat right there in his wheel-chair pretty near every daylight hour these past two years, since paralysis had taken away the use of his legs. His mop of white hair, defiant in the sunshine above the cocoon of quilts which swathed his body, would make an excellent aiming point. Dead center and about three inches below the hair-line.

It had been a chance remark of Doc Carradine's which had first given Griscom the idea. When it was known that Uncle Dan's only son Henry was sinking fast, somebody'd asked Doc whether the old man could come to the funeral, and Doc had said, "No, he'll just have to watch from the porch. I won't risk trying to move him even that far. After all, he's ninety-one years old." Instantly there had flashed into Griscom's desperate mind the thought of standing where he stood now, only two hundred yards from that porch, with a rifle in his hand—and the rest had just been a matter of working out the details.

The routine prescribed by Jubal Tarrant was that each round be loaded separately, at the command "Load," for each of the three volleys. Nothing simpler than to load a ball cartridge instead of a blank for the third round. Even with a snap shot, fired at the word of command without much of a chance for careful aiming and trigger squeezing, Marvin Griscom knew he couldn't miss at that range.

Up on the porch, Mamie Myron, the practical nurse, sitting there now in her rocking chair, would hear the the slap of the bullet as it drove its way through great-uncle Daniel's skull. She'd see the old man collapse in his chair —maybe fall out of it. Griscom had known Mamie Myron all his life. He had no doubt of her reaction. She'd scream and she'd keep on screaming—and all these fools in the churchyard would hear her and go rushing across the road and up the hillside to see what was wrong. Egbert Logan would be in the forefront of that rush—excitable as always, he'd just drop Griscom's rifle and run as hard as he could, thinking only of getting to his uncle's side as quickly as possible. Of course Marvin Griscom meant to run too—taking care to drop Logan's rifle a few feet farther along, just about where Logan might have dropped it. Nobody'd have eyes just then for such small details.

After which all Griscom would have to do would be to wait until that scientific young squirt of a deputy proved whose rifle had fired the fatal bullet. The white gloves that were part of the Honor Guard's uniform would take care of the finger-print angle. Egbert Logan would stand condemned by the best of all evidence: the evidence of science. To back it up, there'd be found in the chamber of Logan's rifle a shell from a ball cartridge – quite different from the crimped-end shell of a blank.

Folks'd shake their silly heads and say they'd never have thought such a thing of Bert Logan—"Never can tell what's in a man's mind, though. Such a nice easy-going kind-seeming fellow: but" – and then they'd start remembering how Bert Logan never has a cent, always in debt, always being pestered by creditors, house plastered with two mortgages, scared to ask grim old Daniel for help. "Guess he just got so he couldn't wait and thought maybe this shooting'd be taken for an accident—rattle-brained to the end. Sloppy Bert." The judge might let him off with a life sentence, of course. But the law—the good sound law —provides that a murderer can't profit by his crime. So great-uncle Daniel's half-million wouldn't come to Egbert Logan after all, as the old man meant it should after Henry's death. It would pass to the next of kin, Marvin Griscom, to whom great-uncle Daniel wouldn't knowingly have left a plugged nickel.

Nobody'd ever find out how much more desperate Marvin Griscom was for money right now than Bert Logan had ever been. With his new prospects, he could borrow enough to cover up the forty thousand dollar

shortage on the books of the Valley City Building and Loan Association, of which he was treasurer and of which the dead Henry had been president. Henry's death meant an audit. But Henry's death opened the way for Marvin Griscom to cover his tracks so as to baffle the keenest sleuth-hound the State Auditor could produce – the only way they *could* be covered – with cash.

The drone of the minister's voice, which had formed the background to Griscom's thoughts, suddenly stopped. Griscom's attention came back instantly to the task in hand. Now the minister was speaking again:

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the Communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you and remain with you always."

The solemn words of benediction went out over the bowed heads of the crowd. Griscom's head was bowed with the others.

"Amen."

There was a pause, a silence that seemed to stretch to the borders of eternity. Swiftly once more Griscom reviewed the details to which he had given so much careful attention. There was still time to—No! He had thought of everything. He had overlooked no single possibility, however small. Nothing could go wrong.

"Firing party! atten-shun."

Jubal Tarrant's voice, cracked by age but sharp with the remembered snap of command.

"Fire three volleys. Load."

Up jumped Egbert Logan's Springfield in Griscom's hands. From the little cartridge box attached to his white belt he took a blank cartridge, saw the bolt drive it home into the chamber.

"Aim."

Eight rifles were lifted to eight shoulders, pointing skyward. Forty-five degrees, said the drill regulations: but old bones, flabby muscles no longer were capable of the precision required of youthful recruits. The alignment of the eight barrels would not have made any sergeant very happy. That, too, Griscom had counted on. By the third volley the alignment would be even worse. The slight shift of one rifle, necessary to aim directly at that white-crowned target, would neither be remarked nor remembered.

"Squad—fire!"

The eight blank cartridges crackled raggedly as eight fingers tightened on eight triggers. Griscom's rifle came down with the others; his bolt clattered as he reloaded with another blank.

"Aim. Squad—fire!"

Once more the ragged volley. The smell of burnt powder was

in Griscom's nostrils as he took the third cartridge from his box —the cartridge from which the deadly pointed end of a bullet protruded. Hidden by his hand, he slipped it into the receiver of the Springfield, closed the bolt upon it.

"Aim!"

The two afternoons of practise with his .22 out in the woods behind Womack's corners stood Griscom in good stead now. His finger was already taking up the slack of the trigger as the rifle came to his shoulder. Deftly he brought the tip of the front sight into the notch of the open rear sight: above that tip he could see the white hair of his great-uncle Daniel, clear and plain.

He gripped the rifle hard, holding it firm against his shoulder, braced to absorb the shock of the recoil. He hadn't forgotten even that small detail — a loaded round, of course, kicks a lot harder than a blank.

"Fire!"

He felt the trigger come free of the sear at just the right instant—he hadn't had to pull the shot—in fact he could call it. Bull's eye.

He saw the white mane of hair jerk back, then slide slowly downward.

An instant later a woman's scream, high and shrill and edged with horror, r i p p e d through the last echoes of that last volley. . . . .

The eight men of the Honor Guard, still in their gaudy uniforms, stood in the back room of the Sheriff's office. Seven of them were looking at Egbert Logan, who stared with unbelieving eyes at the brass cartridge which lay, a little apart from seven others, in the center of the table.

"That's a ball-cartridge shell, Bert," said Sheriff Lane, grimly. "It was in your rifle. All the others had blank-cartridge shells in 'em. Looks bad, Bert. For you. I just can't believe it."

"We can make sure when I get through running ballistic tests on all these guns," put in the young deputy, Farris. He gestured toward the e i g h t Springfields, standing in a row against the office wall, each now tagged with the name of its owner according to the Post records. Every one of them had been picked up from the grass of the churchyard where excited hands had dropped them.

Marvin Griscom listened, inwardly amused. He said nothing.

Bert Logan was quivering with fight and bewilderment.

"But—but—I tell ya," he blubbered, "I never fired any ball cartridge! They were all blanks —I know, I remember putting 'em in my cartridge box. I ain't

even *got* a .30 caliber ball cartridge."

"Just the same, that shell was in your rifle, Bert," the Sheriff said, looking at Logan under his heavy grizzled eyebrows.

"If it was, I didn't shoot it! Somebody else must've had my gun!" squalled Logan desperately.

Griscom froze. What had given the fool that idea?

"In that case," said the sheriff, "you must have had somebody else's rifle in *your* hands, Bert. Any idea whose?"

"No. I—No, 'course I don't—I didn't notice—"

Logan clawed at his eyes with his gloved hands, as though that would help him think more clearly.

Slowly he lowered his hands from his face.

"Wait a minute," he said in a low strained voice. "Wait—what about finger prints? Won't they show on those shiny gun stocks?"

"Through gloves?" demanded Farris scornfully.

Egbert Logan shoved out his big right hand.

"Seems to me," he said, "there oughta be a print on the stock of the gun I was holdin'—from this."

Every eye in the room could see the ball of his right thumb showing pink and clear through the hole in the worn glove.

Sloppy Bert.

"On the grip," said the sheriff, "where you hold her to aim—Farris! Check those Springfields for thumb prints! If Bert's thumb print is on somebody else's gun, then whoever that gun belongs to's got some explainin'—"

Wild panic twisted Marvin Griscom's bowels. He might've made it out the door if Farris hadn't tripped him.

RENDEZVOUS AT A SWIMMING POOL

Several weeks ago a Paris detecitve, shadowing an OAS suspect, was intrigued to note that he seemed so often to go to the same swimming pool. The next time the suspect went there, he followed the man into the water where, as he swam slowly along, he saw him in conversation with another man.

The other man was a Surete departmental chief responsible for an OAS internment camp in the South from which there had been unusually many escapes.

Interrogation and house searches followed, leading to the arrest of the Surete official and his assistant, a Counter-Espionage Major, and six others. An arsenal of submachine-guns, revolvers, ammunition and explosives was found hidden in the homes of members of the group who were apparently interested in keeping an eye on extremist elements and on police actions. The network members used to get their orders and information while bathing at the swimming pool . . .

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riddle of the marble blade

by Stuart Palmer

In order to love her fellow man as she felt duty bound to do, Miss Hildegarde Withers found it advisable to avoid humanity en masse whenever possible. Had her inclinations led her otherwise, she might possibly have stood shoulder to shoulder with a thousand or so other Manhattanites in solemn conclave one bright October afternoon. In that case, one chapter in the history of criminology would have been considerably shorter.

But as it happened she spent most of that Saturday in her little West Side apartment with a stack of test papers before her. By the time she was dragged rudely back to the present century by the shrilling of her telephone, the fat was in the fire. "All hell is broke loose in Central Park!" was the way Inspector Oscar Piper put it. "You see, they were in the middle of unveiling some blasted statue or other . . . ."

Properly speaking, the unveiling was completely in the firm white hands of Miss Deirdre Bryan, daughter of the Commis-

Who can forget the scourge of Centre Street, at whose appearance strong men would blanch, and Inspector Piper would come close to swallowing his cigar! Hildegarde Withers, the schoolma'am-detective, was somewhat less than loved at Headquarters, but still Piper could admit, when she wasn't around, that she obviously could smell murder in the offing—as in this new story . . .

sioner of Parks. She had been given the historic name because of old Mike Bryan's desire to honor thus the most beautiful and unhappy queen who ever graced ancient Eire, but nobody ever called the young lady anything but "Dee".

At a few minutes before two o'clock that afternoon Miss Dee Bryan, looking better than her best for the benefit of the crowd and the massed newsreel cameras, was clutching the end of a rope. That rope, if properly and briskly tugged, would uncover from its drapes of flags and canvas the latest representation in stone of the Father of His Country. Now the statue loomed shapeless and muffled against the sky, and thus it must remain until the last band number had been played and the last speech orated.

The minutes dragged by for Dee Bryan. His Honor the Mayor, looking even more like an angry sparrow than usual, was working himself up toward a climax. He had already told the audience what George Washington would have thought of Tammany Hall, slum clearance, the widening of Broadway, and the fifteen cent fare being raised to twenty. Now he was in the midst of a panegyric on "The City Beautiful".

When he finished, if ever, Dee would go into action with the rope, while the band struck up "The Stars and Stripes Forever", and the Mayor shook hands with Dravid, the famous sculptor.

And then the mighty marble Washington, which the City of New York had commissioned for the sum of ten thousand dollars as part of its program of encouraging the fine arts, would stand in impassive magnificence above the as yet uncompleted hole which eventually was to be George Washington Uptown Swimming Pool Number Two.

Dee was only eighteen, but she had had considerable experience at public affairs. She sensed by the Mayor's delivery that he was approaching the end, at last. She tightened her grasp of the rope, and took a look out of the corner of her eye at the three newsreel cameras set up on the top of nearby sedans. The news director, a bored little man in a leather jacket, waved her to look up at the statue. She turned obediently, though God knows she had seen all the statues of George Washington that she wanted to . . . .

There was a sudden commotion behind her. The brisk young secretary from City Hall who was acting as master of ceremonies had caught her father by the arm and led him out of the cluster of aldermen. "Commissioner!" his voice came clearly to the wondering girl.

"There's been an upset. Dravid hasn't shown up! So you've got to stand beside the Mayor and let him shake hands with *you* instead!"

"Me?" Dee's father looked unhappy. It was bad enough dressing up in a cutaway and striped trousers. "But I had nothing to do with the damn statue", he protested. Then he pointed past Dee into the crowd. "That's Dravid's wife, the big handsome woman in white standing by the newsreel car. Why not let His Honor shake hands with her?"

"There isn't time to brief her!" hissed the master of ceremonies. He came over toward Dee. "Look, honey, you understand the switch? When His Honor shakes hands with your dad, haul on the rope!"

Dee nodded wearily. Her father shrugged his shoulders. "All right," said Commissioner Bryan. "But it's a shame that Dravid isn't here to take his own bows."

The Mayor was at last coming to his finale. ". . . . . to dedicate this statue of the Father of Our Country in the spirit of reverence, and to honor a true genius which has grown and flowered in our fair city, the great sculptor Manuel Dravid . . . . ."

He half-turned, with his hand out—and then caught the frantic signals of the secretary from City Hall. His Honor blinked, and managed a graceful about face. "Manuel Dravid, New York City's own, who is unfortunately unable to be with us today due to illness—" The Mayor was an old hand at ad-libbing, and his hand went to his breast pocket and brought forth a yellow sheet of paper. "—but who has telegraphed to ask that his great statue which is shortly to be displayed before you be accepted and understood as a true affirmation of his artistic faith! Ladies and gentlemen, in behalf of the people of this fair city, I accept the Dravid Washington!"

At this the band broke into a fervent Sousa march, and the Mayor took the hand of the Commissioner of Parks and shook it vigorously. In the meantime, Dee's blue eyes had fallen on something that struck her curiously. It was a man standing against the newsreel truck. He was fairly young, tall and had a beard. What she thought odd was that this man was gazing up at the statue with a weird, distorted look combining distress and fascination, as if hypnotized by a snake. Dee frowned; then the master of ceremonies murmured something to bring her attention back to the matter at hand, and as she turned to the rope she saw the bearded man fade into the throng.

The crowd held its breath as

she tugged at the rope. But nothing budged. She yanked it once more. Still no response. She felt her face grow hot, like that of a salesman demonstrating a gadget that fails at the crucial moment. A nearby councilman stepped forward and they joined forces with a heavy tug. The shroud fell.

Expecting nothing but the best the crowd burst into cheers, but these were short-lived and quickly melted into a horrified groan. It was not the Dravid Washington that caused the change of heart, for it lived fully up to its promise—a magnificent, dignified, gleaming white marble statue of the Father of His Country, twice as big as live, his arm stretched before him as though exhibiting the breadth and beauty of the nation.

But — doubled over the crook of his elbow was the limp body of a lean, sportily-clad man whose face bore the astonished expression of sudden death, and whose head was tilted at an unnatural angle. His neck displayed an ugly wound from which his blood had flooded over his wild white hair and down the marble of the statue. Dee felt her knees grow weak and thought she would surely pass out. She saw, through blurring eyes, the expressions of the newsreel men, expressions of pleased surprise that instead of just another ceremony their cameras had caught this once-in-a-lifetime moment of drama.

Dee's only thought was: "Am I going to faint? I *mustn't* faint in front of the cameras!"

Because the cameras were still rolling, she could hear them. And the expression on the faces of the newsreel men was one of pure and unalloyed delight. They'd come for just another speech and another statue—and got *this!* A news-break!

But it wasn't over. The Mayor, caught flat-footed and speechless for the first time in his life, was pointing up at the body. He barked, clearing his throat, and finally croaked—"But that—*that's* Dravid!"

And then, for a full minute, there was no sound that Dee could hear except the widow's horrible, hysterical laughter.

"So I thought you might possibly be interested, in a screwy murder like that," the Inspector finished.

"You mean, Oscar, that you're stuck with it and you want me to lend you a hand!" she told him. "But it's a fine time to get on the phone and tell me about it. The body was discovered a little after two, you say. It's five-thirty now."

"I know it," Piper admitted testily. "But there's no phone booths in the middle of Central

Park. And you have no idea what it's like to try to investigate a murder with His Honor right there and screaming for an arrest. The cops on the scene haven't much of anything to report, the precinct homicide boys are up a tree. I got there as soon as I could, and it was a madhouse. I haven't had a second to slip away and call you. But I'm on my way to have a look at Dravid's studio down in the Village, and I thought you might like to come along—"

"Wild horses couldn't keep me away!" she promised. "I'll be ready." True to her word, the angular schoolmarm was pacing restlessly up and down the sidewalk outside her apartment when the Inspector, for once traveling incognito in a taxicab, pulled up beside her.

"Jump in," he said, and started to give the driver a downtown address. But Miss Withers immediately vetoed the suggestion. "You can give me just five minutes at the scene of the crime," she snapped. "*You've* had all afternoon." The taxi obediently headed for Central Park West and the 72nd Street entrance.

There was still a good-sized crowd in the park, held back from the statue itself by a squadron of uniformed officers. George Washington had been shrouded with canvas again, but Piper stood on a box to lift the drape and show her the telltale brownish stain. The body had, of course, already been taken away for an autopsy.

"But he was killed with some sort of a stone hammer or arrow," the Inspector told her. "Part of it stuck out of the back of his neck. Been dead at least twelve hours, so that makes it sometime in the night, Doc Bloom says."

"Between twelve and one, I should say," Miss Withers murmured.

"What? Why do you think that?"

"Because the park is quite crowded until midnight. And I happen to know there was bright moonlight from about one o'clock on—except for that one cloudy hour, when it darkened and looked like rain and then the storm blew over. The murderer would hardly risk working except in the dark. Elementary, my dear Watson. By the way, Oscar, when was the statue actually set in place?"

"Yesterday, which was Friday," he told her. "Mr. Owen, Dravid's young assistant and a whole bunch of workmen hauled it up and got it set with a crane; the newspapers took a few photos and then Dravid was mailed his check. Today's unveiling was just the official splurge."

"I didn't know," Miss Withers. "Unveilings are not in my line. I suppose the sculptor was in a last-minute rush to finish the thing?"

"You suppose wrong." Piper laughed. "Why, the statue's been finished for weeks. It was only commissioned after a model of it was chosen from a dozen others in an open competition, you know."

"Hmm," observed the schoolteacher. "I just wonder why there are all these marble chips around the base, that's all. Unless the workmen had an accident setting it up." She gathered up a handful of shards. "For my fern rockery," she explained.

A stepladder leaning against a pile of scaffolding told how the body must have been lifted to its oddly macabre position in the arm of the massive statue. "Cases like this one are broken pretty easy," the Inspector was saying. "Contrary to usual ideas on the part of the public, the more unusual the crime and the weapon, the more easily it's solved. The whole problem comes down to one point—the *how* of the crime. Why was the guy killed with a piece of sharpened stone?"

"No doubt," agreed Miss Withers. She was thinking of something else, as usual. For most of her short career as an amateur sleuth she had been most successful when she set her course at right angles to the Inspector's reasoning. "Well, I see nothing more here. I'm ready to go with you to the Village."

The taxi swirled southward, with the incessant howling of newsboys at every corner. It was not often that the papers got hold of a hot story like this. "HIS HONOR FINDS CORPSE" was the way the tabloids handled it. "His Honor finds corpse and detectives find somebody to arrest or else a lot of guys find themselves in uniform and walking a beat out Staten Island way," Oscar Piper remarked. "Maybe even me."

"They say the suburbs are much more healthful," Miss Withers comforted him. And then they pulled down a narrow street beneath the Ninth Avenue El, in a noisy, dirty world of garages, rooming houses, and lofts. Finally they stopped before what appeared to be an ancient stable. In spite of the brass plaque outside which read: "Atelier Dravid" the schoolteacher looked dubious. But Piper dismissed the taxi.

An exceedingly seedy-looking member of the great unemployed, detached himself from a railing and shambled over toward the visitors. Miss Withers was already fishing in her purse for a dime, when the raggedy-man said: "Nobody come

in since I come on duty, Inspector," out of one corner of his mouth.

"Swell," said Piper. He led the way to the big double door and tried a key in the padlock. It worked. "The boys borrowed it from the stiff's pocket," he admitted. "I didn't feel like waiting for a court-order. Come on in, it's only illegal entry."

There were mingled smells of clay, rockdust, cooking and decay, at which Miss Withers wrinkled her sensitive nose. Piper closed the door behind them and cast his flash around the rudely-furnished hall. A stairway was on the left, and a locked door directly ahead of them, which yielded to another key. "Let's just see what's in here." Piper said, and they went down a long bare passage. The place still looked more like a barn or a warehouse than a dwelling or a studio, in spite of the signs of occasional human occupancy—overalls and rough work clothing hung on nails here and there. At the far end the corridor made an abrupt turn to the right, and opened through a doorway into what at first seemed to be a starless and skyless outdoors. From somewhere came a cool little wind . . . . . .

Piper cast his flash curiously around, and Miss Withers squealed. Looking down on her was the face of a black and evil giant, crouched as if to spring. A second glance told the schoolteacher that the Nubian monstrosity was only cut of basalt, doomed to crouch eternally.

All around them loomed the vast, rebellious, struggling creatures which spoke of the odd genius of Dravid, the sculptor. He worked in the living stone only—no casts from the clay for him.— A large proportion of the statues were in ghostly white marble, finished and ready for exhibition. Farther on were various projects, some of the smaller ones still little more than blocks of stone . . . . .

Walking softly, almost unwilling to speak aloud for fear of disturbing the massive, brooding figures, Miss Withers and the Inspector pushed farther and farther into the studio. Once the schoolteacher paused to admire a fanciful interpretation marked with a placard "The Fates"; it consisted of four crouching female figures completely hooded in marble folds of loose drapery. A moment later the Inspector, stepping back suddenly from too close a look at an unlovely figure of Judas Iscariot writhing beneath a thorn tree, lost his balance on a pile of rock chips and staggered into the outstretched arms of an over-sized, naked lady who seemed to leer back at him . . . .

"Pardon me—" he started to

say. Then he looked sidewise at Miss Withers, who was amused. In the full light of the flash, the opulent, Junoesque figure before them was almost a caricature of womanhood. The robe had just slipped to her ankles, and her face wore an expression right out of Mae West but without the saving grace of humor; her "Whyn'tcha come up and see me sometime?" had sleazy honky-tonk overtones. "Golly-whiz," whispered the Inspector. "Almost makes me glad I'm a bachelor!'

"Obviously no better than she should be," agreed Miss Withers, frowning. "Poor Dravid—he must have once known the wrong woman much too well!"

But they were not meant to spend the evening in admiration of the varied talents of a murdered genius. From somewhere in the upper regions of the hall sounded the shrill ringing of a telephone. "Who'd be calling here, now?" said Piper. "I'd like to answer that! Maybe if I hurry——"

"Don't you leave me here in the dark!" the schoolteacher cried, and took off after him, feeling a cold draft about her ankles. "Oscar! How in the world do you think you're going to locate a ringing phone in a strange place when you can't even find the light switch?" They ran past the Fates, past the Judas and the Black Giant, and then came out into the hallway again. There was a doorway which they hadn't noticed on their way in. And the door was opening, with a shaft of light coming through.

The Inspector almost dropped his flash, and Miss Withers—normally a person of considerable aplomb—gave out with her second scream of the evening. For coming toward them was the white marble woman, the opulent Juno. True, on second glance she seemed to be a little closer to actual life-size, and she was wearing a white negligee which partly concealed her voluptuous curves, but it was the same woman. Even though now she had red lips, and walked smoothly . . . .

Somehow she didn't seem at all surprised to see them. "I'm Gretchen Dravid," she said. "If you're the police detective, you're wanted on the phone."

Piper gurgled a bit. "But my man outside said you hadn't come home!"

She pointed past them. "Perhaps your spies don't know of the side entrance—it opens on the other street. I heard you come in the front door, and 'Im sure I don't mind your poking about. But I wish you'd have your telephone calls somewhere else, I've stood about all I can stand today."

Without a word, the Inspector followed her up the stairs and Miss Withers, not caring to be left alone, threw her dignity to the winds and scampered after them. "The phone's in here," said Gretchen Dravid, leading the way to a chaste and modernistic bedroom. She sprawled out on the king-sized bed, where she had evidently been comforting herself in her deep grief with smelling salts, a French novel, and a jug of red wine.

"She's the sort of woman who never *sits* down," Miss Withers said to herself. "The horizontal type . . . ."

"Lucky I left word at the office," the Inspector was saying. "Because this must be a matter of life and death." Gretchen had to show him the phone, which was found by lifting the skirts of a demure little doll. Piper looked somewhat abashed as he picked up the instrument.

"Hello, Piper speakin'." He listened for a minute or so, during which he said "My God!" twice, not irreverently. Then he put down the phone and stared at it.

"They've found the murderer!" Miss Withers hazarded.

He shook his head. "Wrong," he said. "It's Dee Bryan, the cute doll who unveiled the statue. She's been kidnapped!"

At which news, for no particular reason, the widow Dravid was hysterical all over again.

It was not until half an hour after the discovery of the corpse that Commissioner Bryan had been able to leave the blood-smeared statue in Central Park. Miss Deirdre Bryan had waited, in spite of his efforts to make her drive on home without him. "Tis a terrible thing for a girl your age," he told her.

"It's the most thrilling thing that ever happened to me," Dee insisted. "And if you make me go home I'll never speak to you again as long as I live!" Deirdre had wanted to remain all through the questioning of the witnesses, the preliminary examination of the corpse by the medical examiner, and the removal of the body in the Morgue wagon. But her father finally dragged her away by force, and then, and not until then, she drove him along the boulevard in a smart new roadster. They came out of the park onto Fifth and headed downtown.

"I've got to phone my office," Bryan told her. "Pull up here at the corner a minute and wait." Then he offered her his pack "Have a cigarette. I know it's a breach of discipline, but maybe it'll calm you down a bit." He jumped out of the car and headed down 59th Street toward a cigar store.

He was barely out of sight when Dee caught a glimpse of

the tall young man with the beard. He was walking very fast down Fifth. Instantly she remembered something. This was the man who had stood by the newsreel and stared up at the hooded statue with a wild and fascinated look of horror on his face. He must have known, then, what was hidden from the rest of them! And he was so good looking too!

Suddenly she knew what she must do! Though her knees trembled and she found difficulty in breathing, she slipped from the car. Her red-stained cigarette dropped to the leather upholstery unnoticed; she left the motor running and the car door open . . . . . but Dee Bryan had no thoughts of such minor matters.

The young man who was hurrying away in the twilight was either clairvoyant—or a murderer! And Deirdre was going to find out which!

Tense as a steel spring, eager as a cat at a mouse-hole, Dee implacably trailed her quarry. He was walking fast, but seemingly not too sure of his directions. Finally, after making a complete circle, he stopped and looked cautiously around before he descended the stairs to the BMT subway station, but Dee was at the moment actress enough to be briskly walking in the other direction, as if there was not a thought in her pretty head except a desire to have tea and cakes at Rumpelmayer's . .

But she doubled back and slipped down the farther stair. She saw the bearded young man enter the middle door of a southbound train, and by sprinting desperately she managed to slip into the end door of the same car, feeling very pleased with herself.

Her quarry leaned against a pillar, though there were many empty seats. Dee crowded between a fat woman and a couple of giggling stenographers, and picked up a discarded paper pretending to be reading the sports page, now and then peeking over the top at her handsome, romantic quarry.

Not over thirty, she decided, in spite of the beard. Hatless, dressed in rumpled clothing of expensive cut, he looked lost, appealing, and exceedingly masculine. He stared constantly out of the car windows at the bleak ugliness of the subway cavern which flashed past. And at 42nd Street he suddenly left the car, so that she had to tread almost on his heels to get out before the door closed. But he did not look back.

"I wonder if I have the nerve to grab hold of his arm and ask him—" Dee breathed. But he was already hurrying up the stair. At the top he turned left

and made for the IRT. Luckily she got through in time to see him go down the Downtown stairway of the other subway.

Here the platform was crowded with people going home, even if it was Saturday. Dee saw the bearded young man buy a tabloid and stuff it into his pocket. Then he moved restlessly along.

He was standing on the express side of the platform, but as a local train pulled in he turned suddenly and slipped in through a closing door. For a moment Dee imagined that he cast a triumphant glance back at her, and then she realized that if her suspicions were correct he was running away not from her, but from everybody.

She managed to get her arm in the door of the last car, and the automatic release flung it open and held the train just long enough for her to crowd inside. The young man with the beard was two cars ahead, and there was too much of a crowd for her to force her way forward even if she had dared to risk being noticed again. But she thought of another idea. There was room on the rear platform, and she paid no attention to signs warning passengers not to ride there. Shoving the door open, she took her stand at the back tailgate, where she could at least lean out and see if her intended victim got out anywhere.

Penn Station . . . . 28th Street . . . . 23rd . . . . 18th . . . . 14th . . . . slowly the train emptied, and was refilled, but still no sign of the man with the beard. Maybe it was only a disguise, and he'd taken it off! Sheridan Square came next, in the heart of Greenwich Village. Beards w o u l d n ' t be so noticeable there . . . . .

Then, as the train started forward with a jerk, she saw him! He had managed to slip off the train and conceal himself behind a pillar on the platform. Now he was hurrying toward the stairway which led to Sheridan Square!

He knew, then! Yet he was not looking back toward Dee. It must be a police tail that he was afraid of, she thought. There was nothing for it now—he was gone, with his terrible secret. Yet Dee's Irish was up. No—she had followed him this far, and she wasn't going to lose him now.

The train was under way and g a t h e r i n g speed. But she climbed up on the gate, balanced herself a moment and then sprang to the platform, well aware of the deadly third-rail lying just beneath her if she tripped . . . .

But she landed sprawling, overturned a tin container full of old newspapers, and then rose

dizzily to her feet. The train roared off into the tunnel. "Me and Tarzan!" said Dee Bryan proudly. And then, as people began to gather, open-mouthed, she ran briskly past them and up the stairs.

Her quarry was luckily still in sight, walking fast in the direction of the North River. "Now to see where you live, big boy," said Dee, not without triumph. "And then a phone call to daddy and the cops . . . . ."

He went on, with Dee keeping as close behind as she dared. One block—two, three, and yet another. They were coming now into an odorous and unsavory region, the borderland of the Hudson River waterfront.

The young man with the beard hurried past a building where he glanced at the sign on the door "Atelier —something" and went briskly on. There was a lounger in a raggedy jacket across the street, casually examining an old cigar butt he had just picked up, but Dee took him at face value as a bum—to her all policemen wore bright cheerful brass buttons and carried nightsticks.

Around the corner and along a side street went the bearded man—and then suddenly he disappeared into thin air. Dee stopped, stared all around and even up into the narrow lane of sky, but there was no sign of him. She went ahead softly, and then she saw the door. It was a large door, big enough to permit the passage of a truck, and it was not completely closed. Everything would have ended right then and there if it had been shut, but it wasn't. And now it offered untold possibilities.

Dee bolstered up her courage, and walked briskly up to the door, shoved it a little wider, and slipped through. Nothing happened! Yet the man she was following must have come in here, there had been no place else for him to go. As her eyes adjusted to the semi-dark, she saw looming figures all around her, marble figures. "A studio!" she whispered. Intrigued, excited, over-confident, she tiptoed forward . . . .

She knew that it was madness as soon as she heard the closing of the door behind her. She turned, and her young mouth opened in a silent scream as the darkness engulfed her, rising like mighty waters over her head so that she went down . . . down . . .

Miss Hildegarde Withers was looking at the Inspector. "So the girl was kidnapped. What next?" she demanded. "Don't just stand there!"

"Blanked if I know what to do first," he admitted. "But I've got to drop the murder case and

do what I can on the Bryan girl snatch. That girl has to be found quick! I suppose the Federal men will be horning in any minute . . . ."

"Fiddlesticks!" said the school teacher. "Can't you see? The kidnapping of the girl is part of your murder case! She must have been grabbed because she knows something or saw something!"

"What?" demanded Piper, not unreasonably.

Miss Withers admitted that she didn't know and didn't care to guess. "But when Miss Dee Bryan was holding that rope at the unveiling ceremony, she must have got herself involved somehow, or this wouldn't have happened!"

"But what could she see that a thousand others didn't?"

"I wasn't there, worse luck. If I had been, I could no doubt tell you. Saving that, I'll have to have a talk with an eye-witness. Can you suggest anybody?"

The Inspector leaned against a block of uncut marble, and rubbed his chin. "There's the Mayor—but he was involved with his own eloquence. Her father—but the Commissioner is so upset at losing his daughter he can't think straight. Says he left her in her roadster and came back five minutes later to find the car deserted and her disappeared off the face of the earth ——"

Miss Withers shook her head. "No, I don't want to talk to any of the official personages involved. You don't happen to know any of the newspapermen who were there? They usually have a way of seeing what there is to be seen . . . ."

She was suddenly cut short by a bellow from the Inspector, who turned back, leaped up the stairs again, and burst back into Gretchen Dravid's bedroom. Rudely he seized the telephone from beneath the skirts of the silly doll, and barked a number. It was all settled in a matter of minutes. "I've got us an eye-witness that *is* an eye-witness," he announced to Miss Withers.

As Gretchen Dravid, widow of the sculptor, watched with wide and slightly bleary eyes, the two oddly-matched sleuths went scurrying out of the studio and into the street, to finally find a cruising taxicab. Fifteen minutes later Miss Withers was hustled into the Times Square offices of the Paradox Pictures Newsreel Service, and whisked to an upper floor, elbowed into a pitch-dark room which seemed to be well provided with leather chairs, and—after a few moments—the Inspector plunked himself down beside her.

"The film's just out of the dry-

ing racks," said a voice somewhere above them in the darkness. "It hasn't been cut yet or anything . . . ."

Then a great white square appeared on the screen before them, and a moment later the projection machine presented them with a faintly-flickering picture of a public gathering. With a gasp Miss Withers recognized the Mayor, who was beginning his speech. He looked more like a comic, angry sparrow—or a robin redbreast—than ever now, all in pantomine. Just beyond him was the looming draped figure of the statue, and there was a pretty dark-haired girl holding the release cord . . .

"That's Deirdre Bryan," said the Inspector unnecessarily.

Everywhere else in the view of the camera were people, crowding against the base of the statue, even a line of heads before and below . . . . in the background were the trees of the park and far off to one side, the spires of Manhattan.

Miss Withers and the Inspector watched the Mayor's speech —they noted the last minute bustling of the master of ceremonies and saw him giving his hurried change of insructions to the Commissioner and his daughter. They watched, spellbound, while Dee Bryan nodded to show that she understood her instructions. They saw her glance at the camera and turn hastily away—then she looked up at the muffled statue.

The Mayor made his clever recovery toward the end of his speech, and then took the "telegram" from his pocket—the message supposedly from Dravid saying that he was sorry but must send regrets. "That was a quickly thought-up lie on the part of His Honor," said Piper.

But Miss Withers was staring at the screen, not missing a single detail. When it was over —all too soon—she asked that it be repeated. "Notice, Oscar? That's the back of Gretchen Dravid's head. It couldn't be couldn't be anybody else, with that neck and shoulders. But see —she doesn't expect anything, she has no guilty knowledge."

"So who said she did?"

"But watch Deirdre! When the time comes for her to pull the rope, she is looking off to the right, out of the camera, past Gretchen! There's a funny expression on her face, as if she'd seen a ghost. She almost missed her cue." The schoolteacher wanted the film run a third time, and then held at one spot —but the weary projectionist explained that was impossible. He could, however, have some stills made—but it would take time.

The Inspector and Miss Withers killed time by grabbing hamburgers and coffee, one of

their favorite little restaurants being nearby. When they returned they found not only some prints, still wet, made from the newsreel footage but the man in charge had another exhibit for them. "There were a couple of still photographers here, and I sent over and got their prints just in case . . . ."

Miss Withers could have kissed him! "Look, Oscar! Here are various different angles of the crowd! We can time the thing by what is happening on the stand. Remember, it was just before she was supposed to pull the rope that she saw something. If we match the pictures . . . . . that little boy there was licking his ice cream cone in this one, and here it's half gone . . ."

"We're wasting time barking up the wrong tree," said Piper.

"Wait! Deirdre was looking off here, past Mrs. Dravid. She must have seen *this*. But the crowd looks perfectly normal to me. There's a young couple, and the boy with the cone, and the two women just behind Gretchen Dravid . . . "

"And the young guy with the trick beard," said Piper, staring down at the print. "Maybe she never saw a man that age with whiskers before." He sighed "Only Deirdre could tell us—and she's gone."

"It must be the man with the beard!" insisted Miss Withers. "But put him aside for a minute. The answer to this puzzle isn't so much Who, or Why, as it is *Where*!"

"You mean the setting for the murder? But maybe Dravid was killed somewhere else, and brought to the spot . . . ." Piper shook his head. "No, because the blood was on the marble, and bodies don't bleed after death. So Dravid was actually killed while climbing on his own statue. But I don't see—"

"I think you will," Miss Withers told him. She started to gather the pictures together, to return them. Then she stopped. "Oscar, here's the last shot. The ice cream cone is gone—the little boy is wiping his mouth. And notice—the man with the beard isn't there any more!"

"So he left!"

"At the moment the body was discovered? Come, now!"

They came out of the projection room, and Piper thanked the newsreel men. "Only hope we can release that film tomorrow," said the director. "Biggest scoop since we caught the death plunge of those men from the Macon."

Down in the lobby the Inspector said he really ought to call his office, and Miss Withers suggested another call he might make. "But that was only a dodge of the Mayor's—he didn't

really get any telegram!" he protested.

"Ask him anyway," she insisted. He hurried away, and for the first time that day the schoolteacher had an opportunity to study the marble fragments which she had been lugging around. It was very much like working a jigsaw puzzle, one of her minor vices, and by the time the Inspector was back she was surveying her results with considerable triumph. The results were spread out on the floor.

"What you got there?" Piper demanded. "Playing house?"

"The weapon," she told him.

"Weapon? But I just talked to Doc Bloom. Dravid was really killed with a marble blade, the doc just took it out of his neck . . . ."

"And that blade fitted right into the end of this!" She pointed to her joined fragments, with a few gaps, representing a stone hammer and sickle with the end of the blade missing! "When Dravid was struck, the blade broke off in his neck, and the rest of the contrivance fell to the base of the statue and shattered. The murderer didn't have time to search for the pieces, or thought they didn't matter . . ."

"I don't get it. The statue was complete as it stood, wasn't it? Anyway, I just talked to His Honor, as you suggested and he says yes, the telegram *was* on the level, he'd clean forgotten about it. But it really was delivered to him this morning. So Dravid never meant to be on the scene!"

"*If* he sent the wire."

"But he did! I called Western Union at Penn Station office and got a description of the sender. It was Dravid. Luckily the night staff have just gone on duty again, and one girl remembered seeing Dravid write the wire while a young man with a beard stood in the doorway and waited, holding a bundle. They left together."

Miss Withers nodded. "And when was Dravid seen alive, after that?"

"By nobody. His wife says he left the studio late in the evening, after ten-thirty, with a bundle under his arm. Without saying where he was going. But he seemed excited—almost gay. As if he was up to something."

"Which he was," Miss Withers agreed. "Let's get going. I don't suppose there's any news about the girl?"

"Oh, she's been reported seen in various places. Nothing definite, the usual thing."

"There's nothing about this case which is unusual," Miss Withers told him. "I'm beginning to put the pieces together, just as I put together the pieces of the hammer and sickle. But it's that girl who worries me. And

another thing—I don't remember my mythology as I should. According to the ancient Greeks, how many Fates were there?"

"Huh? Four, I guess. Yeah, four . . . . ."

"And their names were?"

"Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and —" the Inspector surprised her by answering. "Or something like that, anyway."

"Oscar! That's the three musketeers," she snapped back. "The Fates were Atropos, Clotho, and Lachesis, if I'm not mistaken. But I know there were only *three* Fates!"

"Four!" insisted Piper. "Why I remember clearly. There were four figures in the statuary group in Dravid's studio!" He stopped short. "Hildegarde, what's the matter?"

For Miss Withers was having trouble keeping her teeth from chattering. She leaned against a lamp-post. "Three Fates," she repeated. " 'One who spins, one who holds the thread, and one who cuts it off with the dreadful shears . . . .' "

"Hildegarde, you're hysterical!"

She shook her head. "Not hysterical, Oscar. Just a blind, silly woman." She turned suddenly and started to run, like some strange, long-legged bird of prey. "Come on! she cried.

"But where?"

Miss Withers told him, grimly.

"In that case, we need the boys," said Oscar Piper reasonably. There was a police signal box on the Times Square corner, and he unlocked it and spoke briefly into the mouthpiece. "Emergency," he said. "And I mean emergency."

It seemed that he had hardly hung up and closed the box when the howl of sirens sounded, increasing in pitch. And then two squad cars came roaring up with a screech of brakes. They tumbled into the first one, and were off again. But at the Inspector's order the sirens stilled as they approached their destination, racing down Ninth Avenue toward the studio of the late Manuel Dravid. When they stopped, Miss Withers was the first one out.

But the Inspector caught her arm, and pointed out a light in an upper window. It was the widow's bedroom. "I know!" said the schoolteacher. "She doesn't matter, though I suppose she was really the cause of the whole trouble. You'll never get anything on her; women like that take care of themselves. But have your men break down this door, quick!"

"We'll find the girl," Piper promised grimly.

"Or what's left of her!" The door was breached, and they were running down the long hall, much pounding of heavy

brogans. And they came into the high-vaulted studio with its grim, looming figures.

Even a hardboiled copper might well wince as his flashlight struck the grinning face of the black giant, or the tortured figure of Judas beneath the thorn tree. But it was beside the statue group marked "The Fates" that Miss Withers paused.

"I'll be something!" gasped Piper. "There were only three figures, after all!"

"There *are* only three figures," Miss Withers corrected. "Which means that we are too late!" Then she felt a draft across her ankles—just as she had done on her other visit to this world of stone figures. But this time there was the faint sound of a closing door. "Quick," she gasped. "There's another way out of here! Find the door!"

Blue-clad policemen scurried like a pack of hounds who had lost the scent, or perhaps more like firghtened fireflies, among the great implacable figures, their torches slashing the darkness in frenzied and futile endeavor. It was five minutes, at least, before the big doorway was discovered and flung open. They plunged out into the street, and stopped short. Across the way was a lounging figure in an old overcoat.

"Mullins!" yelled the Inspector. The plainclothes cop snapped to attention. "You're supposed to be at the other door, what are you doing here?"

"Why, nothing. But I had an idea that maybe this studio place had a service entrance on the side street here, so I was just having a look—"

"Did you see anybody leave by this door?"

Mullins shook his head. "Why, nobody, Inspector. Nobody that doesn't belong here, that is . . ."

"Did you see *anybody*?"

Why, there was nobody but a guy named Owens, who identified himself okay. He works here, a nice young fellow with a beard."

"You saw him leave, just now?" Miss Withers put in.

Mullins nodded. "He come out of there with a big statue, all wrapped up, and dumped it into an old car that he had waiting at the curb. Said he had to deliver it somewhere, and showed me the order."

"Remind me to recommend Mullins for promotion to the Sewer Department!" gasped Piper as he led the way in a race back to the squad cars. "If we only had an idea which way the guy went—"

"North—to the Bridge!" Miss Withers moaned. "Can't you see? He'll throw it over the rail!"

"Can't you go any faster?" Piper demanded of the driver, who was already doing seventy

through crowded West Side streets. They picked up speed . .

At the foot of 57th Street a ramp leads up to the elevated auto highway, later connecting with Riverside Drive. As the cars raced up this ramp Miss Withers screamed, and pointed.

There ahead of them in an open touring car she had glimpsed a bearded man who was driving like a maniac, and there was a white bundle in the back seat. The squad car leaped forward, sirens howling—and the lone driver knew that the trail had come to an end. He turned back for one quick, despairing glance, face paper-white above his beard, and then suddenly jerked the wheel toward the thin wooden railing and the street fifty feet below . . . .

There was a crash of wood as the car plunged through. The police car slowed, skidding to a stop, and Miss Withers closed her eyes. But she opened them again—for the fugitive car was hanging awkwardly half through the railing, tangled in cables that the power company or somebody had left, front wheels foolishly spinning in thin air. The driver was clutching the wheel, at an awkward, impossible angle. Then suddenly he pulled himself free, shouted something incoherent, and dived deliberately down toward the pavement far below.

"Best thing he could have done," the Inspector was saying, as he and the schoolteacher watched as the squads of officers, aided now by the Rescue Squad, gingerly pulled the old touring car back from its precarious position. "With two murders on his conscience . . . ."

Deft hands were unwrapping the cleverly draped sheets which had given the soft young form of Deirdre Bryan the semblance of a draped marble statue. Then somebody yelled, a shrill exclamation of amazement and glory. "She's breathing!"

And so she was. "You can't kill the Irish with one whack on the back of the head," Piper told Miss Withers proudly, after the ambulance had borne Dee Bryan away. "She's in a coma, but she's young and she'll pull through."

"It may teach her not to follow strange murderers home," Miss Withers agreed. "Well, Oscar, it wasn't as bad a tangle as I had feared. "Quite run-of-the-mill, in fact."

"Huh? Well, I'm still tangled. I catch on that this Owens killed Dravid, but why?"

"You didn't study these sufficiently, Oscar." They were now sitting in a convenient little Coffee Pot, and she produced her rock samples again.

"Just broken pieces of some statue or other . . . ."

Again she arranged them, so that the head of the hammer came inside the curve of the sickle. "Does this mean anything more to you?"

"Huh? No—why, yeah! That's the symbol or whatever you call it of the Communist Party!"

"Right!" Miss Withers nodded in approval. "Well, I think Dravid was trying to perform a practical joke on the city, by slipping a stone hammer and sickle into the hand of his own statue of George Washington! It would be great publicity for him, too, on account of the newsreels and the Mayor's speech. But he couldn't risk being there at the unveiling, so he sent a wire begging off, and then sneaked up to the park last night with his assistant to help him. It was no easy job to get those extra pieces into the outstretched hand."

"And this Owen, being superpatriotic and all that, hit him in the back of the neck with the sickle blade. And then just walked off and left the body there, to be discovered at the unveiling?" Piper slowed down, suddenly dubious. "Who'd kill over a silly thing like that!"

"I told you, Oscar, that the important angle of this case was the place where the murder happened. Why was Dravid stabbed while mounted on his own statue—unless he had come there to make a last minute change?"

Miss Withers took a large bite of ham and eggs. "But as for motive—I wonder, Oscar, if that wasn't the big white woman who was married to Dravid? Remember the statue that her husband did of her? It was a terrible revelation of her true nature—and I'm very much afraid that, whether Owen admitted it to himself or not, that woman was really the reason why it happened that a great surge of hatred swept over him when he was alone with Dravid at the statue last night . . ."

"Jealousy? Just the old triangle situation." The Inspector finished his coffee, reached for a toothpick, and then hastily threw it away under Miss Withers' disapproving stare. "So all's well that ends well," he observed philosophically. "D e e Bryan, when she gets out of the hospital, will have a rousing good story to tell about it all. And the woman really responsible for it goes free—"

"S h e does, Oscar. Unless somebody remembers that she admits she heard us when *we* came into the studio, and asks her and keeps asking her why she *didn't* hear Mr. Owens, who must have made a lot more noise than we did! You pick her up, Oscar, and you might find she was an accomplice! See if I'm not right!"

And they did. And she was.

what's new in crime

by Stefan Santesson

I suspect that there is going to be a social—rather than a critical—reaction to Malcolm Gair's excellent SNOW JOB (Doubleray, $3.50). I say this because of our peculiar insistence as a people in ignoring, in conversation among ourselves and with others, the reality that this society of ours has only a surface homogenity and that it is in actuality made up of a number of social vacuums, within which people are born, live their allotted years and then pass on without ever having gotten to know – or to understand – the people across town (or the people around the corner, for that matter . . .) who happen by chance to have been born in another social—or ethnic—vacuum. This lack of understanding (and of knowledge) of how these others among us live, and of the disturbing reality that their dreams are often like our dreams, that their hates are so often like our hates, and that their emotions are so often like our emotions, are among the disturbing realities of life in these days and something which cannot be conjured away by statistics which tend to prove that

Hans Stefan Santesson, editor of this magazine since 1956 and former editor, between 1945 and 1952, of the Unicorn Mystery Book Club, continues his column of comment on recent mystery and suspense novels and on other matters of possible interest to readers of this magazine.

white is black, or that black is white. Or perhaps by efforts to prove that murder—and grief—*can* come to the very rich, as also to the more familiar middle-class . . .

The doubt that this can be so is not necessarily a class reaction, and not solely because the word has come to have a different connotation in this generation. The world of Whit Ruysdael will however seem very unreal to the many for whom these protected few—this generation's international society—are not really people, but simply personalities, incredible personalities whose doings you read about with a faint shudder of envy that such men and such women can be in this day and age. The reaction is somewhat akin to that of the reader of a generation ago who never quite believed in the world about which E. Phillips Oppenheim wrote; its mores and its manners were so alien to their own. Similarly, the world of Whit Ruysdael will seem alien and strange to many for whom the ski resort in the Austrian Alps to which Death comes will seem unreal, fully as alien and unreal as the Delegates' Lounge at the U.N. seems to still others for whom the world is divided, with an ease which will be envied by tomorrow's historians, into simply two groups of people—"our" people, and the rest . . . .

It is precisely with this in mind why I say that there is a genuine danger that the alien quality of this more mannered world to which Death comes will obscure, for many, the reality that this *is* an excellent novel of detection. Mark Raeburn, whom we have met with before, is one of the more interesting private detectives in the field; with qualities, however, which emphatically will not seem familiar to those who prefer their private detectives to be men whom they can understand—or dream about . . .

This is a most interesting novel. Do read Malcolm Gair's SNOW JOB!

Frances and Richard Lockridge's A THIEF IN THE NIGHT (Lippincott, $3.50) and Thomas Walsh's A THIEF IN THE NIGHT (Simon & Schuster, $3.50), are both by favorite authors of mine (and of yours too, I am certain). I would normally discus them separately but because both are representative of an interesting trend in the field I will not do so this time but, instead, discuss both together.

With some concern.

The novel by the Lockridges is obviously based on the Galindez case which now that General Trujillo is dead, seems to be

remembered only by people for whom the views for which Dr. Galindez stood have obviously a somewhat unreal quality. It is not so long ago, after all, that the mere fact that the administration of a country agreed with us on certain major matters seemed to excuse, to put it mildly, their failure to completely translate this approach into terms which could be appreciated by their own peoples. Our failure to recognize, until it was too late, the potentialities of the "third force" in Chinese politics in the 'forties', is an example of what I am thinking of; and one can of course think of Turkey, some years back, and of—but let us be delicate.

To however equate opposition to the status quo with the traditional see-saw of banana republic politics" is an unfortunate over-simplification which I must admit disturbs me. Allison Kent blunders into a conspiracy, on our soil, which includes the attempted kidnapping of this exiled professor who is supposed, presumably in between teaching, to have been planning the usual sort of revolution to which Richard Harding Davis and later writers have long accustomed us . . There is no sharp line drawn here between each camp —each uses tools and methods which are familiar to those of us who've cut our teeth on the pulps. This is not improbable but what does disturb me is the reality that writers of the distinction of the Lockridges can fail (perhaps through inadequate researching) to more clearly draw the things which underline the reality that those who oppose the status quo are more than often men of principles—and not gangsters . . .

As for Thomas Walsh's extremely effective A THIEF IN THE NIGHT (Simon & Schuster, $3.50), here again one can identify the central character and here again one can wonder how credible, how convincing, the picture of the man that emerges really is . . .

Do I ask for credibility—as well as a fast moving story?

Yes! Keep in mind that there will be a lot of people who will recognize The Fat Man whom Eddie McNulty breaks out of jail to harass—in order that his brother be released . . . It is an unfortunate reality that opinions are not shaped by research, but by voices heard on the radio or on TV, by pictures seen in the daily press, or by subliminally absorbed impressions of persons and places gained in the course of reading, not for research but for relaxation. A lot of people are going to, without exactly knowing why, remember this portrait of The Fat Man—and they will forget what this man

likewise stands for . . . A THIEF IN THE NIGHT, in other words, is good entertainment, as is always the case with a novel by Thomas Walsh. But do not, please, take the world of Eddie McNulty too seriously!

Edmund Crispin's BEWARE OF THE TRAINS (Walker, $3.50) is a delightful collection of sixteen short-stories by one of the acknowledged modern masters of the detective story. If you have never met the rather redoubtable Gervase Fen, Professor of English language and literature at Oxford, it is high time that you do so! Don't miss this!

And don't miss Philip MacDonald's DEATH AND CHICANERY (Doubleday, $3.50), a collection of four stories, most of them set in California, which are interesting examples of what this writer can do with people—particularly in DEED OF MERCY.

Florrie Lennox was softhearted. All you had to do was to twist her arm ever so little—or just murmur something to that effect—and she'd smile and agree to whatever you wanted.

The last time she did so she died.

Assistant District Attorney Jeremiah X. Gibson had a very personal reason for wanting to get to her killer. He'd known her when they were both younger—years before she had drifted into the profession she'd only recently "retired" from—and she'd sent for him because she had something to tell him, something to tell him both as a friend and as an Assistant District Attorney. Only he got there too late, moments too late . . . .

Hampton Stone's newest "Gibby and Mac" novel, THE BABE WITH THE TWISTABLE ARM ($3.50, Simon & Schuster) is, despite the title, a both sensitive and vivid portrait of men and women seldom met with outside of Ed McBain's novels (and then not so literately, so clearly, so finely drawn . . .); these are the men and the women who are the raw statistics of crime, including Florrie's extremely unprepossessing brother and all the others, including "the Turd", whom you'll meet.

Do read this! You'll like it!

Roy Stratton was personally chosen by the Massachusetts State Police to, replacing the late Ben Benson, undertake the series of mystery novels which THE DECORATED CORPSE ($3.50, Mill-Morrow) is the first. A Commander, U. S. Navy (Ret.), he lives with his wife, the novelist Monica Dickens, on Cape Cod. In preparation for

the series, he lived the life of a trooper in barracks, accompanied officers to the scenes of actual criminal investigations, attended the State Police Academy and the Seminar at Harvard on Homicide Investigation.

The result is a decidedly impressive novel of police procedures. At the same time, as you are side by side with the troopers as they investigate the apparent kidnapping of the eight year old daughter of the prominent Cape Cod lawyer, you get the feeling of the people (not the summer people but the year-long residents of Cape Cod, what makes them tick, and what can make some of them do incredible things . . . If you've ever met people such as these (and they do not live only on Cape Cod, after all . . .), why then you'll feel at home . . .

CREAM OF THE CRIME, the 15th Mystery Writers of America Anthology (Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, $3.95), is precisely that—and proof, as Hugh Pentecost points out in his foreward, that "the mystery story, the old and classic model, is — —far from dead"! This is an anniversary collection—the finest stories from the fourteen earlier anthologies of the Mystery Writers of America—and it is impressive testimony to the quality of writing that is possible in this field. A partial list of the authors represented includes John Dickson Carr, Margery Allingham, Craig Rice, Miriam Allen deFord, Rex Stout, Ellery Queen, Lawrence G. Blochman and Anthony Boucher. This is one anthology that should be a "must"!

John Piper, an insurance assessor, and his crime reporter friend, become increasingly interested in the possibility that there might be an identical reason for the seven suicides—unexplained suicides—that've recently taken place. They investigate these suicides, in Harry Carmichael's OF UNSOUND MIND (Doubleday, $3.50), and come up with some extremely interesting results.

Dick Francis, a former champion jockey who rode the Queen Mother's *Devon Loch* in the Grand National, has retired from steeplechasing and become the racing correspondent for the London *Sunday Express* and a judge at horse shows. His first novel, DEAD CERT (Holt, Rinehart, Winston, $3.50) obviously prompted by the widespread concern in England, a year ago or so, at the discovery of unpleasant happenings in racing, is unusually interesting because of its background and because of Mr. Francis' obvious familiarity with the people a-

bout whom he writes. When he (perhaps at the insistence of his editor . . .) introduces story-elements which are supposed to add to the effectiveness of the novel, these could be more convincing but this does not detract from the fresh and exciting quality of this first novel.

I had planned to comment at some length on the best novels of the year, but this will have to wait. I am delighted to see that Anthony Boucher, in his "A Crime Critic's Christmas List" (*New York Times Book Review*, December 2, 1962, agrees with me that Joan Fleming's WHEN I GROW RICH (Washburn, $3.-50) was one of the more effective novels of the year. I completely agree with him that there is "precisely one candidate for Mystery Writers of America's "best first" Edgar (Robert L. Fish's "The Fugitive"), and almost agree with him that Daniel Broun's "Counterweight" is a close second.

It will be interesting to see whether MWA will agree with us.

But let me comment, briefly, on another matter.

We have taken a certain pride in frequently publishing first stories by writers who show considerable promise and who, in time, will undoubtedly contribute much to the field. We want to continue to do so; in fact we must do so, not in our own interest but because, ten years from now, twenty years from now, these will be the men and women who will be making an impact on this field through their novels and their stories. No responsible editor is unaware of this.

I am however dismayed to find how few of these writers who are still not professionals appear to make any effort to study the markets to which they are submitting. Two-three years old market lists are being referred to and submissions are being made on the basis of these and *not* on the writer's belief that the story he or she has written suits a particular publication. It so happens that I have been very slow in going through these unsolicited submissions but when I do so I am frankly disturbed to see how few people seem to bother to study the markets to which they submit.

mr. wong's midnight intruder

by W. E. Dan Ross

As Neil Munroe trudged along the road leading to the home of the art dealer, Mei Wong, he regretted having discussed the old man with the stranger. Alone in the midnight darkness of the deserted suburb he realized how interested the swarthy stranger who'd stood next to him in the lobby of Bombay's Empire Hotel had been in his conversation. He had listened much too hungrily to every word.

Glancing furtively around to make sure he hadn't been followed, Munroe stopped before a secluded and lovely home hemmed in by palms and flowers. There was no one in sight as he quickly made his way across the lawn to the rear of the building; it seemed almost like coming home. He knew every inch of the place. Six years ago before his wanderlust had taken him back to the sea he'd worked for Mei Wong's Bombay Art & Curio Company as shipper and agent. He'd been twenty-five at the time and the liquor hadn't really got hold of him yet.

Now he stood in the shadows by a back window and the silence of the night made his ex-

Mr. Ross will be remembered by readers of this magazine for his THE THREE THIEVES, by Charlotte and Dan Ross (SMM, Feb. 1962) and for his earlier Mei Wong stories which have appeared in The Saint. He is the author of two novels, published under a pseudonym, and has been widely published here and abroad.

cited breathing seem loud. Strange to find himself here about to rob Mei Wong. He had decided on it earlier in the day when he lost his berth on the S.S. *Karib* because of his drinking.

Leaving the vessel he'd strolled up from the docks to the city. The mad noise and heat of Bombay with its clanging streetcars, bullocks and noisy carts, clutching beggars and cowdung. Finally swinging into the comparative quiet of the hotel lobby he'd searched the place for a familiar face. To be broke and without a job was a tough predicament in a port like Bombay. So he'd struck up a conversation with this stranger and during it had happened to mention he'd once been employed upstairs in the Empire Hotel with the Bombay Art & Curio Company.

"Mei Wong?" The stranger was impressed. "Fine man—and wealthy!"

"He's worth a bit," Neil agreed.

And standing in the crowded lobby his mind had wandered back to an episode when he worked for the old man. Mei Wong had called him to his suburban home to pick up papers and cash for a customs transaction. As he'd waited in the living room, Mei Wong had entered his study—leaving the door slightly ajar.

The old art dealer had gone directly to a closet in the far corner of the room and opening it he had taken from a shelf in its dark interior a bronze wine-vessel of the Chou dynasty, fashioned in the form of an owl. Munroe had seen the ugly, yet strangely fascinating piece on Mei Wong's desk several times. Through the open door he watched the dealer's massive body bend over the figure as he deftly removed its head and took out a large roll of bills. Counting out a number he returned the balance of the money to its hiding place. He then replaced the owl in the closet and came back to Neil with his instructions.

Memory of the incident had given the sailor an idea and he had decided to rob the old man that night. Now he cautiously pushed aside the shutters of a rear window and opened it slowly. Before hoisting himself in he patted the pocket where he kept his gun. There was a chance he would have to use it.

The house was in darkness, but that was no drawback. He knew his way about perfectly. Through the kitchen he crept, then down the hallway past the bedroom; the next door led to the study—and the old man's cache of money in the closet.

He edged noiselessly along the narrow hall. As he neared the door of Mei Wong's bedroom

he thought he detected a slight sound. The faint glow of a night-light came through the doorway. Moving closer in the concealing darkness he glanced inside.

For a moment he was shaken. Mei Wong was seated in a large chair by his bedside, fully dressed in his usual immaculate white suit, but the old man showed no awareness of his presence. He sat motionless, eyes closed, apparently asleep. Munroe breathed easier and taking the gun from his pocket, continued down the hall to the study.

Stepping into the blackness of the room he crossed quickly to the closet and was about to open it when he heard the sound of a footstep behind him. Whirling around as the room lights were flashed on with blinding suddenness he came face to face with Mei Wong.

The bland features of the ancient Oriental betrayed no surprise. "You are rather a late caller, Mr. Neil Munroe," he said softly.

Recovering himself Munroe pointed the gun at the old man. "The best for what I have to do."

"I see." Mei Wong studied him thoughtfully. "I regret we should meet again under these circumstances. I have always had a high regard for you."

The art dealer's quiet words sent shame searing through him. He wanted to hear no more. "Skip the fancy talk," he mumbled. "Stay where you are and you won't get hurt."

Mei Wong ignoring the advice moved a step closer to him. "If it is your plan to open that closet and rob me, you will have to murder me first."

The sailor braced himself. He'd known he might have to deal with Mei Wong but he hadn't expected so definite an ultimatum. "Don't be crazy," he warned. "All I want is some cash. I need it badly. And I'm not going without it. Make your mind up to that."

Acting as if he hadn't heard the warning, Mei Wong stepped directly between the angry Munroe and the closet. "And it is my intention to keep you from this closet, if need be by risking my life. You, young man, must make your mind up to that."

"If you want it the hard way," Munroe spoke harshly, raising the gun.

Mei Wong's eyebrows raised in incredulity. "You would actually kill an unarmed old man for a paltry sum? Don't you know the price the money can cost you?"

The sailor looked into the strong face of the old man and realized that there was still enough decency left in him to make this thing impossible. It would be easy to kill Mei Wong

and loot the place. But as the are dealer stood there unprotected, his wide face filled only with concern for his attacker, Munroe recalled his courage and kindness in the past. And filled with disgust at the madness that had brought him close to murdering his former benefactor he slowly lowered his weapon.

"In an instant you have acquired an age of wisdom," Mei Wong told him quietly.

At that instant a strange voice came from behind Munroe. "What's this all about?"

The sailor turned to discover the swarthy man with whom he'd talked at the Empire Hotel, and who now had him covered with a revolver.

The stranger addressed himself to Mei Wong: "I followed this drunk here from the hotel. He was talking a lot about you and I had a hunch. Perhaps you remember me, Inspector Jeddah, Bombay Police."

Mei Wong's huge frame advanced to the man. "Have you come in answer to my phone call to police headquarters of a few minutes ago?"

The inspector shook his head. "No. I followed this fellow. Watched him force a window and break in."

Mei Wong smiled disarmingly. "I'm afraid you're wrong, sir. This young man is my employee."

"He took a funny way to get in here and what about that?" The Inspector questioned as he crossed and took Munroe's gun.

The old man hesitated as Munroe watched him with panic-stricken eyes. Suddenly the sailor had become completely sobered.

"But, yes inspector —" Mei Wong began; then he was interrupted by the sound of a motor car pulling up outside the house. "I believe that must be the police now."

A moment later Mei Wong let two turbanned officers in the front door. As he led them to the study he said: "I heard a suspicious noise just before I phoned you, Take every precaution when you open this closet."

The police stood cautiously by the closet door and one of them flung it open, then they both quickly moved back. From the bottom of its shadowy interior arose the swaying figure of a giant cobra. Its ugly head darting forward as it weaved from side to side, speckled hood distended, ready to strike death. The police fired, then a second time and a third until the giant snake writhed on the floor before them in its death throes.

Munroe stood transfixed with horror, realizing the fate from which Mei Wong had saved him.

The old man gave a deep sigh of relief. "The snake nearly got

me when I half opened that closet a short time ago. A man in my position makes enemies. I have been threatened on several occasions by a near-mad ex-convict. Of course Mr. Munroe stood by with his gun to help me."

When the Inspector and the policeman had gone Mei Wong carefully closed the door and turned to Munroe. "You know," he said, "I dislike lying to the police. But you could set it right by coming to work for me again."

The sailor hung his head. "You should have let me stumble on the cobra. That would have settled it. I'm not worth another chance."

Mei Wong smiled. "On the contrary, young Mr. Munroe. I'd like to give you another chance. After all — only the tempted really know virtue."

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a practical joke

by Alfonso Ferrari Amores

There were thirteen gifts in all. A cocktail shaker set, a vicuna coat, five clocks, a sewing box, a negligee, an electric sewing machine, a chest of silverware, a combination radio - phonograph, and a check for thirty-five hundred pesos from the people at the office.

"If you're superstitious about number thirteen, Mariucha, which way is it?" asked Gabriel, the newlywed, grinning at his brand new wife. "For some people it's good luck. For others, just the opposite."

"Shall I tell the truth?"

"Of course."

With comic solemnity, Mariucha admitted, "I'm one of those who fears thirteen.

"All right," the groom continued, moving to settle the matter. "There's no possible way to tell which of these presents is number thirteen. It could be all of them, or none of them."

"Yes, that's right," agreed Mariucha, amused. "After all, we don't know the order they came in. They were all sent here to

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Alfonso Ferrari Amores, a prominent Argentine writer, is a journalist, radio script writer, and a composer of tangos. He is also one of the most prolific detective fiction writers in all Spanish America and has written more than a dozen detective novels under various peudonyms. The present story has been translated by professor Donald A. Yates, of Michigan State University.

the hotel together . . . And were waiting for us when we arrived."

The gifts had come from her father's home, the inn in the Barracas section of Buenos Aires where, the evening before, the wedding reception had taken place, following the afternoon ceremonies at the Registro Civil. The idea of sending the gifts, which everyone had thought a good one, was suggested by Gabriel's father-in-law. He proposed that, after having been exhibited until evening on a table in the back room, the wedding presents should be loaded on a delivery truck and brought to the fourth floor hotel suite overlocking the Avenida de Mayo where the young couple was now staying.

"Just before we arrived, that's right," repeated Gabriel. And a smile of remembered mischief barely touched the corners of his mouth.

"From what the desk clerk said, the whole wedding party trooped here with the presents," Mariucha said with a smile.

"You might know it! And Moras heading the pack, I'll bet!" exclaimed Gabriel. Then, giving in to an impulse that had nothing at all to do with what he was saying, he put his arms about Mariucha and kissed her tenderly.

Moras was a police sergeant, an old-timer, and a friend of Mariucha's family. The inn was located in his precinct. The ancient building supported a sign out in front which read: La Parmigiana. And at the doorway the marble slab had long been worn away to a concave, eroded by the coming and going of its patrons. It had two large windows facing on the street across which Don Yiyi, the owner, would write with a lime-dipped brush the daily feature on the menu: MINESTRONE TODAY, for example. And between the crude letters you could see the customers eating—mostly stevedores and sailors, a truck driver here and there; but almost always the same people.

"Moras . . ." the groom murmured, looking away. And again to his lips came that smile of "only-I-could-have-enjoyed-how-funny-it-was." Mariucha noticed it this time and her curiosit was aroused.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Of the surprise the sergeant thought he gave me at the party last night," replied Gabriel laughingly, "when he took me aside to ask if I knew that Rocambole had been the one who killed my brother."

Mariucha raised her hand impatiently, as if to swat a bothersome insect, and said, "Let's not think about things like that now."

"Well, now . . . The fact is

that you don't know anything about this yet . . . and—yes, I think I'd better tell you."

Mariucha looked at him. She recognized the tone of voice he was using. It was one that, even when he pretended to be joking, meant he had something important to tell her. She leaned back on the table where the gifts were laid out and waited for him to speak.

"How could I have helped but know it!—when Rocambole himself told me!" he exclaimed.

"To make you angry?"

"No, my little girl . . . The truth is that he didn't *know* I was his victim's brother! Isn't that a laugh? He'd been drinking some, and his tongue loosened up. He told me about his feat, and I asked him why he'd taken me into his confidence. Rocambole told me then the reason was that I resembled the man he had killed. That was what had caused him to remember the incident."

"What did you do?"

"Me? Not a thing."

At that moment the thought occurred to Mariucha that some mysterious power punishes evildoers, and she reflected out loud, "And what a coincidence that after having told you this he was found dead from a knife would in the shower room at the office!"

"Yes, very, very strange," agreed Gabriel, breaking into impressive laughter.

He was a sturdy lad, tall and well-built. Before his entry into military service he had served as an underworld bodyguard. The fault, though, hadn't been all his; it was the environment. Besides, he felt he ought to justify his virile appearance. Otherwise, his comrades might have shown lack of respect for him. As it was, they never had failed to show it . . . That was sure! Now he was laughing and his strong white teeth contrasted strikingly with his shaded eyes and dark, abundant hair.

"And he wasn't the only nuisance we got rid of," he continued. "How about Papa Frita?"

"Yes, he was troublesome, too," admitted Mariucha. "I remember how violently he insisted that daddy rent him a room. And then, for a whole week, under the pretext that he had lost his knife there, he hardly left the inn. He even tried to search our rooms! In the end it turned out that it was all a farce, because a few days later he used that same knife to kill Rocambole."

"It was a heavy weapon, unmistakeable, recalled Gabriel tediously. "The blade was made from a steel file with a horn handle wrapped in leather strips, and the initials of Papa Frita's

real name: G. T.—Gumersindo Torlonia."

"What I could never understand was why he was jealous of Rocambole, who never had anything more to say to me than 'Hello!' "

"All the same, there wasn't any doubt that the note found in the dead man's clothes had been written by Papa Frita. And it was a threat, plain and simple: 'I like Mariucha. If you cross my path, I'll kill you.' "

"With suspicions like his, he was on the way to leaving us without *any* customers," she said, smiling faintly.

She didn't like the subject. She even feared that Gabriel might think there were some basis to the absurd suspicions of the killer who was now serving time for his crime in jail. What did it matter! For Mariucha there had never been another man but the one who was now her husband.

"Well Rocambole kept going to the inn, anyway, didn't he? And he was killed on a Monday afternoon, at the same time the teller at La Paternal was shot to death."

Gabriel doubled the effect of these words with a long pause, as if he were listening to them echo back to him. He began to pace thoughtfully back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back. Then, suddenly, he asked, "Could you imagine, Mariucha, the restraint it took for a man of my temperament to accept — without protest — an insult?"

He continued, without waiting for an answer.

"Killing is easy, especially when you're afraid, But for a man with self respect, like me, who never let himself be intimidated by anyone, it's not wise to take such things lightly. It's as foolish as spitting at the sky . . . Still, you run the risk of seeming a coward. People are very shallow. Their opinions mean nothing to me, but it's hard to face up to them in my position."

He was speaking now as if he were thinking out loud. He had stopped in the middle of the room, with his gaze fixed on the floor, absently. She was a little confused. Actually, all that she understood clearly was his need to confide something to her.

"Had you noticed that?" he asked.

"What?"

"The coincidence of the two deaths: that of the teller at La Paternal and that of Rocambole in Barracas?"

"No."

"And now that you know, doesn't it suggest anything to you?"

Mariucha moved her head negatively. "No," she said; because he wasn't looking at her.

She had the impression that

Gabriel had lost the thread of his thoughts. She grew surer of this as he went on.

"My brother, Julian, was the eldest of we three sons. He was a pretty good guitarist. As a boy he used to hang around the Indio's grocery store in the Monte Castro district where, on Saturday nights, Martin Castro used to sing. Those were the days! He spent a lot of time there and, as the years went by, he continued to improvise on his guitar and developed into quite a virtuoso. He went around rubbing elbows with all kinds of people, not to exclude the worst. But, nevertheless, he kept clean. Not a single run-in. When he was discharged later from the navy, he went back there to live. At first he was regarded as an outsider, but Julian was always an industrious fellow. He began thinking of getting married and buying a milk delivery route from a friend. At that time he was working as a mason for some builders in the Vuelta de Rocha section. Then the affair over a woman came up; and thereafter Rocambole held a grudge against him for stealing the little prize he coveted.

"Then one morning, while Julian was working with him on the same scaffolding three stories above the ground, Rocambole tipped over the platform. My brother dropped like a rock; and the killer turned himself in as a witness, declaring that it had been an accident. I was suspicious of him from the beginning, and it was perhaps out of the hope that I'd learn the truth that I came to this district. And isn't it strange! The rivalry that existed between Julian and Rocambole repeated itself between myself (I name myself first, as destiny would have it) and Papa Frita."

At this point Gabriel, half-joking, half contemptuous, raised his voice once again in a bitter entreaty:

"Gumersindo Torlonia, alias Papa Frita! One night, at the inn, he spent hours provoking me. One innuendo after another! And me, all the time silent. Someone told Papa Frita that I was deaf. Then—I don't know if he believed it or was just going along with the joke—he wrote that business on the paper: 'I like Mariucha. If you cross my path, I'll kill you.' He had a boy bring the note to me after he left. Meanwhile, I had discovered from something Pajarito, the dishwasher, had overheard that Papa Frita was planning to hold up one of the tellers at La Paternal. It was to take place that coming Monday. Exactly seven days before that, he missed his knife.

"When he held up the teller, he had to kill him to get away with the money. I had foreseen that he was going to make this

kind of a blunder. Papa Frita was always brutal. When they showed him the knife they had taken from Rocambole's body, he was forced to admit that it was his. When they showed him the threatening note, the same. So then, between establishing his alibi by declaring himself the man who robbed La Paternal and killed the teller, and confessing to having stabbed a man to death while motivated by passion . . . Don't you see? It was a matter of choosing. Papa Frita chose well."

Gabriel's face was shadowed now. His gaze continually eluded Mariucha, as if he were trying to hide it somewhere.

"As for what *really* happened to Rocambole . . . you can always take advantage of the necessity of a man's having to remove his clothes to take a shower, leaving them for a moment with pockets and all accessible—with a wall separating . . . Under those circumstances, anyone could turn *him* into the recipient of a note that doesn't say who it's addressed to."

Mariucha was breathing with difficulty. Suddenly, all this was becoming too much; it was producing a suffocating sensation within her.

Her Gabriel then . . .?

It was a murderer's confession.

She made an effort to keep from fainting; her knees felt weak. Her body started to sway, but with her back still to the display of gifts, she gripped the table edge more firmly.

"Don't fret, little one. It's all in the past now."

As he said this, Gabriel approached and stroked her hair gently. Then he kissed her again.

Mariucha loved him. Could she reject him? It was less possible at this moment than ever before! Mixed with her love now was pity and the confidence of the shared secret. There could no longer be a separation — for any reason — because Gabriel had truly surrendered his liberty to her.

"It's all right, Gabriel," she whispered.

Within a few minutes she had recovered. Her generous wife's heart had absorbed like a magic sponge the drop of bitterness of that unhappy confession as if it were the most insignificant thing, of which there no longer remained any trace.

At that moment the doorbell rang.

"Who could that be?" she asked softly; and she looked at Gabriel.

"I don't know . . ." he said, puzzled.

As if the catch of the door-latch, on turning, had released the spring of a jack-in-the-box,

into the room burst a human figure.

"Ah-hah! The love birds still hiding away, eh?" Sergeant Moras cried jovially. "Don't you two know that it's tea time now?"

But the most curious thing wasn't so much the friend's brusque entrance as the haste with which, as he was talking, he threw himself physically on the radio-phonograph combination and, embracing it, exclaimed, "I'm taking my present with me!"

Then, instantly, he added, "No, no! Don't be alarmed! I'll give it back to you. I'm just borrowing it."

And hugging the shiny machine to his chest he hopped outside the room and explained from the corridor, "If I didn't do it this way, you'd take it away from me. Because this little set had a microphone and tape recorder hidden inside which has taken down the romantic cooing of a pair of newlyweds. The fellows who were at the party last night are planning on listening to it . . . and this little recording will melt them down like chunks of sealing wax, one by one!"

The last sentence ended in a chuckle.

Gabriel moved toward the policeman, but it was already too late. The sergeant, who was dressed in street clothes, was racing like a demon down the stairs. And besides . . . how could he undertake any energetic movement with this pitiful stupor gripping him, which was slowly paralyzing him like the effects of a rattlesnake bite?

They could still hear, in the distance, the last echoing cries of the sergeant. "Don't take it badly, Gabriel. It's a joke, don't you know? A practical joke . . ."

Mariucha, deathly pale, dropped on the edge of the bed and sat looking desperately at Gabriel. Then, suddenly, emiting a choked sob, she began to cry.

The man lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply several times, and strolled slowly to the window which overlooked the street. He stood there looking, seeing nothing, seeing nothing through the opaque folds of the drapes. His face was expressionless. He looked like an idle stroller who had stopped before a shop window. At the end of a long silence, he sighed deeply, and in a hoarse voice said, "Well, now we know, Mariucha, which gift was number thirteen."

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