

SCIENTIFIC DETECTIVE

JULY, 1946

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MURDER WAITS TILL MIDNIGHT



THE DOUBLE TAKE



MURDER IS NEVER PERFECT



MURDER WITNESS



THE LENTON CROFT ROBBERIES

SCIENTIFIC DETECTIVE

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Murder

Waits Till Midnight

By ANDREW J. COLLINS

A "whodunit" with a Hollywood twist.

SILK SAUNDERS acquired a stool in front of the Ten Eyck bar and ordered a Manhattan. Newark's swankiest hotel was crowded and the Blue Room beyond the bar was a sea of shining, azure-tinted faces.

Silk's aimless gaze focused upon a small group less than a dozen feet away from him. Lois Lincoln, Hollywood's lovely singer, was the center of attraction at the table. Silk smiled thoughtfully. He wondered if the lovely screen star would still remember him.

Momentarily, he thought of the days when Lois and her mother had lived in the same apartment house with him. Lois had changed

a great deal. She was no longer the cute little red-head who listened to his detective cases with big, round eyes. She was a movie queen now. Silk looked at the others around the table. Sam Stacy, the local columnist, was watching Lois with a fatuous expression upon his round face. The glamorous brunette would be Rose La Rue, a dancer he'd seen in various pictures.

While he watched, a tall, fair-haired young man got to his feet and came to the bar. Silk recognized him then. The blond Adonis was Gordon Arnold, supposedly Lois Lincoln's fiance. Arnold asked the bartender for a rye highball.

There was another man at the table. Silk recognized him too. Sam Baxter, the house detective. He was sprawled in a chair, obviously playing watchdog. His dingy black suit needed pressing and his open coat exposed a soiled white shirt front. Two gold capped incisors glistened as the detective talked. Silk turned away and pushed his empty glass toward the bartender. A moment later, a voice at his elbow said:

"Hello, Mr. Saunders."

Silk turned around. Lois Lincoln was standing beside him, smiling with genuine pleasure. He grinned.

"Hello," he said. "I saw you sitting out there but I was afraid you wouldn't remember me."

"Oh, I wouldn't ever forget you," Lois assured him solemnly. "After all, aren't you Newark's best private detective?" She climbed up onto the vacant stool next to Silk and beamed at him.

"I think so," he told her. "How are you?"

Lois appropriated his drink and he ordered another one. Briefly, he probed her pretty face. The big grey eyes were not so candid anymore. As a matter of fact, he was certain he'd observed an ex-

pression of troubled unhappiness lurking in their depths. The broad smile glistening upon her red lips seemed a little strained.

Gordon Arnold was watching them wonderingly. Lois plucked at the blond boy's sleeve.

"Gordy, dear," she said gently, "I want you to meet Mr. Saunders, an old friend of mine."



Very quietly, Silk Saunders got to his feet and while everyone's attention was centered on Lois, he moved off into the darkness.

Pridefully, she added, "He's a private detective. A good one."

Gordon Arnold smiled vacantly and shook the detective's hand. Silk bought a round.

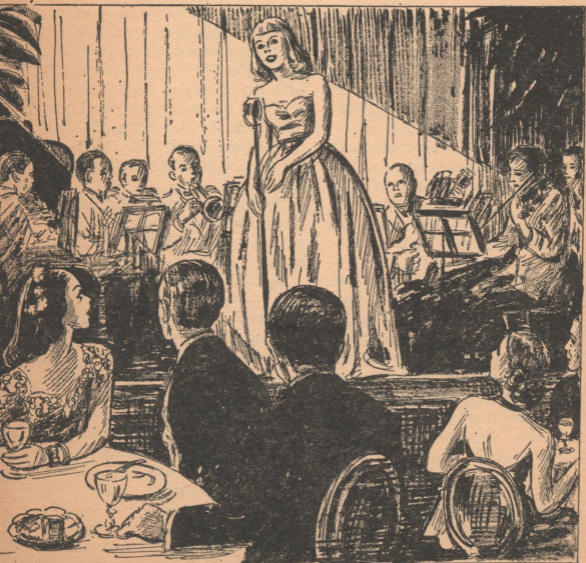
"What are you doing in town?" he inquired.

"We're playing a benefit here for the disabled soldiers. Then, too, it gives me a chance to visit

my folks. All of us came back from a tour day before yesterday."

Silk accepted that wordlessly. "Would you dance with me?" Lois asked finally.

"Any time at all," Silk announced, grinning. He led Lois out onto the dance floor and smoothly guided her through the



crowd of closely-packed couples.

When they were close to the bandstand, Lois missed a step. She looked up into the detective's face.

"Please," she said tensely, "I don't really want to dance. I want to talk to you. Privately."

Silk's eyebrows climbed.

"Trouble?" he asked tersely. Lois nodded.

Skillfully, he steered her through a doorway that led to the hotel lobby. They found a deserted chaise-lounge and sat down.

Lois Lincoln got out cigarettes and lit one for each of them. Silk's eyes widened in amazement.

"It's a habit I got into with Gordy," she explained.

"What's the trouble?" Silk queried. Lois sat up stiffly.

"You remember that time I ran away from home?" she asked.

Silk nodded.

"I was sure I was in love with Joe Baker's drummer," Lois continued. "I ran away and registered at that hotel as Mrs. Walter Smith, and was waiting for him to come and marry me, when you found me. You had discovered he already had a wife."

"Yeah," Silk said. "But, that was kid stuff."

"Maybe, it was," Lois admitted. "But tonight I have to pay out ten thousand dollars to buy the page out of that hotel register and some exceedingly foolish letters I wrote Walter."

"Blackmail," Silk said bluntly. Lois watched him with worried eyes. The detective sighed.

"You'd better tell me the whole story right from the beginning."

"Late this afternoon," Lois said, "before we played the show, I got a call from Walter. He said he had some papers that belonged to me and he wondered if I would be interested in their return. Then he told me what they were and how much he wanted. I couldn't think of anything to do, so I promised him the money. He told me to come to his room with the money at midnight and he'd give me the papers. He lives here in the hotel, room 706B."

"I know," Silk said. "This is not the first time he's blackmailed somebody."

"Well, why doesn't Mr. Baxter throw him out?" Lois demanded a little wildly. Silk's grin was bleak.

"I think Baxter's working with him."

Silk Sounders glanced at his wrist watch. It was five minutes until ten.

"We've got two hours," he said pensively.

"Then you will help?"

"Sure. I don't like blackmailers," Silk added gallantly, "And I do like you."

A beatific smile brightened Lois' face and her eyes were suddenly luminous. It was easy to see how she had climbed to the heights in Hollywood.

Gordon Arnold found them. He looked a little reproachfully at Lois.

"I was getting lonesome," he said pleasantly.

Lois patted the cushion beside her and he sat down.

"I've just finished telling Mr. Saunders all about it," Lois told Gordon. "He's going to help."

The handsome blond's face brightened.

"That's swell," he said. Silk was watching the actor closely.

"How do you feel about all this?" he asked.

"I advised Lois to tell him to go to the devil," Gordon said. "I'm in love with her. I don't care what she's done before."

Silk grinned approval.

"Just as soon as we get back to Hollywood," Gordon amplified, "we're going to be married."

"It wasn't Gordy I was worrying about," Lois explained to Silk. "It's the effect that sort of thing would have if it came out in the newspapers."

"Well, don't you worry," Silk advised. "I'll see what I can do." He stood up. "In the meantime," he added gently, "I'd stop carrying that gun around."

Lois Lincoln jumped and she clutched her bag tightly. Then she smiled.

"It's only a little gun," she pointed out. "I just put it in my purse because I was frightened tonight."

"You'd better get rid of it,"

Silk advised in a warning tone.

Gordon stood up. "I think we had better be getting back to our table," he said. He held out a hand to Lois and helped her to her feet. Quite obviously, she was very much in love with the handsome actor.

"Won't you come and sit with us for a while?" she asked Silk. "Perhaps, we can dance again."

"What's to stop me from running up and seeing Walter right now?" the detective asked. Lois shook her head and frowned.

"That won't do," she said. "He said he won't have the papers until shortly before midnight."

Silk pursed his lips and the broad flat planes of his face stretched tautly.

"You haven't told anyone about that escapade of yours?"

"Only Gordy," Lois answered.

"Um," said Silk. He went with them to the big table at the edge of the dance floor. The floor show was about to begin. Baxter, the house dick, gave Silk a crooked grin and Sam Stacy waved a puffy hand in greeting. Rose La Rue ignored the detective. There was another man at the table now. Lois introduced him. He was Jack Gatewood, her manager.

Gatewood was a small man with a gift of gab and a happy grin that never left his round, child-like face.

From the bandstand a spotlight sprang into sudden brilliance wavered among the crowd and

finally came to rest upon Lois Lincoln. A master of ceremonies fiddling with the microphone found his voice and started clapping his hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he intoned, "tonight we have with us one of Hollywood's loveliest stars." He shouted the name. "Miss Lois Lincoln." The crowd applauded and Lois took a bow. The m. c. beckoned for her to come up to the mike. Lois joined him on the bandstand, spoke to the baton-waver and started in to sing.

"Ain't she terrific?" Jack Gatewood enthused. He beamed upon Silk. The detective nodded.

"She's from Newark, too," Sam Stacy put in. "I didn't know you knew her, Saunders."

Because he didn't like the gossip peddler, Silk spoke sharply. "There are lots of things you do not know."

Baxter, the dingy looking house dick, didn't say anything. His grubby fingers were wrapped around a highball glass with ambitious tenacity. Gordon said nothing.

Very quietly, Silk Saunders got to his feet and while the attention was centered upon Lois, he moved off into the darkness. He left the hotel and got into his coupe, parked across the street, and drove to police headquarters. He found detective sergeant Johnny Hearn in one of the few lighted offices. The police officer

flashed him a smile of welcome.

"Hello, Silk," he said amiably. "What's on your mind? Or are you just visiting?"

"I want to ask you something Johnny. What do you know about Walter Smith?"

The detective pulled a pipe out of a baggy pocket and made a ceremony of filling it and putting it in his mouth.

"I guess we don't know any more than you do," he said finally. "We figure him for blackmail and women. But, we've never been able to get enough on him to put him away. Why? You got something?"

Reluctantly, Silk admitted that he had nothing definite. He stated rather bluntly that he wished he had.

Hearn's grin was rueful. "You are not alone."

Silk left the station with the feeling that he had wasted time. He drove to his apartment in North Newark. Inside, he got out of his coat and into a shoulder rig. He glanced at his watch. It was a little after eleven thirty. He put his coat on and flicked out the lights.

It took him fifteen minutes to get back to the Hotel Ten Eyck. Lois Lincoln and her party were no longer in the Blue Room. He thought of asking at the desk for her room number and visiting with her before he went to see Smith. He changed his mind.

The elevator operator gave him

a cursory glance and lifted him to the seventh floor in studied silence. 706B was almost directly in front of the elevator. Silk put his finger on the tiny red button and pushed. He heard the buzzer rasping inside the room but nothing happened. He tried the door. The knob turned. Very gently he pushed the door open.

His glance flicked around the living room. When he saw the tips of two black shoes pointing ceilingward, he stepped hastily inside and closed the door.

Walter Smith wouldn't blackmail anyone else. There was a tiny, red crusted hole just above the right eye. The corpse was sprawled on its back beside an upholstered arm-chair.

Silk Saunders sighed heavily and looked around the room. A small .25 caliber automatic was on the floor close to the body. Beside the arm chair, an ash tray held several cigarette butts. One of them had a brilliant red tip.

Bleakly, the detective added up the score. He knew without being told that the gun would turn out to be the one Lois had carried in her purse. The cigarette butt would be hers, too. He cursed bitterly and turned his attention to the bedroom.

He had just moved inside the open door and taken a step toward a massive bureau, when out of the corner of his eye he detected movement. He was too late. A shape stepped out from behind

the bedroom door and slammed something down on top of his skull. He fell into a deep, yawning pit of blackness.

There were people in the room when Silk came out of it. He was lying on the bed and the huge bulk of Inspector Roy Swift of the homicide bureau was perched on the edge of the mattress.

"Got a headache?" Swift inquired with exaggerated solicitude. He was grinning. The inspector was more than six feet tall and almost as wide. He seemed amused by Silk's grimace of pain.

People were moving around in the living room. Silk got up and walked shakily into the other room. Swift had brought his entire organization. Fingerprint men were busy, an assistant coroner was examining the corpse and a photographer was shooting pictures from all angles.

Silk stood in the connecting doorway, leaning against the frame and waiting for his battered head to stop spinning. Swift mentioned an anonymous tip.

"You will stick your nose into police business," Swift remarked callously. "Who hit you?"

"Yehudi," Silk snarled. "Who the hell did you think did it?" Swift laughed at him. A uniformed patrolman came into the partment with the elevator operator in tow.

Questioning elicited the fact that Lois Lincoln had been picked

up on the seventh floor and taken down to the third, just a short time before Silk entered Smith's room. She had been crying. The operator announced that he had also brought Silk up. No one else. Swift sent him back to work.

"What business did you have with him, Silk?" the inspector asked with deceptive mildness. Silk shook his head.

"I'm sorry——" he began.

"Yeah, yeah," Swift interrupted wearily, "a privileged communication. Why don't you wise up? I'm going to find out anyway."

Lieutenant Johnny Harms, who was always with the inspector, said, "Yeah, sure. We're gonna find out."

Silk grinned at Harms. The man was a parrot. No matter what Swift was liable to say, Harms would repeat it.

"Well," Silk said genially, "I guess that's what you'll have to do."

Swift said, "You don't know who owns the gun?"

Silk shook his head.

"I guess we won't be needing you any longer," the inspector remarked suggestively.

"Yeah," said Harms, "We won't be needing you any more."

There was a cocktail party going on in Lois Lincoln's suite. She opened the door and smiled a little weakly at Silk.

"The cops will be here in no time at all," the detective said swiftly. "You had better tell me

what happened, the whole story."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," Lois countered. Her cheeks were flame red. The rest of the people in the room ignored them.

Silk said, "Smith is dead. Murdered. Shot with what I'm willing to bet is your gun."

Terror welled up into Lois Lincoln's eyes and she began to shake.

"Oh, no," she pleaded piteously. The color seeped out of her cheeks and she was thoroughly disorganized. Sam Stacy, the columnist sauntered over to them, a tall glass in his hand. He looked a little tight.

"Hello, shamus," he said smiling. He tried to put an arm around Lois's shoulder but she brushed him off with the same absent disdain she would use on a fly. The newspaperman shrugged and wandered away. Gatewood, Lois's manager, was watching them with sharp little eyes that missed nothing. Gordon was talking to Rose La Rue with a distinctly animated face.

Lois got herself under control and placed a hand upon Silk's arm.

"I didn't kill him," she said evenly. "I don't know who did." Before Silk had time to say anything else, the doorbell clattered into sound.

Lois reached out and pulled the door open. Inspector Roy Swift grinned at Silk and bowed to

Lois. Harms was directly behind the inspector.

Silk got through the introductions in a hurry. Jack Gatewood joined the tiny group at the door and waited for the inspector to explain. The others trooped over almost immediately. Gatewood finally spoke up.

"I'm Miss Lincoln's manager. Anything that concerns her you'd better take up with me. I'll take care of it for her."

Swift said, "How would you like to take a little trip to the chair for her?" Gatewood went white.

"The chair?" he echoed stupidly.

"Yeah," Harms said. "The chair."

What had been a party now disintegrated into a wake. People got their wraps and exhibited a strong desire to leave. The inspector blocked the door.

Gatewood said, "We'd better sit down and talk this over." He led the way into the living room. Swift found a bottle and a glass and poured himself a drink. Harms got one for himself, too. Lois settled nervously into a seat upon the davenport. She was immediately flanked by Gordon and Gatewood. Stacy sprawled in an armchair, his eyes very bright and attentive. Silk leaned against the miniature bar and made a drink.

"Just a short time ago," Swift began, "Walter Smith was mur-

dered in his room, number 706B."

Gatewood snapped: "Well, what has that got to do with us? We don't give a damn."

"I'm not so sure." Swift put his hand in his coat pocket and pulled out the small gun. The sharp intake of breath was a dead giveaway. Lois fought for control of herself.

"This is yours, isn't it?" Swift demanded. Lois nodded. Gatewood was staring at her in horrified stupefaction.

Silk Saunders said, "You didn't waste any time tying it up." Swift smiled, pleased with himself.

"The elevator operator brought her down from the seventh floor less than an hour ago. She was in tears and he is almost certain that she came from Smith's room. There's a cigarette butt with a woman's lipstick in the ash tray up there. Here's another one exactly like it."

The homicide detective pointed a finger toward the nearest ash tray. Lois Lincoln's face became a dull, lifeless gray. She got to her feet and faced Silk Saunders with hopeless despair mirrored in her eyes. She took one faltering step and swayed. Silk grabbed her as she started for the floor.

"For the time being," Swift announced, "Miss Lincoln will be under police protection here in this room. Further questioning will decide our next move." He

lumbered across the room to the telephone and called for the house doctor. Next he called headquarters and arranged for police guards and nurses.

Silk got Lois comfortably ensconced upon a bed and sent Rose La Rue to care for her. He got into his coat silently. He was worrying about the result of further questioning. As soon as Swift found out about the blackmail angle, Lois Lincoln would be headed for the chair.

Ignoring the others, Silk went out. He was downstairs in the bar, drinking a highball when Gatewood, Gordon and Sam Stacy joined him. Gatewood's bland, cherubic face was stiffened with concern. He looked at Silk.

"You're a private dick, aren't you?"

Sam Stacy said, "He's good at it, too."

A few feet away from them Sam Baxter, the house detective, had his nose in a beer glass. He came over and joined the group. A clock behind the bar showed that it was five minutes after one.

The expression of dismal hopelessness on Gordon's handsome face was almost pathetic. He looked at Silk.

"Can't you do something?" he asked.

Gatewood said tensely, "I don't care what it costs. You get Lois out of this mess and you can name your own fee."

Silk told him, "You don't need a detective. You need a magician."

Sam Stacy's fat face was beaming. "There will be a flock of reporters here in no time at all," he announced. Silk glowered at him.

"I suppose you turned it in already?" he snapped.

Stacy sipped his drink. "Sure. I'm a newspaperman. A murder is a murder to me."

Inspector Roy Swift's figure emerged from the elevator and saved Sam Stacy. Silk had been about to hit him. The inspector, with Harms behind him, bellied the bar a few feet away. Swift jerked his head and Silk went to him.

"You'd better take a run upstairs and talk to your client," the inspector advised softly. "The boy at the door will let you through. She wants to see you."

"What's happened to you?" Silk queried, amazed. "You're not going soft, are you?" Swift gave him a crooked grin.

"No," he said. "But this thing stinks. You know what she would not tell us. Maybe you can help work it out." The inspector was scowling at the group Silk had just left. He said, "Beat it."

Silk had no trouble getting in to see Lois Lincoln. The cop had opened the door as soon as he saw the detective. The screen star was propped up in bed. Her face was white and strained and her eyes were terrified. A stout

nurse in blue and white seersucker moved swiftly around the room. As Silk settled to a seat on the edge of the bed, the nurse went out of the room and closed the door.

"All right, kid," Silk said swiftly. "Let's hear your story. Why did you go up to see him?"

Lois shivered. "I was foolish, I know, but I recalled some of the things I had said in those letters and I knew I didn't want anyone to read them.

"So, I thought I could talk to him." She paused. "He was rotten. Nasty. And he said the price had gone up. He wanted fifty thousand dollars. He said I had made a million in the movies and I could spare it."

Silk Saunders listened intently. She was all wound up and the words were tumbling from her lips.

"I took my little gun out and tried to hold him up. He laughed at me and took the gun out of my hands. He was still laughing when I ran out of the apartment."

Silk Saunders stood up and lit a cigarette.

"I don't think you shot him," he said thoughtfully. "And, I'm sure you didn't hit me over the head."

He saw her wide eyes and explained.

"Then, whoever killed him must have been right there in the room." Silk nodded.

"Yes. But, what I can't figure

out is who would gain by killing him and having you sent to the chair for the killing." Lois tried hard to think.

"I can't either," she said eventually.

The nurse came into the room, silently terminating Silk's session with his client. He went downstairs and found that the inspector and his repetitious henchman were quizzing Gordon, Stacy, Gatewood and Baxter. Swift's disgusted expression showed how little he'd accomplished.

"They all admit they were in and out of Lois Lincoln's suite but none of them admits going up to the seventh floor."

Sam Stacy said, "Why should we? We don't figure into this at all. I knew Smith, but, I certainly wouldn't kill him. Blackmail is a dirty racket, but, I wouldn't kill a guy because he was in it."

Silk Saunders' bright, black eyes glowed. He looked at Roy Swift and grinned.

"I'm going to run up again and talk to Lois," Silk said. "I want to ask her just one question. If she says what I think she will, I'll soon tell you who did it and why."

Roy Swift said, "Sit down, boys."

The clock behind the bar was at five minutes until two. Quickly, they ordered a double round of drinks. The bar closed at two.

Silk Saunders was with Lois

for nearly ten minutes. It took that long to break her down. When he joined the others in the deserted bar, he was grinning.

He dropped into a chair beside Roy Swift. Johnny Harms, silent for once, sat on the other side of him. Sam Stacy lolled in his seat, an expression of good-natured tolerance on his face. Sam Baxter was definitely sore. He had hoped to be in on this case, but the hotel didn't seem to be involved. Gordon and Gatewood were a solemn-faced pair directly opposite Silk.

Silk Saunders said, "This was a funny one to figure out. No one had a motive for killing Walter Smith except Lois Lincoln. She was being blackmailed by him and her career was threatened, perhaps her happiness." He paused. "But, she didn't kill him."

Stacy snarled, "Well, who did?"

"Yeah," said Johnny Harms, "who did?"

"Let me do this my own way," Silk insisted.

"Lois told me tonight that she had received a telephone call from Walter Smith. He wanted ten thousand dollars or he was going to make public some letters she wrote him when she was a kid. But he couldn't turn the papers over to her until midnight. Therefore, he had to get them.

"That sounds screwy," Silk pointed out. "Because if they were letters she had written to

him, he'd have them. There was also some mention of a hotel register page. Perhaps he didn't have that."

Sam Baxter interrupted.

"That's what it must have been. I was getting it for him." The scornful expressions around him sent the blood into his face. "Well," he said defensively, "a pal of mine is the detective in that hotel and Smith offered me a hundred bucks if I could get it." He opened his dirty black coat and pulled out a long, lined page folded in half.

"I'll take that," Roy Swift snapped. "That's evidence."

"Yeah," Harms echoed. "That's evidence."

Silk went on, "Lois thought about her letters and she realized they would seem exceedingly ridiculous. She didn't want anyone to see them. So she went upstairs to bargain with Smith. He laughed at her. She threatened him with that tiny gun and he took it away from her. She ran out of his place, crying."

"What she didn't know was that she was being followed. The man who had come up the stairway, instead of the elevator, knocked on Walter Smith's door. The mutt let him in and told him about Lois' visit. He even showed him the gun. Maybe it was laying on a table there in the room. All I know is that the killer realized he had a golden opportunity. He picked up the gun and blasted

Walter Smith out of the world."

Silk scanned the tense faces about him, waiting for someone to make a break. Gordon had a drawn, unhappy look. Sam Baxter was shaking like a leaf. Gatewood was raptly attentive. Sam Stacy was wearing a half smile. He was being deliberately derisive.

"Go on," Roy Swift said testily. "Let's get this over with."

Sam Stacy said, "Yes. Do. I have a dead line to worry about."

Silk shrugged. "Lois Lincoln has piled up more than a million dollars in the ten years she's been a screen star."

Gatewood said, "That's the truth. I've always managed her money and sunk it away for her."

"Right," said Silk. "Now, all you have to do is ask yourself who would benefit if Lois Lincoln were sent to the electric chair for murder." He saw startled amazement spread quickly on Sam Gatewood's face.

"Why, that dirty, stinkin'—." He broke off as he observed a quick, desperate movement. He leaped.

It took Silk Saunders, Roy Swift and Johnny Harms to pull Lois Lincoln's manager away from his prostrate victim. There were ugly, blue bruises on Gordon's throat and Silk was sure Gatewood would have killed him. Johnny Harms slipped a bracelet on one of Gordon's wrists.

"You see," Silk said softly,

"Gatewood was the only one who knew that Lois had married Gordon. They had a very simple ceremony in London. When the studio heard about it, they raised cain. Gatewood promised to keep it a secret until the publicity department could build up a big splurge on their romance and a bigger one on their wedding."

"That's what you went upstairs to ask her?" Swift queried. Silk nodded.

"It had to be something like that. Nothing else would fit. Gordon wasn't making out too well in the movies and he wanted money. He saw his chance and took it. If his wife went to the chair her money became his. He's the bird that conked me so he could get away."

Johnny Harms was moving out into the lobby with Gordon. He paused, said something to his prisoner. Then, the detective's hand snaked inside the actor's coat. He led the man back to the table.

"Here's the letters," he said proudly. "He took 'em off Smith." Gordon didn't say a word. He was watching Johnny Harms. Roy Swift took the letters. As he did, Gordon jerked savagely and the handcuffs in Harms hand came loose. The actor scurried swiftly toward the door and freedom.

He was just going through the front door when the slug from
(continued on page 22)

THE Double

It isn't often that a pick-pocket returns a favor. And when he does, there are unexpected consequences.

DR. SMYTHE urged his car to the highest point of the mountain road, changed quickly into top gear, and sped onward as fast as the rough sun-baked surface would permit.

As his straining engine roared over the narrow tortuous switch-back, he swore silently at the Widow Doherty. The last time he had been asked to come to her little cottage away in the solitude of the mountains, she had met him at the door, and in reply to his inquiry as to what ailed her, calmly informed him that she felt lonely.

He decided firmly that if her complaint proved to be no more serious this time, he would give her a lecture and a bill which would make her a little more cautious in future. A man must draw the line somewhere, no matter how kind-hearted he may be.

Thinking of giving Widow Doherty a bill, reminded him of his need for haste. He had been on his way to the bank with the contents of his safe—almost a hundred pounds in notes—when he had been intercepted to attend a motorcycle casualty. That job done, he had discovered that the bank was closed, and on returning home had found a message waiting for him from the Widow Doherty.

Only when he was half way up the mountain road had he remembered that the money was still in his pocket and this very mountain, Knockmanish, was where Tom the Rider had assaulted and robbed a bank car, traveling to the sub-office in Kilmonian, two days ago.

The doctor gritted his teeth and prayed that he would reach home before dark. It was strange how

Take

By HAMILTON ALLEN

Courtesy Ireland's Own

this wilderness of immense silent crags and bracken played on a man's nerves. He, who claimed to be an authority on neurotic reaction of every kind, was himself beginning to get the wind up.

As usual, the Widow Doherty complained of what she termed "bronickal throuble." As usual, the doctor diagnosed her complaint to be nothing more than a desire to hear a human voice and news from the town, and although he cursed himself for being a soft-hearted old fool, his visit cost her no more than on previous occasions.

On his way home he swerved dangerously round a corner, jammed on his brakes, and came to a standstill a few yards from a tramp who stood in the middle of the road signalling him to stop.

"Goin' Ballydargle way, sir?" asked the man.

The doctor regarded the stranger searchingly and thought of

the wad of notes in his pocket, but after a moment's hesitation, judged him harmless.

"Yes, get in," he said.

Already the sun was low enough to throw the black mass of Knockmanish into a clean silhouette, and he decided that any company would be better than the long silent journey in loneliness.

"Live around here?" he asked.

"Used to," replied the tramp, "but I've been away over three years."

As the vagrant volunteered no further information, the doctor offered him a cigarette in an effort to loosen his tongue.

"Thank ye, sir," said his passenger. "Faith an' that's a purty wee lighter ye have. A great savin' on the matches them things."

"Oh, it's only a cheap thing," the doctor replied lightly. "Got it for half-a-crown before the war,

so I'm afraid these flashy jewels on it aren't the real McCoy. But you were saying you hadn't been home for three years. Been abroad?"

"No," replied the tramp, and for a moment fell into deep meditation. "Listen Dr. Smythe—oh, I know ye all right—ye're a dacint sort, an' having lifted me I s'pose it's only right to tell ye I've been doin' a stretch."

"A what?" ejaculated Dr. Smythe.

"Aye sir, I'm just out—just out of jail. Time was I could have took a bowl of milk from a cat without it knowin'. Peter the Pinch they called me. But I've paid the price of me antics. This time no more pickin' of pockets for me. I'm living honest from now on. Cripes, ye're dhrivin' at an awful lick—ye'll be killin' the both of us!"

The doctor, however, did not slow down. But more to steady his nerves than from curiosity he encouraged his companion to talk.

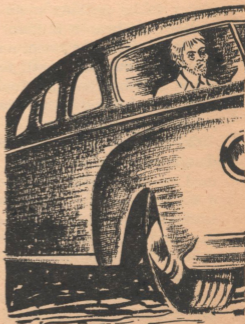
"I'm surprised," he said, "that you come back here where you're known if you want to make a fresh start. Wouldn't you have a better chance somewhere as a complete stranger?"

"Oh, I'm not comin' to stay,"

replied the bearded ex-pickpocket. "I've an account to settle up this way, an' when that's done I'll be off. 'A prophet hath no honour in his own country,'" he quoted solemnly.

The doctor laughed outright, despite his nerves, at the incongruity of this simply stated maxim. It seemed slightly out of place when applied to pickpockets, and his hand stole unobtrusively into his inner pocket, as though he half expected to find his wallet gone. It was still there, but he decided to remain watchful.

A man on horseback, a few hundred yards ahead, seemed to be having difficulty in controlling his mount. The doctor slowed down, and then brought his car to



As the man on horseback struggled to control his mount, the doctor brought his car to an abrupt halt.



an abrupt halt as the animal careened across his path.

"Tom the Rider!" exclaimed the tramp in an awestruck whisper, and the words had scarcely left his lips when the horseman slipped to the ground and stood smiling at them behind a leveled revolver.

"Sorry to trouble you, gentlemen," said their assailant, as they scrambled from the car with upraised hands. "Fact is I was expecting a much more profitable traveler up this way, but as he hasn't turned up, and I need a quid or two pretty badly, I'll bother you for the contents of your pockets. It's a ticklish job getting a living these days when people carry so little ready cash."

The doctor's thoughts were a mad jumble of possibilities. A hero of fiction would have snatched the man's gun, struggled with him for a few moments, and then sailed home triumphantly with the fellow trussed up in the back of the car. But he judged wisely that Tom the Rider seemed to have the advantage both in nimbleness and in strength.

With a feeling of despair, he watched his pocket wallet being removed. The highwayman shoved it carelessly into his hip pocket, and handed him back his cigarettes and a few odds and ends, explaining that as he smoked a pipe the cigarettes would be of no use to him.

Then without a second glance

at the tramp, who had watched the proceedings silently with upraised hands, the robber ordered them back into the car.

As the doctor was starting the engine, he was astonished to see Peter the Pinch produce from his rags the jewelled cigarette lighter which he had admired earlier, and coolly proceed to light a cigarette stub. And even as he did so the inevitable happened.

"Here, what have you got there?" snapped Tom the Rider, stepping briskly to the other side of the car.

"Aw, Mистер, Mистер—please, please," pleaded Peter the Pinch. "The lighter me poor old father give me. It's a heirloom. Honest, boss, I'll give ye anythin' if ye'll spare me this."

"Hand it over," said Tom the Rider grimly.

"Listen, boss. I'll bring ye the value of it. I'll do anythin' except lose this. It's the only thing I have to remind my of bygone happy days."

"Give it to me," said the other with menace.

The tramp held the lighter away from him, right across the doctor's face, and the highwayman, becoming angry, leaned inside the car across his stubborn victim, and wrenched the glittering object away from him.

"I've a mind to make you walk for your cheek," he said with an oath.

"Please, Mистер, please, it's the

only thing of value," whined the vagrant.

"Drive on," barked Tom the Rider, and the doctor did not need to be told twice.

Before the practitioner had time to question his companion's conduct, the latter spoke in a tone which startled him.

"I want to jump off round this next bend," he said imperiously.

"I'm not stopping till we get to Ballydargle Police Station," replied the doctor emphatically.

"Well, I'm not a man to cause trouble," said Peter the Pinch simply, "but if this tap at me feet stops the pethril to the ingin, I'm thinkin' we'll stop when I want to."

As he spoke the engine began to misfire, and losing momentum at the bottom of a short hill, the car came to a standstill.

Peter the Pinch hopped out with a laugh on his bearded lips, and contemplated the puzzled doctor for a moment.

"Just as I suspected," the doctor exploded vehemently. "You are in league with that rogue, you dirty low down—"

"Half a sec, Guv'nor," the tramp interrupted. "I can clear things up if ye'll let me. Ye see, Tom the Rider done me a good turn once. He double crossed me an' landed me in jail, and that cured me of me bad habits. So I'm about to do the same for him this very night—that's what I'm here for."

"I don't believe a word of it," snapped the doctor. "You're up to some foul trickery."

Peter the Pinch regarded him from beneath shaggy eyebrows.

"Keep away from that pethrol tap for a minute," he said, "and listen to me. If I hadn't got a lift from ye, I mightn't have found me ould friend as aisy. And seein' as how one good turn desarves another, I took this along jist to show I mane what I'm talking about."

Sweeping his battered green hat from his head, he extracted the missing pocket wallet from inside the crown and handed it to the doctor.

"Count the notes if ye like," he added, "but I'm thinkin' they're all there."

As the doctor sat speechless, staring into those gleaming brown eyes, a clatter of hooves in the clear mountain air stirred Peter the Pinch to action.

"Huh," he chuckled, "Tom has noticed that somebody must have took the loan of his wallet of notes. An' be the rate he's travelin', he must have heerd the car stoppin'. Betther turn on the tap again an git goin'. I'll have time for a nice private talk with him afore ye send out the guards. Poor dear Tom, he didn't reckernise me, so I s'pose I'll have to interjuce meself all over agin. Huh, that'll be a touchin' scene!"

The grimy old fellow pulled a revolver from his rags and stood

back. The hoof beats became ominously loud.

"You're not going to shoot him?" the doctor exclaimed in horror.

"Bless yer honor, not likely," Peter the Pinch said with an amused chuckle. "I'm goin' to save him the way he saved me,

and the only way I can think of doin' it is to scare the divil out of him till you send help up to me."

With a wild confusion of thoughts, which he had no time to analyze, Dr. Smythe raced furiously down the mountain in frantic search of the Ballydargle police.



MURDER WAITS TILL MIDNIGHT

(continued from page 15)

Silk Saunders' gun caught him in the shoulder. Harms picked him up on the sidewalk.

Silk said, "That cigarette butt with Lois' lipstick on the tip was supposed to tie her in with the kill more solidly. Gordon deliberately left it in the ash tray. And that's what led me to him."

"How?" Swift demanded.

"Lois told me she had gotten into the habit of lighting his cigarettes for him. And according

to her story she didn't smoke while she was up there. So——"

"Well, I'll be——," said Swift.

Sam Gatewood said, "Saunders, you can name your own price. You did a wonderful job."

"You couldn't pay *my* price," Silk said, grinning. "I'm going upstairs and collect my fee personally."

Gatewood scratched his head and watched the detective walk over to the elevator. Then a smile came out on his face.

MURDER

IS NEVER PERFECT

By GLENN LOW

He liked to keep people guessing, but he hadn't planned that his own death be so mysterious.

STEPHAN MAUN, retired real estate wealthy, and I were talking about his hidden money. He was telling me that he'd decided it was foolish to keep so much cash in the house, when we heard a scraping sound.

"Go look out the window, Joe Prince," he said. "Maybe it's a cat climbing the ivy."

I crossed the room, started to lift the sash, first glancing through the night-blackened, bullet-proof glass. My fingers froze on the lifts.

A face! A kind of a face, obscurely limned in the spill of light from the room, peered in. A face I knew well. A dead man's face, now, because a month ago Calvin Page had died.

"Some devilish prankster!" I said, and flung up the sash.

The face was gone.

"It was Page," said Maun, laughing gauntly. Continuing in that thin cackle, he said: "I told you, Prince. You'll not make fun of me now. It was simply Page's ghost."

I pressed my face to the steel bars lacing the window, strained my eyes to find something in the lawn below. A wispy moon knifed a crescent blade through a fist of cloud. The shrubbery clumps became big black knots against the drop of the trackless snow.

Across the lawn a light winked on over the garage in the chauffeur's apartment. Then the soft throb of orchestra music pulsed on the quiet, sparkling night as Mr. Biddy's radio began playing.

"Somebody's trying to frighten you, Mr. Maun," I said. "Somebody's after you——"

A sudden glimmer of the lights, a hard grunt, a solid thump, brought me whirling from the window.

Maun was humped forward, hands on knees, in the position of a man playing leap-frog—Maun was falling, tilting forward, like a man trying for a somersault.

He was dead when I reached him. The framework of the room's big chandelier dropped a bar of shadow across his still face.

"Joe! Joe Prince!"

That was Hank Willits, Maun's

bodyguard, calling from out in the hall, rapping on the room's only door—a door that was bolted on the inside.

"Anything wrong in there, Joe?"

I started to try a lie, started to tell him that Maun was dead, that the long expected heart attack had materialized. Then I didn't. I told a different lie. One that couldn't do me any good.

"Everything is all right," I said.

"Okay," Willits replied. Then, as I drew an easier breath, he called to Maun. "Mr. Maun."

I wondered if I could simulate Maun's voice well enough to deceive Willits. I thought I could. I thought I'd try. "Well?" I said, rasping it.

"Just wanted to be sure," the bodyguard said.

I heard him sit down on the couch out in the hall.

I pressed my fingers against the purpling, circular bruise on Maun's head. A sickening softness met my touch.

I went to each of the room's three windows, raised the sashes with their bullet-proof glass, examined the steel bars set deeply in the stone casements. No one had tampered with the windows.

The room's walls were plaster over slat lathe and papered. The size and arrangement of the furniture forbade any one concealing himself behind or under it. When we'd come in, alone, Maun had bolted the door.



It seemed that Stephen Maun's death was linked in some way with the plaster bust which had been stolen from his nephew's studio table.

Still, some one must have been in the room.

Moving over to a large, old-fashioned fireplace, I saw a lone grey hair sticking to the blade of a fire shovel.

This shovel was of soft pewter, a slim-handled ornament never meant for actual use. The hair on it, I thought, was Maun's. Kneeling before the fireless hearth, I peered up the chimney.

It was then I became possessed of a most impractical idea. A small person, I reasoned, might have entered the room by the chimney. It was clean, there never having been a fire lit in the grate. Maun's country house was heated by a gas furnace. Mortar blobs sticking from the chimney brick might have been used as climbing holds.

Since the door was bolted, the windows barred, the chimney stood as the only possible means of entry.

The utter implausibility of that story I meant to tell was at that moment inapparent to my distraught powers of judgment. I slipped the bolt on the door and asked Willits to step inside.

The next moment revealed my stupidity.

Willits took one look at Maun, then turned accusing eyes on me.

"So, it was you who tried to slug him that other time?" he said. "You were here that night. Mrs. McLarnie said she suspected you."

He flicked an automatic from an arm-pit holster and leveled it at me. At me—Lieutenant Joseph Prince, Homicide, Angelwood Division.

I laughed at his gun. "Don't be silly," I said. "I didn't kill him." Then I started to tell him about seeing the face at the window, but changed my mind. If this was what he considered cooperation with the law, I'd cooperate his way.

"I'm taking you to headquarters, Lieutenant," he said, his face becoming slightly wolfish.

"Okay, let's go," I told him.

"Anxious, ain't you?" he sneered. "Anxious to get out of this room ain't y——"

The sound of the WHIR stopped him. He stood back from the corpse, keeping me covered. As we listened his face paled. Maybe mine did the same.

The sound seemed to come from—anywhere. It was a whir, a whining, muffled, whir.

It was almost midnight. Maun's house is located in a sparsely settled rural community. I was satisfied that the sound came from within the house.

It continued, creepishly whining, for a full minute, then quit.

Willits licked dry lips and said, "Now, what was that?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," I told him. "But I'm thinking it's some trick of mystery that Stephan Maun rigged up."

Several months ago, after re-

tiring from a nice real estate business, withdrawing all his money from various investments, Maun had purchased this old stone mansion and moved into it. He had come here from the city, a lonely old bachelor, deeply interested in certain magic arts, also in the peaceful continuance of his life, long threatened by heart disease.

He'd brought nearly a half million dollars with him and had hidden it somewhere in the house, probably in this fortified room, afterwards telling his heirs that its hiding-place would be uniquely revealed at the time of his death.

The house was built on a single story. It had sixteen rooms arranged in a south and north wing, with three baths, an adequate basement, and a lofty, unfinished attic.

Recently he had changed his mind about keeping the money near him. In fact that is why I was with him when he was murdered. He had phoned me to come, spend the night with him, then escort him to town the next day. He had decided to return his money to the banks. He was an old friend of mine. Our acquaintance and friendship developed because we had once met at the Cosmos Club and discovered that we played chess with almost the same amount of adroitness. He had chosen me to guard him and his money on its return trip

to town, because he no longer trusted his hired bodyguard, Hank Willits.

Maun's fondness for riddles was legendary. Just before I'd gone to look out the window he'd spun a tricky conundrum. He'd said: "In a minute, Joe, I'll take you to the spot I've hidden my money. But I'll tell you now, you would never have guessed its hiding place, because *it is hidden where the substance as whereof I am soon to be is not disturbed.*"

Later he had talked of his old business enemy, Calvin Page. He'd seemed pleased that death had touched Page before coming to him. I had laughed almost dubiously when he'd told me of seeing Calvin Page's face peering in at the window.

"Twice now since the old scallawag died," he'd said, holding up two pale, skinny fingers. Each time at the south window there. Staring in like an old sick idiot. The old fool. The poor old dead fool." Then he'd cackle, adding: "Scrooge had his Marley, you know, and I've got my Page."

Now he was dead, stricken down as by a dark Providence. Considering that I had not killed him, the situation seemed impossible. Hank Willits believed me guilty of murder. And could I blame him? All who understood the impregnability of this room would join him in that belief.

Maun had prepared the room, making it invulnerable, after an

attempt was made on his life two months ago. Some one had tried to slug him in a rear hall. The lights had been turned off and he had been attacked. The timely arrival of a nephew, Leslie Maun, who lived in the house with his wife, had saved him.

Then, aware that a killer or killers were out to murder him, knowing the hidden money to be powerful murder bait, he'd called in workmen and had this room turned into a veritable fortress. For super safety he'd hired Hank Willits as a bodyguard.

Shortly after the WHIR ceased, Willits said: "Even the chimney is cemented over at the top. Nobody besides you and Mr. Maun was in this room."

His attitude made me sore. I stepped toward him, disregarding his gun, with half a mind to smack his face in. A heel-dog like him, calling me a killer—a Lieutenant of Detectives, with nine years clean service behind me. I decided against any rough stuff, though, and said:

"I'm going to call headquarters."

I turned toward the phone on a stand by the door.

"Oh, no you don't," he said. "No tricks! No tricks!"

"Then you call the police," I said, humoring the gun in his hand and the wild light in his eyes.

Maybe he was going to call them. He did sidle toward the

phone. Then Mrs. McLarnie, Maun's housekeeper, came in and stopped him.

Mrs. McLarnie was a block-faced, wide-eyed Amazon, six feet tall and weighing above two hundred. "What's coming off here?" she said. Then she saw the corpse. Her eyes popped. A hard swallow jerked at her neck. She glanced at the gun in Willits' hand, then swooped over the room, knelt beside Maun and ran a large, work-hardened hand under his shirt.

Her back was to Willits then, and she looked up at me. I thought she winked.

She said in a managing tone: "Come here, you, Willits, and give a hand. Mr. Maun ain't dead. We got to put him on the couch there."

She was lying. But it was a lie that fooled Willits.

He went to the door, locked it with the key, put the key in his pocket. He did this quickly, then demanded that I give him my gun.

I gave it over. He put it and his own into his pockets and spoke to the housekeeper: "Joe Prince, here, detective or not, tried to murder Mr. Maun."

He stooped to take hold of the corpse. It was then Mrs. McLarnie snatched the fire shovel off the hearth-stand and slugged him. The blow was a beauty. The handle of the shovel doubled. Willits fell onto his face and did

not move—felled like an ox.

I knew then the fire shovel had not been used to kill Maun. Its handle of soft pewter bent like gum.

"Working for you, Lieutenant," Mrs. McLarnie said, showing me a big, square-toothed grin. "Now, 'fess up. You found Maun's money, that's why you murdered him."

"Nobody asked for your help," I said. "Why did you lie to Willits?"

"To get a chance to conk him," she said, still grinning, showing yellow teeth. "To help you. We couldn't go and let him call the police with all that cash hidden around somewhere." She paused, giving me a long, tentative stare. "Besides, I think Willits killed him."

"Willits didn't kill him," I told her.

I caught onto her game. She was ready to hand over Willits as the killer if I would agree to cut her in on Maun's money. She believed I had killed the old fellow to get possession of the cash, and was willing to frame an innocent man if I would but grease her palm.

"Willits couldn't have killed him," I said. "The door was bolted on the inside. Willits was in the hall when it happened."

Her face hardened. "You're playing the fool, Lieutenant," she said. "You're blabbing your neck into a noose."

JULY, 1946

She stooped, gathered up Willits without my help and deposited him on the couch. She took the key from his pocket and unlocked the door. I went over and got the guns.

There was something on the big girl's mind, but I'll never know what it was, because just then Leslie Maun walked in.

"Where have you been all evening, Leslie?" she asked him.

"Investigating a theft," he said coolly. Then he saw his uncle, and Willits' limp body. His manner changed. He seemed to pale, nervously whisking some pieces of modeling clay off his hands.

"That—that Willits," said Mrs. McLarnie in a choked voice, "murdered Mr. Maun." She turned me a beseeching look. "Didn't he, Lieutenant?"

She was fishing hard for a cut in the half million. "No," I said.

"He did so," she replied hotly. "He opened the door when your back was turned and slugged Mr. Maun in the head."

"You — you were present?" Leslie asked me.

I nodded. "We'll have to call the county police," I said.

"You're the police," he told me.

"I'm strictly city limits." I started for the phone.

"Wait, Mr. Prince," said the housekeeper, her voice a pleading whine.

"If you're worrying about the money," I said, "you don't need to. Some one already has it, else

Mr. Maun wouldn't have been killed."

"Some one," said Leslie, "stole a piece of statuary from my studio, a bust." He sighed. "First robbery, then murder."

He, in mentioning a bust, was referring to a piece of his own work. He called himself a sculptor, but he wasn't earning any money at the business. He and his wife had been living off his uncle for months.

Willits stirred, groaned. The housekeeper said: "Leslie, will you go to the bathroom and fetch the smelling salts?"

He went out. She said to me: "You know your way around, Lieutenant. Suppose you go into the kitchen and fetch some ice cubes."

This was a stall to put off calling the county police, but I went. I was curious to see what would occur when Willits revived; also I was anxious to nab the murderer. Which was natural enough, considering how my future depended on it.

Leslie was standing outside the door when I returned. "I have no idea what has happened to Mrs. McLarnie," he whispered. "But listen to this."

He rapped on the door, and immediately Willits answered. "I'm opening to nobody except Mrs. McLarnie. That flatfoot, Joe Prince, murdered Mr. Maun and slugged me. Besides, I'm sick. Go away."

Leslie said: "Most enlightening, Lieutenant. But then five hundred thousand will buy quite a lot of silence. By the way, have you located the money?"

I hit him smack in the kisser. He reeled back. I followed, meaning to smash him again.

"Don't—don't hit me any more, Mr. Prince!" he whimpered.

I said, plenty mad: "I'm seeing this rotten mess through, get me. I'm going to find Mr. Maun's money and make sure it's turned over to the proper authorities. Maun was my friend."

As I spoke he laid a hand on my arm. "Listen," he said, his eyes widening with fear. "Hear?" His words slipped a pause.

The WHIR.

The eerie sound was filling the house again. The moaning, alternating WHIR. It was creepy, all right. Leslie's long fingers began fiddling with the skin on his neck. He looked ghastly.

When the sound quit, I said, "It was inside the house. I'm sure."

Leslie looked at me a moment, his lips trembling. "I'm going to Agnes," he said. "She was asleep awhile ago. I'll not leave the house."

I let him go to his wife, and set out on the search of Mrs. McLarnie.

She had probably pulled Willits in on her side, and they were now scheming how they might put hands on Maun's money. It could be they had found the

money in his fortress room. I'd always suspected it was there, hidden in some unique manner.

She had lied to Willits, had told him I had slugged him. If I could only find her, I meant that we should have it out. Besides, I was beginning to think that in some mysterious manner she had murdered Maun.

She wasn't anywhere in the hall, but when I reached the kitchen I met Mr. Biddy, the chauffeur, just coming in from outside.

By the pointed look on his plump little face I thought he'd heard the WHIR. He hadn't, though. Something he'd seen was ailing him.

"Lieutenant," he panted, pursing his fat lips as if to give more room to his tongue, "there's a bird—a big bird in Mr. Maun's room. I—I saw it."

Te told me how he had glanced through his north window at the garage and noticed the lights on in Maun's room. Then he'd seen something swoop down and attack his employer.

I wanted to look into that room, but I'd need a ladder. The windows were twelve feet off the ground. I knew Biddy hadn't seen a bird in there, as nothing larger than a sparrow could get through the window bars.

Before Maun was murdered, I recalled, the lights had come on in Biddy's apartment. He'd been over there, I thought. His north

window was at a level with Maun's south one. He'd probably seen what happened when my back was turned. But he'd certainly been a good long time getting over to the house afterwards.

I told him: "Mr. Maun's room door is locked. I'll get a ladder from the basement and we'll go outside for a look. But first I'm going to the attic."

He gasped a little at that word attic.

The attic, though unfinished, was floored and set with windows. It had only one door, the one leading off a stairway that went up from the center hall. We went to the stairway door, I opened it and snapped on the lights.

"I've been up here on errands for Mrs. McLarnie," Biddy said. "She keeps her cleaning things on the landing."

"Ever inside the attic?" I asked.

"No. Nobody goes inside the attic."

On the landing was an array of cleaning necessities. Two vacuum cleaners, curtain stretchers, mops. I passed these and opened the attic door.

Light from the landing spilled in, illuminating the big, partitionless room. There was a light-switch beside the door. I thumbed it for more adequate visibility.

The entire floor above all those sixteen rooms was an undisturbed sea of dust. Dust, untouched for years. Its smooth carpet told me that no one had recently gone

this way, that no murderer had concealed himself up here.

From a spot marking the center ceiling of Maun's room a rod, or pipe, stuck through the floor. It came up where a wall would have been, if the attic were partitioned.

"That rod?" I said, pointing.

Mr. Biddy peered past me. He said: "Before Mr. Maun bought the house, years back, the other people used gas for lighting purposes. It's a gas pipe, coming up from the old gas chandelier."

I nodded. Many old houses had had the gas fixtures converted to the use of electricity. I was no longer looking at the pipe, but through a south window, and over at the garage. A light had come on in Mr. Biddy's apartment.

"Any one at your apartment?" I asked.

"No," he said.

I took a last look at the dust-coated, trackless floor and snapped off the lights. The lights went off over in Mr. Biddy's apartment. Behind me the chauffeur's teeth clicked peculiarly.

From the bottom of the stairs Mrs. McLarnie said: "That you, Mr. Prince?"

I went down, saying, "Where have you been?"

"In the basement, trying to locate a strange sound," she told me.

Her big face showed a gleaming smugness. I wondered if she had, by some chance, found the

hidden five hundred thousand.

"I've telephoned to the police," she said.

"By the time they get here," I told her, "I'll be able to hand them Mr. Maun's killer. You may be sure of that."

She said: "I left a bottle of rye in the basement last washday. Though it might help revive Mr. Willits. So I went to get it. Then I heard that scary sound."

At that moment Leslie turned a corner of the hall. He was still pale, jaggy looking. "A most peculiar thing," he said to me. "And who stole that plaster bust?"

"Mrs. McLarnie has telephoned the police," I said. "So hang around."

He went on, looking back, laughing thinly.

"I'm going to get the ladder," I told Mr. Biddy. "Meet me out front."

"Ladder?" said the housekeeper. "Why a ladder?"

I didn't tell her.

The ladder was on the basement wall behind the furnace. I pulled up a stool to reach it down. When I stepped up my head was even with the top of the furnace, and I saw Leslie's missing piece of statuary.

I was so surprised I nearly fell off the stool. Then I did fall off.

A shot came from the stairway. A bullet nicked the wall by my right ear. The lights went out.

I groped over the floor, search-

ing for something I could use as a weapon. Some one was running toward me; then the steps alternated, went the other way. A door slammed at the top of the stairway.

In a minute I made it over to the stairs and snapped on the lights. Leslie's bust was gone.

I went upstairs, and met little Agnes, Leslie's wife, in the rear hall. She was clad in a mussed bathrobe and she carried a towel and soap. "Tell me," she said, sleepily, "what happened to the shower-sprayer?"

"The—what?" I said roughly, my personality unsettled from nearly having my brains riddled. She'd evidently heard the shot.

"The nozzle, the big one off the shower-pipe," she said.

"I haven't the least idea," I said. And that wasn't right. I had an idea. One had just slipped into my mind. A shining little beaut'.

"I awoke with a terrible headache," she said, seeming suddenly anxious to explain. "A cold shower helps my headaches. So I got up to take one. And the nozzle off the shower is gone."

"Why did Leslie make a bust of Calvin Page?" I asked, watching her face closely.

"Did he?" she said, yawning.

The yawn was strictly a fake. I said, "Mr. Maun's been murdered."

That woke her face. "How?"

I thought that an unsuitable

question. "Slugged," I informed.

"Oh. I thought he'd been shot. I heard a shot awhile ago." Her face drew to a tight knot, then laxed, and her under lip trembled.

Leslie turned the corner of the hall. "Why, Agnes," he said, "what are you doing here?"

I went on and left them. In the front hall, Mr. Bidley said, "Where's the ladder?"

"I've changed my mind. But you can help me in another way," I told him. "I've got Mr. Maun's killer cornered."

"Cornered?" His piggish eyes widened in surprise.

"Cornered," I said.

Gulping, he glanced back down the hall. "Do you know, Lieutenant," he said, whispering, "that Mrs. McLarnie, Leslie, and Agnes are all half crazy searching for the money. Every time you turn your back they start looking. Awhile ago I heard a racket in Mr. Maun's room. I think they are tearing it to pieces, searching. And, if I may say so, I don't think Mrs. McLarnie has called the police."

"Thanks," I said.

Then I told him how I wanted him to help me. "Go to your apartment. Turn on the lights, and stay there until I get in touch with you."

"Is—is that important?" he asked.

"Very," I assured him.

He went. I breathed easier to be rid of him.

For a minute, I did; then I heard it again. The WHIR.

This time, no creeps for me. I raced down the hall, turned at the ell— Mrs. McLarnie grabbed me.

"Let go, you fool!" I told her. "Let go!"

"Wait," she said, whispering. I was helpless in her clutch. "Hear it?" she said. She seemed scared. "Another of us has been murdered."

I told her: "Let me go or I'm going to sock you." I cocked my fist.

She released me. I raced on for the attic stairs. The WHIR stopped. When I threw open the door Leslie was standing there, a bewildered expression on his face, looking toward the attic.

He turned, blinked. "Most peculiarly remarkable," he said.

"What is?" I asked him.

"I found my bust," he said. "It was here on the stairs. I went for a cover for it, and that sound stopped me. I do wish we could find out what makes that horrible sound. It has Agnes hysterical and——"

"Tell me about your statue," I interrupted.

"Well, when the sound stopped I came back here, and it was gone. Yet no one had been near this door. I could see, every second of the time, from down the hall."

"Did you look in the attic?"

"No one's been there. The dust isn't disturbed." He stared at

me his face scared, twitching. "It is downright crawly," he said. "And Agnes and I are moving into the city just as soon as we——"

I collared him. "What have you done with the money?" I said. "Tell me or I'm going to smash your face in."

"I'll—I'll divide it with you," he gasped.

I pasted him on the nose. "What do you mean, divide it with me? You think I'm as rotten as you?"

"I'll—tell—let—me——"

I eased up. "You made that bust of Calvin Page. You took it to the stair landing and dangled it on a rope in front of Mr. Maun's window. You knew about his heart. You hoped it would scare him to death. It was you who slugged him before, then pretended to be his rescuer. But the bust didn't scare him much, so you figured up another way——"

"No!" he gasped. "I didn't kill him." He clawed at my coat, tears rolling off his cheeks. "How could I have? The door was bolted on the inside."

"We're going to that room now," I said. "I'm going to find out how you worked it."

I pushed him into the hall, stepped out behind him. He must have seen the guy standing there, because he jumped and ran. I grabbed after him. And kept right on grabbing, a way off, into a fuzzy patch of darkness.

I opened my eyes. Close to

it, the WHIR didn't sound so creepy. My head hurt where I had been slugged. I looked down across a human back, saw hips moving. I was being carried across the attic. Whoever carried me did not leave a single track in the dust.

We stopped by the gas-pipe. I was unloaded, carefully. I let everything go, staying limp. My chum turned around to shut off the WHIR.

I kicked him between the ears. He went down, knocking the shower-sprayer from its connection. The connection without the sprayer attached resembled a baby cannon. I handcuffed Mr. Maun's slayer, I thought.

Then I went over and put an eye to the pipe's muzzle. To my surprise I was looking down into the fortress room. Visible to me was a space about the size of a wash-tub. I now knew that the other end of the pipe came flush with the concave center of the chandelier. I saw Hank Willits and Leslie down there. Willits was choking Leslie.

From beside me Mr. Biddy said: "The pipe, Lieutenant. There's a clamp, works on a lag-screw, down close to the floor."

I found it. I'd guessed something like this when Biddy told about seeing a big bird attacking Maun. Now, I thought I knew everything—only I didn't. I had Leslie griddled as the killer. Reason? I'd just spotted his missing

plaster bust back in a dark corner of the attic.

"I'm sorry I kicked you, Biddy," I said.

"That's okay," he told me. "I understand. You thought I killed him."

I loosened the lag-screw. The clamp released on the pipe. Now I held the chandelier in my hand—a Goliath's sledge—, let go or lower the pipe suddenly and the chandelier would sock Willits on the head. I did it, just after Leslie told him where he'd hidden the money.

It wasn't too hard, but it bopped him down.

In that second I realized the chandelier was wired with a disconnect. When I lowered it the lights blinked off. When I hauled it back into place they winked on again.

A murder weapon? Why, the instrument, the set-up was nearly as perfect as they come.

I replaced the clamp, thumbed home the lag-screw, and squinted into the pipe, listening. The housekeeper, Willits, Leslie, and Agnes were there. Willits was back on his feet. In the next minute each of them, at one time or another, paused beneath the chandelier. They were talking about the puzzling thing that had happened to Willits.

I turned, took the handcuffs off the chauffeur. Then I went back and got Leslie's plaster bust. Biddy was still sitting on the floor

when I came back with it. I passed him, going closer to the light to examine the statue. Then I happened to think—

I dropped the bust, dived for him. The automatic in his right hand stopped me. He snarled, his piggish eyes glittering evilly. "How did you ever guess?" he asked.

Stupid of me. A minute ago I'd watched while each of those below lingered beneath the deadly chandelier, thinking one of them was the killer. Biddy had fooled me when he'd told me about the clamp on the pipe. I should have known that if any one below was aware of the deadliness of the chandelier he wouldn't have stopped beneath it. Their willingness to do so had pointed out the murderer to me, and I'd missed the play.

"You took the bust from the basement," I said.

"I stole it and put it there. I brought it here after I tried to kill you," he told me.

He'd followed me when I went for the ladder. He'd left the bust on the attic stairs to meet me in the front hall, then slipped back to hide it in the attic. Leslie had found it meanwhile. Biddy had been in the attic then, preparing his dust-smoothing contraption. When Leslie left it a moment, he went and got it. He'd also come down while I was pushing Leslie into the hall and slugged me, then carried me into the attic.

I was guessing that Maun, not Biddy, had devised the trick of getting in the attic without tracking dust. I remembered Maun's significant riddle. "The money is where the substance as whereof I am soon to be, is not disturbed."

That would be right here in the attic. After death, Maun's substance would be dust.

"You stole the money from Leslie," I told Biddy.

"I'll oblige for another minute," he said, "then I'm going to kill you." He fingered the automatic, a thin, nervous grin on his face. "Leslie stole the money from me."

"You saw Maun hide it here," I said. "You expected him to hide it here from the first. That's why you wired the lights so they'd turn on in your apartment when they were turned on here. So you would know when Maun came up to hide the money." I moved the shower-sprayer with my foot, edging closer to him.

"Stay back," he said, nodding, gloating. "I knew when you got wise to the light awhile ago. I had a notion to kill you then."

"You slipped up and watched Maun hide the money, and learned how to get into the attic without leaving any tracks in the dust, and you removed the flooring and loosened the bolts on the chandelier braces, so that nothing held it except the clamp you put on the pipe. You also wired it with a disconnect."

"Right," he said.

"You got the money back from Leslie, then murdered Maun."

"I did," he said. "Now I'm going to murder you. When the police get here I and those people downstairs will swear that you murdered him, and that I shot you while you were trying to escape. You were alone with him, you know, and the door was bolted on the inside." He grinned. "The perfect murder, and I'm going to get away with it—and five hundred thousand dollars for my trouble."

"Murder is never perfect," I said.

"Turn around," he ordered. "Or would you rather have it in the face?"

He still sat on the floor, and I thought his face would just about be in line. I kicked the switch quickly—the switch that set off the WHIR.

A big funnel of dust whooshed into his face. He dropped his gun, came off the floor, clawing at his eyes with both hands. I snicked the bracelets on him. Then I picked up his automatic, and switched off the vacuum cleaner.

The vacuum cleaner, with dirt bag removed and shower-sprayer attached, he'd used to pull behind

him when entering the attic, to pick up the dust from his trail and lay it down again, smoothly, leaving no track.

Awhile ago when I'd kicked him in the head he'd fallen and knocked the shower-sprayer from its connection with the vacuum's exhaust. The machine had upset, and in such a position that when I'd started the motor he'd been in line with the first big blast of dust.

I turned to where I'd dropped Leslie's plaster bust and picked up a big wad of money from its ruins. It had smashed to pieces when it struck the floor. "Leslie wasn't so dumb," I said. "Building a statue around the money after he stole it from you."

Very disgruntled now, the chauffeur did not reply.

I laughed, remembering how he had tried to throw me off the trail with that big bird story. He had tried to play it dumb, putting on the hysterics with that wild tale. And he had played dumb. He'd given himself away with it.

I said: "You're the big bird. A big jail bird now. And in a few weeks the state will wring your neck, like a Thanksgiving turkey."

Even if all that has been handed down and reported to us concerning the past, until our own time, were true and known to some person, it would be less than nothing compared with what is unknown.

—*Montaigne*

Murder

Witness

By KEN GREENE

He found the girl of his dreams—only to lose her in a mysterious chain of events.

MIKE MALLORY leaned his hard body back in his swivel chair and nodded to the tense young man sitting on the edge of his seat before the desk.

"Paul Freeman, huh," Mike said. He noticed that the tall blond guy was about twenty-eight. There was a discharge button in the lapel of his new brown suit. "Well, Freeman, let's have it."

"It's a girl," the young man blurted out. "I want you to find a girl for me."

Mike lighted a cheap cigar.

"Your wife?" He blew a smoke ring.

"I'd like to make her my wife," Paul said, an earnest desperation in his voice. "That's why I want you to find her."

"Let's have the facts."

She was crying on a bench in City Park when I came by the lily pond and saw her," the fellow said softly. "That was April 15, 1943. It was twilight, a warm evening full of those magical spring perfumes that drive a man batty. Well, I learned she'd lost her job in the music department of Hagen's. Later that evening I took her to the Club Rio. We had fun. She sang a number with the orchestra, and I paid three bucks for two of these."

Mike squinted at the picture. It was the usual exorbitantly-priced night club photo. A man

As Mike glanced around, he spotted the rat-faced individual across the street, apparently admiring the dresses in the window of a shop.



and a girl sitting at a table. Lieutenant Freeman was easily recognized. The girl looked stunning.

"Go on," Mike said.

"I couldn't take her to her rooming house, but I made a date with her for five that afternoon at the bar of the Club Rio. I couldn't make it, though. I tried to phone the club. The line was busy. When I did get the call through—no dice. No girl there answered that description, I was told. I didn't have her address, so I couldn't write her. The next day they packed us on a train, then on a boat. Three years overseas, but all the time I was thinking of her. Now that I'm out I want you to find her."

"And the name of this young lady?"

"Vicky Francis." He spelled the last name for Mike.

"Description?"

"Redhead, about up to my shoulder. Big green eyes. She's twenty-three."

"You found her rooming house?"

"No satisfaction," Paul Freeman said, looking worried. "Her landlady said she didn't live there anymore. She slammed the door in my face."

Mike wrote down the rooming house address. After a silence of a minute, Mike said, "Twenty a day and expenses. Plus two hundred when I find the jane."

Freeman withdrew a hundred in tens from a fat wallet and toss-

ed them on the desk. "There's a retainer."

"Of course," Mike said slowly, "there's always the possibility that the gal has married."

"Find her!" Freeman snapped. He slammed the door as he left. Mike sat there staring at the girl on the snapshot. As he left the office, the hands of the old wall clock pointed to 11:05.

Mike nursed his expensive whiskey at the shiny chromium bar of the Club Rio. The walls were done in pastel blue. The main part of the club, containing the dance floor, was in another room that wouldn't be open to the public until night. There was a middle-aged gent sipping a beer at the other end of the ritzy bar and two plain girls chattered at a table. Mike beckoned to the bartender, and when he came shoved the picture towards him and said, "Maybe you know the girl."

Wringing out his rag, the bartender shook his head. "Can't say I do."

"It was taken three years ago."

The bartender swore. "Look, I couldn't even remember someone who was in here last week. We pack 'em three deep at the bar at night."

"So you're sure you don't know her?"

"I don't and I don't want to know her," he said emphatically. "When I got my divorce I says—"

Mike interrupted with, "I want

to see the owner of this sucker-trap."

"Rodney Tate? In that door," pointing to an anteroom just this side of the powder room. The door was partly open. Mike knocked, pushed in and closed the door. The man sitting on the straight chair at the small oak table looked up in surprise.

Rodney Tate was a heavy man, around forty. His black hair was thinning in the front. Expensively tailored, he looked like he had an eye for dames and it was a hard eye, shrewd and calculating. Tate didn't smile.

"I'm hunting for a girl," Mike said. He dropped the photograph on the table. "That girl."

He could have sworn a flicker of recognition came into Tate's eyes but the owner of the Club Rio shook his head. He kept staring fixedly at the picture.

"Some dish," he said at last, and winked.

Mike said, "April 15, 1943, she came in the club accompanied by an army lieutenant. She sang a number with the orchestra. They had a date at the bar April 16, at five, but he couldn't make it. He hasn't seen the girl since."

Rodney Tate shrugged. "Three years is a long time. There's been a million girls at the bar in the last three years."

"She might have come often," Mike pointed out. "She had shared a pleasant evening here and the memory might have

brought her back. That and the hope that she would see the young man again. She was a redhead."

Tate stood up, his eyes stormy. "It's very touching," he said bitingly, "but this is not an agency for the lovelorn so—" pointing at the door—"Get out!"

Mike shrugged and left the anteroom. He stopped at the bar for another whiskey. To the bartender, "I suppose Tate's married?"

"That's right."

"Maybe he has a girl friend, too?"

"I don't hear so good," the bartender said levelly.

Mike slipped him a five. The bartender hastily pocketed it.

"Yeah. It ain't generally known and his wife would kill him if she found out—he's got a gal up on the hill." His eyes were expressive as his hands outlined a curvy shape. "A gorgeous redhead."

As Mike went from the Club Rio into the warm April sunshine he noticed he had acquired a tail. He was a thin, rat-faced man, following a half-block behind. He looked plenty tough. To make sure that it wasn't his imagination, Mike stopped and glanced at some men's suits in a store window. From the corner of his eye, he saw his pursuer pretending to be interested in a book display. When Mike crossed the street the other man was still behind him. Mike frowned. He

didn't like the set-up. Chills rode his spine. The menacing tail was still with him when he ducked into the office of the *Daily Clarion*.

"I'd like to see your files for April, forty-three," Mike told the girl who approached him.

With the clicking of the office typewriters in his ears, he studied the April 17, 1943, evening newspaper with interest. The front page carried a photo of one Scarface Bordoni, local small-time crook and gunman, who had been found dead in his room above the Club Rio that morning. There was poison in his liquor glass. Several of his friends, including Rodney Tate, had said Scarface had been mopey. The police wrote it off as a suicide.

Five-sixteen Chestnut Street was nothing to write home about. It was an old three-story frame house that needed paint, or maybe someone to jack up the numbers and run a new house underneath. In answer to Mike's ring a woman first peered out of the dirty window, then opened the door a scant few inches. Mike promptly stuck his foot in.

"Nothing today," she said in a hard voice. A thin plain-dressed woman about fifty, she had tight lips and shifty eyes. You'd pay the rent here in advance or be put out.

"I'm looking for Vicky Francis," Mike said, unsmiling.

"She ain't here."

"When'd she leave?"

"I can't tell you," she snapped. "I'd have to look at my rent books. Get your foot out of my door!"

As if he hadn't even heard her Mike said, "Do you mind? It's important."

She glared at him but he stared back calmly and she went in and got a flat black rectangular book.

"Paid up till the 19th of April, '43, but she left on the 16th, about six-seven o'clock in the evening."

"Thanks," Mike grunted, "for that and for her forwarding address."

She made another sour face, but Mike stood deadpan and she got him a slip. He glanced at it, nodded, and removed his foot from the door. She promptly slammed it, locked it, and pulled down the shade. In the woman's heavy, stubborn writing on the white slip was:

Vicky Francis
c/o The Blue Duck
815 Main Street
Langsbury.

Langsbury was 105 miles southwest. At the corner drugstore Mike used the phone. He spotted the rat-faced individual across the street, apparently admiring the dresses in the window that read: MILLIE'S JUNIOR MISS SHOPPE. The ticket agent said the next train for Langsbury left at 2:09. The time on Mike's strap watch was 1:41. Mike mumbled thanks and hung up.

Not much time to pack but he could make it if he hurried.

On the train journey to Langsbury Mike was not alone. The tail sat at the other end of the coach, trying to make himself inconspicuous behind a newspaper. He gave Mike the jitters. At the Langsbury station Mike took a cab, which was followed, and got a room for the night in the Stanley Hotel, a medium-priced establishment. On the street once more, Mike decided that it was about time to lose his tail. He pushed in a door containing gold lettering that read: JACOBY CLEANERS. A bald-headed little guy beamed as he came from behind a curtain separating the office from the back room.

"I want to get this suit pressed while I wait," Mike said, and noticed his man was across the street looking in a photo shop window which, of course, reflected every movement of Mike's.

The bald one assured him he could press his suit immediately. Mike took off his coat and followed him into the back room, but then donned his coat again and said, "I've changed my mind." He pressed a buck into the man's hand and said, "Stay in this room for a minute or two." He ducked out the back door, hugged the alley for two blocks, and assured himself that he had lost his tail.

Mike found the Blue Duck without any trouble. It was prob-

ably one of the town's nicer cafes but it wasn't anything to get enthusiastic about. Behind the semi-circular bar a deserted piano rested on a platform. There were only a half dozen customers in the place at this early evening hour.

Mike ordered a drink from the solitary bartender on duty. "I'd like to see the manager."

The skinny young bartender jerked his thumb towards a fat guy reading the *Police Gazette* at a rear table. "That's Benny Long there."

Mike nodded and took his drink with him and sat down opposite Long, who looked up pleasantly and laid down his paper.

Pushing the Club Rio photo across the white tablecloth, Mike said, "You must remember Vicky Francis."

Long stared at the picture and said, "She sang here for a while, a couple of years ago. Nice kid."

"Gimme the exact date."

The fat proprietor got a black book from the vest pocket of his loose grey suit, moistened his thumb and flipped some pages. "She started here the night of April 16, 1943, and sang until June 14. Two months."

"But you hadn't known her before, I understand."

"No, I didn't. A booking agent sent her in. I remember the night she started—I was sore because she got here late. After ten, I think."

"I'd like to know where she is now."

Long turned his palms upward. "I dunno."

"Thanks," Mike said. Picking up the picture, he went back to the bar, ordered another drink and questioned the bartender. He remembered the girl from her picture but didn't know where she lived.

"She used to be good friends with a blonde waitress in Charlie's Diner. It's one block up and the gal's name is Flossie."

Charlie's Diner wasn't busy either. There were three girls on duty. Mike took a booth where he'd be served by the plump blonde, ordered a roast beef platter, and when she came back to find out whether there'd be anything else, he said, "Hello Flossie."

"I don't know you," she said, chewing her gum violently.

"I'm a friend of Vicky Francis. I don't suppose you've seen her lately."

The chunky blonde hitched up a straying shoulder strap. "Naw. We kinda drifted apart. Ain't seen her for almost a year.

Mike's face fell. "Tell me where she lived."

Flossie cracked her gum and said, "She had a room down at Fourth and Elm. Roominghouse on the corner. You can't miss it."

Gulping his coffee, Mike left a dollar tip, paid his bill and hurried out. He got directions on the

street, and, after a walk of five or six blocks he located the brick roominghouse. It looked a lot better than Vicky's place on Chestnut Street. Middle class, but it seemed clean and respectable.

The front door wasn't locked and in the vestibule were a half dozen black mail boxes. Mike's eyes focused on a box containing a typewritten card that read: *Vicky Francis, Room 8.*

Climbing the stairs to the third floor, Mike saw the small neat 8 on the rear door. Taking a deep breath, he knocked.

Almost immediately the door opened. Mike walked in and the door was closed behind him.

"Your nose is too long!" a voice said grimly. The voice belonged to Rodney Tate, Club Rio owner, who had a mean-looking revolver pointed at Mike's middle.

Eyes widening, Mike's blood ran cold as he hastily cased the large bedroom. There was a worn green throw rug beneath his and Tate's feet, a single bed against the wall, a washbowl, a couple of chairs, a small flat table containing a scissors and a bureau covered with feminine articles. A duplicate picture of the one in Mike's pocket stared at him from the center of the bureau.

"So you didn't know where she was, huh?" Mike asked hoarsely.

Tate's eyes were fired with hatred. "What do you want her for?"

"A client of mine wants to marry her," Mike said levelly.

"You're lying!" Tate snapped.

There were footsteps on the stairs and Tate said, "One peep out of you and I'll drill you!"

Mike waited tensely while a key turned in the lock. The door-knob turned but the door didn't open because the key had locked the door. Again the key moved and this time the knob opened the door.

The girl who entered the room was breathtakingly lovely. Her flaming red hair fell in soft waves to her shoulders but her green eyes registered fright when she saw the two men in her room and the revolver.

Tate kicked the door shut and waved the gun at her. "Get over with him," he said in a hard voice.

Obediently, she said in a trembling voice, "M-Mr. Tate, what's the meaning of this?"

Mike's lip curled. He said to Tate tauntingly, "So you *do* know the girl."

Tate didn't answer. His eyes looked mean.

Turning to Mike, Vicky said, "He got me a singing engagement at the Blue Duck once. I was very grateful. I needed a job."

"And he was plenty grateful that you took it," Mike said.

Tate barked, "Blab all you want. It won't do you any good. I'm going to kill you both. I'll make it look like you killed the

girl and then killed yourself!"

"But I don't understand," Vicky faltered.

"It's simple enough," Mike said. "Think back to when Tate offered you the job. It was April 16, 1943, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "I remember because I had a date—" her green eyes brightened—"a very special date." The sparkle died. "But he didn't show up."

Tate looked bored and cruelly indifferent.

Mike said quickly, "But Tate did. He was a complete stranger to you. Yet he said he'd caught your number last night and offered you a singing job out of town. And you jumped at the bait."

"Bait?"

"Sure. He wanted you out of the way. While you were waiting for your date, that afternoon before five, you went to the powder room, didn't you?"

"Why yes. I was jittery, afraid my face wasn't right, and I went there to check up."

"And when you passed the ante-room the door was open and you saw Tate inside doing something that meant nothing to you then but would have if you'd been around town when the next day's papers came out."

Puzzled, she said, "There was a guy slumped at a table in the ante-room. I remember him because of the scar on his face. He looked very drunk. I saw Tate

drop something into the man's glass and I figured it was a sleeping powder so he could sleep off the jag."

"It was poison," Mike said, "and Scarface Bordoni was found dead the next morning by the cleaning woman in his own room, over the Club Rio, the poisoned drink near him. Tate, and others said he'd been despondent lately and the gunman's death was called a suicide."

"Like yours is gonna be," Tate said coldly.

"But why would he do that?" Vicky asked.

Looking at Tate, Mike said, "My guess is that Scarface was trying to blackmail him." The expression in Tate's eyes told him he had rung the bell. "Scarface threatened to tell Tate's fiery, jealous wife about his girl friend unless—" Mike smiled at Tate's stony face—"how much did he want?"

"Five grand, wise guy," Tate snarled.

"I see," Vicky said slowly. "He was afraid I'd see the papers and go to the police. He remembered I'd sung there the previous night so he had his big idea and phoned a booking agent. No wonder he wanted me to get down to Langsbury that same night. That far away, I'd probably never hear about Scarface's death."

Tate cleared his throat and said harshly, "I had you tailed for a couple of days just to make

sure. And I've always kept myself posted on you."

Vicky turned to Mike. "But suppose I had gotten wise and gone to the police. It would have been my word against his."

Tate answered. "I knew that. But cops make me nervous. I did not want to get messed up with them. I was afraid they'd gimme the third degree and I'd crack. Everything would have been all right if this dick hadn't come snooping around. And now I gotta kill you both."

Mike eyed the scissors on the table and said, "You wouldn't kill a guy without a last smoke, would you?"

Distainfully Tate *chucked* Mike a cigarette. "Don't get any ideas," he growled.

Mike muffed the match packet he tossed him and bent casually to pick it up. Suddenly Mike grabbed the ends of the throw rug and yanked for his life. Standing on the other end of the rug, Tate was thrown off balance and when he fell the gun slipped from his hand and clattered on the floor.

He got the gun. Mike jumped him. Tate howled in pain as Mike kicked the gun out of his hand. Mike smashed him on the jaw, again and again. Tate crumpled like a deflated balloon.

Vicky phoned for the police while Mike stood guard over him and in ten minutes Mike was telling the story to a desk sergeant

at the town's police headquarters. "Work over him a little," Mike said. "He's yellow inside. He'll talk. He did.

Mike Mallory sat in his office one morning a week later, smiling

faintly at the postcard on his desk, postmarked New York City. It read:

Having a wonderful honeymoon. DON'T wish you were here.

Vicky and Paul.



BURGLAR LULLED BY LOOT

Yonkers police were searching for a young dairy hand, wanted for the burglary of a drug store, when they ran across their quarry, fast asleep. That night he was still in the same condition at a local hospital as a result of swallowing his loot—several sleeping tablets.



If we wish to be just judges of all things, let us first persuade ourselves of this: that there is not one of us without fault; no man is found who can acquit himself; and he who calls himself innocent does so with reference to a witness and not his conscience.

—Seneca



STORK STORY

A number of tombs in the recently uncovered temple, believed built by Rameses II 3,000 years ago, contained coffins of storks. The Egyptians represented Thoth as a stork and a monkey. The stork was held as the symbol of justice and the monkey of time and wisdom.

BY ARTHUR MORRISON

The Lenton



AT the head of the first flight of a dingy staircase leading up from an ever-open portal in a street by the Strand stood a door, the dusty ground-glass upper panel of which car-

ried in its center the single word "Hewitt," while at its right-hand lower corner in smaller letters, "Clerk's Office" appeared. On a morning when the clerks in the ground-floor offices had barely

Croft Robberies

hung up their hats, a short, well-dressed young man, wearing spectacles, hastening to open the dusty door, ran into the arms of another man who suddenly issued from it.

"I beg pardon," the first said. "Is this Hewitt's Detective Agency Office?"

"Yes, I believe you will find it so," the other replied. He was a stoutish, clean-shaven man, of middle height, and of a cheerful, round countenance. "You'd better speak to the clerk."

In the little outer office the visitor was met by a sharp lad with inky fingers, who presented him with a pen and a printed slip. The printed slip having been filled with the visitor's name and present business, and conveyed through an inner door, the lad reappeared with an invitation to the private office. There, behind a writing-table, sat the stoutish man himself, who had only just advised an appeal to the clerk.

"Good-morning, Mr. Lloyd—

Mr. Vernon Lloyd," he said affably, looking again at the slip. "You'll excuse my care to start even with my visitors—I must, you know. You come from Sir James Norris, I see."

"Yes; I am his secretary. I have only to ask you to go straight to Lenton Croft at once, if you can, on very important business. Sir James would have wired, but had not your precise address. Can you go by the next train? Eleven-thirty is the first available from Paddington."

"Quite possibly. Do you know anything of the business?"

"It is a case of a robbery in the house, or rather, I fancy, of several robberies. Jewelry has been stolen from rooms occupied by visitors to the Croft. The first case occurred some months ago—nearly a year ago, in fact. Last night there was another. But I think you had better get the details on the spot. Sir James has told me to telegraph if you are coming, so that he may meet you

himself at the station; and I must hurry, as his drive to the station will be rather a long one. Then I take it you will go, Mr. Hewitt? Twyford is the station."

"Yes, I shall come, and by the 11.30. Are you going by that train yourself?"

"No, I have several things to attend to now I am in town. Good-morning; I shall wire at once."

Mr. Martin Hewitt locked the drawer of his table and sent his clerk for a cab.

At Twyford Station Sir James Norris was waiting with a dog-cart. Sir James was a tall, florrid man of fifty or thereabout, known away from home as something of a county historian, and nearer his own parts as a great supporter of the hunt, and a gentleman much troubled with poachers. As soon as he and Hewitt had found one another the baronet hurried the detective into his dog-cart. "We have something over seven miles to drive," he said, "and I can tell you all about this wretched business as we go. That is why I came for you myself, and alone."

Hewitt nodded.

"I have sent for you, as Lloyd probably told you, because of a robbery at my place last evening. It appears, as far as I can guess, to be one of three by the same hand, or by the same gang. Late yesterday afternoon——"

"Pardon me, Sir James," Hewitt interrupted, "but I think I

must ask you to begin at the first robbery and tell me the whole tale in proper order. It makes things clearer, and sets them in their proper shape."

"Very well! Eleven months ago, or thereabout, I had rather a large party of visitors, and among them Colonel Heath and Mrs. Heath—the lady being a relative of my own late wife. Colonel Heath has not been long retired, you know—used to be political resident in an Indian native state. Mrs. Heath had rather a good stock of jewelry of one sort and another, about the most valuable piece being a bracelet set with a particularly fine pearl—quite an exceptional pearl, in fact—that had been one of a heap of presents from the maharajah of his state when Heath left India.

"It was a very noticeable bracelet, the gold setting being a mere feather-weight piece of native filigree work—almost too fragile to trust on the wrist—and the pearl being, as I have said, of a size and quality not often seen. Well, Heath and his wife arrived late one evening, and after lunch the following day, most of the men being off by themselves,—shooting, I think,—my daughter, my sister (who is very often down here), and Mrs. Heath took it into their heads to go walking—fern-hunting, and so on. My sister was rather long dressing, and, while they waited, my daughter went into Mrs. Heath's room, where

Mrs. Heath turned over all her treasures to show her, as women do, you know. When my sister was at last ready, they came straight away, leaving the things littering about the room rather than stay longer to pack them up. The bracelet, with other things was on the dressing-table then."

"One moment. As to the door?"

"They locked it. As they came away my daughter suggested turning the key, as we had one or two new servants about."

"And the window?"

"That they left open, as I was going to tell you. Well, they went on their walk and came back, with Lloyd (whom they had met somewhere) carrying their ferns for them. It was dusk and almost dinner-time. Mrs. Heath went straight to her room, and—the bracelet was gone."

"Was the room disturbed?"

"Not a bit. Everything was precisely where it had been left, except the bracelet. The door had not been tampered with, but of course the window was open, as I have told you."

"You called the police, of course?"

"Yes, and had a man from Scotland Yard down in the morning. He seemed a pretty smart fellow, and the first thing he noticed on the dressing-table, within an inch or two of where the bracelet had been, was a match, which had been lit and

thrown down. Now nobody about the house had had occasion to use a match in that room that day, and, if they had, certainly would not have thrown it on the cover of the dressing-table. So that, presuming the thief to have used that match, the robbery must have been committed when the room was getting dark—immediately before Mrs. Heath returned, in fact. The thief had evidently struck the match, passed it hurriedly over the various trinkets lying about, and taken the most valuable."

"Nothing else was even moved?"

"Nothing at all. Then the thief must have escaped by the window although it was not quite clear how. The walking party approached the house with a full view of the window, but saw nothing, although the robbery must have been actually taking place a moment or two before they turned up.

"There was no water-pipe within any practicable distance of the window, but a ladder usually kept in the stable-yard, was found lying along the edge of the lawn. The gardener explained, however, that he had put the ladder there after using it himself early in the afternoon."

"Of course it might easily have been used again after that and put back."

"Just what the Scotland Yard man said. He was pretty sharp,

too, on the gardener, but very soon decided that he knew nothing of it. No stranger had been seen in the neighborhood, nor had passed the lodge gates. Besides, as the detective said, it scarcely seemed the work of a stranger. A stranger could scarcely have known enough to go straight to the room where a lady—only arriving the day before—had left a valuable jewel, and away again without being seen. So all the people about the house were suspected in turn. The servants offered, in a body, to have their boxes searched, and this was done; everything was turned over, from the butler's to the new kitchen-maid's. I don't know that I should have had this carried quite so far if I had been the loser myself, but it was my guest, and I was in such a horrible position. Well, there's little more to be said about that, unfortunately. Nothing came of it all, and the thing's as great a mystery now as ever. I believed the Scotland Yard man got as far as suspecting *me* before he gave it up altogether, but give it up he did in the end. I think that's all I know about the first robbery. Is it clear?"

"Oh, yes; I shall probably want to ask a few questions when I have seen the place, but they can wait. What next?"

"Well," Sir James pursued, "the next was a very trumpery affair, that I should have forgotten all

about, probably, if it hadn't been for one circumstance. Even now I hardly think it could have been the work of the same hand. Four months or thereabout after Mrs. Heath's disaster—in February of this year, in fact—Mrs. Armitage, a young widow, who had been a school-fellow of my daughter's, stayed with us for a week or so. The girls don't trouble about the London season, you know, and I have no town house, so they were glad to have their old friend here for a little in the dull time. Mrs. Armitage is a very active young lady, and was scarcely in the house half-an-hour before she arranged a drive in a pony-cart with Eva—my daughter—to look up old people in the village that she used to know before she was married. So they set off in the afternoon, and made such a round of it that they were late for dinner. Mrs. Armitage had a small plain fold brooch—not at all valuable, you know; two or three pounds, I suppose—which she used to pin up a cloak or anything of that sort. Before she went out she stuck this in the pin-cushion on her dressing-table, and left a ring—rather a good one, I believe—lying close by."

"This," asked Hewitt, "was not in the room that Mrs. Heath had occupied, I take it?"

"No; this was in another part of the building. Well, the brooch went—taken, evidently, by some one in a deuce of a hurry, for,

when Mrs. Armitage got back to her room, there was the pin-cushion with a little tear in it, where the brooch had been simply snatched off. But the curious thing was that the ring—worth a dozen of the brooch—was left where it had been put. Mrs. Armitage didn't remember whether or not she had locked the door herself, although she found it locked when she returned; but my niece, who was indoors all the time, went and tried it once—because she remembered that a gas-fitter was at work on the landing near by—and found it safely locked. The gas-fitter, whom we didn't know at the time, but who since seems to be quite an honest fellow, was ready to swear that nobody but my niece had been to the door while he was in sight of it—which was almost all the time. As to the window, the sashline had broken that very morning, and Mrs. Armitage had propped open the bottom half about eight or ten inches with a brush; and, when she returned, that brush, sash, and all were exactly as she had left them. Now I scarcely need tell you what an awkward job it must have been for anybody to get noiselessly in at that unsupported window; and how unlikely he would have been to replace it, with the brush, exactly as he found it."

"Just so. I suppose the brooch was really gone? I mean, there was no chance of Mrs. Armitage

having mislaid it someplace?"

"Oh, none at all! There was a most careful search."

"Then, as to getting in at the window, would it have been easy?"

"Well, yes," Sir James replied: "yes, perhaps it would. It is a first-floor window, and it looks over the roof and skylight of the billiard-room. I built the billiard-room myself—built it out from a smoking room just at this corner. It would be easy enough to get at the window from the billiard-room roof. But, then," he added, "that couldn't have been the way. Somebody or other was in the billiard-room the whole time, and nobody could have got over the roof (which is nearly all skylight) without being seen and heard. I was there myself for an hour or two, taking a little practice."

"Well, was anything done?"

"Strict enquiry was made among the servants, of course, but nothing came of it. It was such a small matter that Mrs. Armitage wouldn't hear of my calling in the police or anything of that sort, although I felt pretty certain that there must be a dishonest servant about somewhere. A servant might take a plain brooch, you know, who would feel afraid of a valuable ring, the loss of which would be made a greater matter of."

"Well, yes, perhaps so, in the case of an inexperienced thief, who also would be likely to snatch

up whatever she took in a hurry. But I'm doubtful. What made you connect these two robberies together?"

"Nothing whatever—for some months. They seemed quite of a different sort. But scarcely more than a month ago I met Mrs. Armitage at Brighton, and we talked, among other things, of the previous robbery—that of Mrs. Heath's bracelet. I described the circumstances pretty minutely, and, when I mentioned the match found on the table, she said: 'How strange! Why, my thief left a match on the dressing-table when he took my poor little brooch!'"

Hewitt nodded. "Yes," he said. "A spent match, of course?"

"Yes, of course, a spent match. She noticed it lying close by the pin-cushion, but threw it away without mentioning the circumstance. Still, it seemed rather curious to me that a match should be lit and dropped, in each case, on the dressing-cover an inch from where the article was taken. I mentioned it to Lloyd when I got back, and he agreed that it seemed significant."

"Scarcely," said Hewitt, shaking his head. "Scarcely, so far, to be called significant, although worth following up. Everyone uses matches in the dark, you know."

"Well, at any rate, the coincidence appealed to me so far that it struck me it might be worth while to describe the brooch to the police in order that they

could trace it if it had been pawned. They had tried that, of course, over the bracelet without any result, but I fancied the shot might be worth making, and might possibly lead us on the track of the more serious robbery."

"Quite so. It was the right thing to do. Well?"

"Well, they found it. A woman had pawned it in London—at a shop in Chelsea. But that was sometime before, and the pawnbroker had clean forgotten all about the woman's appearance. The name and address she gave were false. So that was the end of that business."

"Had any of your servants left you between the time the brooch was lost and the date of the pawn ticket?"

"No."

"Were all your servants at home on the day the brooch was pawned?"

"Oh, yes! I made that enquiry myself."

"Very good! What next?"

"Yesterday—and this is what made me send for you. My late wife's sister came here last Tuesday, and we gave her the room from which Mrs. Heath lost her bracelet. She had with her a very old-fashioned brooch, containing a miniature of her father, and set in front with three very fine brilliants and a few smaller stones. Here we are, though, at the Croft. I'll tell you the rest indoors."

Hewitt laid his hand on the

baronet's arm. "Don't pull up, Sir James," he said. "Drive a little further. I should like to have a general idea of the whole case before we go in."

"Very good!" Sir James Norris straightened the horse's head again and went on. "Late yesterday afternoon, as my sister-in-law was changing her dress, she left her room for a moment to speak to my daughter in her room, almost adjoining. She was gone no more than three minutes, or five at most, but on her return the brooch, which had been left on the table, had gone. Now the window was shut fast, and had not been tampered with. Of course the door was open, but so was my daughter's, and anybody walking near must have been heard. But the strangest circumstance, and one that almost makes me wonder whether I have been awake today or not, was that there lay a *used match* on the very spot, as nearly as possible, where the brooch had been—and it was broad daylight!"

Hewitt rubbed his nose and looked thoughtfully before him. "Um — curious, certainly," he said. "Anything else?"

"Nothing more than you shall see for yourself. I have had the room locked and watched until you could examine it. My sister-in-law had heard of your name, and suggested that you should be called in; so, of course, I did exactly as she wanted. That she

should have lost that brooch, of all things, in my house is most unfortunate; you see, there was some small difference about the thing between my late wife and her sister when their mother died and left it. It's almost worse than the Heaths' bracelet business, and altogether I'm not pleased with things, I can assure you. See what a position it is for me! Here are three ladies, in the space of one year, robbed one after another in this mysterious fashion in my house and I can't find the thief! It's horrible! People will be afraid to come near the place. And I can do nothing!"

"Ah, well, we'll see. Perhaps we had better turn back now. By-the bye, were you thinking of having any alterations or additions made to your house?"

"No. What makes you ask?"

"I think you might at least consider the question of painting and decorating, Sir James—or, say, putting up another coach-house, or something. Because I should like to be (to the servants) the architect—or the builder, if you please—come to look around. You haven't told any of them about this business?"

"Not a word. Nobody knows but my relatives and Lloyd. I took every precaution myself, at once. As to your little disguise, be the architect by all means, and do as you please. If you can only find this thief and put an end to this horrible state of affairs, you

will do me the greatest service I have ever asked for—and as to your fee, I'll gladly make it whatever is usual, and three hundred in addition."

Martin Hewitt bowed. "You're very generous, Sir James, and you may be sure I'll do what I can. As a professional man, of course, a good fee always stimulates my interest, although this case of yours certainly seems interesting enough by itself."

"Most extraordinary! Don't you think so? Here are three persons, all ladies, all in my house, two even in the same room, each successively robbed of a piece of jewelry, each from a dressing-table, and a used match left behind in every case. All in the most difficult—one would say impossible—circumstances for a thief, and yet there is no clue!"

"Well, we won't say that just yet Sir James; we must see. And we must guard against any undue predisposition to consider the robberies in a lump. Here we are at the lodge gate again. Is that your gardener—the man who left the ladder by the lawn on the first occasion you spoke of?" Mr. Hewitt nodded in the direction of a man who was clipping a box border.

"Yes; will you ask him anything?"

"No, no; at any rate, not now. Remember the building alterations. I think, if there is no objection, I will look first at the

room that the lady—Mrs.—" Hewitt looked up enquiringly.

"My sister-in-law? Mrs. Cazenove. Oh, yes! you shall come to her room at once."

"Thank you. And I think Mrs. Cazenove had better be there."

They alighted, and a boy from the lodge led the horse and dog-cart away.

Mrs. Cazenove was a thin and faded, but quick and energetic, lady of middle age. She bent her head very slightly on learning Martin Hewitt's name, and said: "I must thank you, Mr. Hewitt, for your very prompt attention. I need scarcely say that any help you can afford in tracing the thief who has my property—whoever it may be—will make me most grateful. My room is quite ready for you to examine."

The room was on the second floor—the top floor at that part of the building. Some slight confusion of small articles of dress was observable in parts of the room.

"This, I take it," enquired Hewitt, "is exactly as it was at the time the brooch was missed?"

"Precisely," Mrs. Cazenove answered. "I have used another room, and put myself to some other inconveniences, to avoid any disturbance."

Hewitt stood before the dressing-table. "Then this is the used match," he observed, "exactly where it was found?"

"Yes."

"Where was the brooch?"

"I should say almost on the very same spot. Certainly no more than a very few inches away."

Hewitt examined the match closely. "It is burned very little," he remarked. "It would appear to have gone out at once. Could you hear it struck?"

"I heard nothing whatever; absolutely nothing."

"If you will step into Miss Norris's room now for a moment," Hewitt suggested, "We will try an experiment. Tell me if you hear matches struck, and how many. Where is the match-stand?"

The match-stand proved to be empty, but matches were found in Miss Norris's room, and the test was made. Each striking could be heard distinctly, even with one of the doors pushed to.

"Both your own door and Miss Norris's were open, I understand; the window shut and fastened inside as it is now, and nothing but the brooch was disturbed."

"Yes, that was so."

"Thank you, Mrs. Cazenove. I don't think I need trouble you further at present. I think, Sir James," Hewitt added, turning to the baronet, who was standing by the door—"I think we will see the other room and take a walk outside the house, if you please. I suppose, by-the-bye, that there is no getting at the matches left behind on the first and second

of these mysterious occasions?"

"No," Sir James answered. "Certainly not here. The Scotland Yard man may have kept his."

The room that Mrs. Armitage had occupied presented no peculiar feature. A few feet below the window the roof of the billiard-room was visible, consisting largely of skylight. Hewitt glanced casually about the walls, ascertained that the furniture and hangings had not been materially changed since the second robbery, and expressed his desire to see the windows from the outside. Before leaving the room, however, he wished to know the names of any persons who were known to have been about the house on the occasions of all three robberies.

"Just carry your mind back, Sir James," he said. "Begin with yourself, for instance. Where were you at these times?"

"When Mrs. Heath lost her bracelet, I was in Tagley Wood all the afternoon. When Mrs. Armitage was robbed, I believe I was somewhere about the place most of the time she was out. Yesterday I was down at the farm." Sir James's face broadened. "I don't know whether you call those suspicious movements," he added, and laughed.

"Not at all; I only asked you so that, remembering your own movements, you might the better recall those of the rest of the

household. Was anybody, to your knowledge—*anybody*, mind—in the house on all three occasions?"

"Well, you know, it's quite impossible to answer for all the servants. You'll only get that by direct questioning—I can't possibly remember things of that sort. As to the family and visitors—why, you don't suspect any of them, do you?"

"I don't suspect a soul, Sir James," Hewitt answered, beaming genially, "not a soul. You see, I *can't* suspect people until I know something about where they were. It's quite possible there will be independent evidence enough as it is, but you must help me if you can. The visitors, now. Was there any visitor here each time—or even on the first and last occasions only?"

"No, not one. And my own sister, perhaps you will be pleased to know, was only there at the time of the first robbery."

"Just so! And your daughter, is I have gathered, was clearly absent from the spot each time—indeed, was in company with the party robbed. Your niece, now?"

"Why, hang it all, Mr. Hewitt, I can't talk of my niece as a suspected criminal! The poor girl's under my protection, and I really can't allow——"

Hewitt raised his hand and shook his head deprecatingly.

"My dear sir, haven't I said that I don't suspect a soul? *Do*

let me know how the people were distributed, as nearly as possible. Let me see. It was your niece, I think, who found that Mrs. Armitage's door was locked—this door, in fact—on the day she lost her brooch?"

"Yes, it was."

"Just so—at the time when Mrs. Armitage herself had forgotten whether she locked it or not. And yesterday—was she out then?"

"No, I think not. Indeed, she goes out very little—her health is usually bad. She was indoors, too, at the time of the Heath robbery, since you ask. But come, now, I don't like this. It's ridiculous to suppose that *she* knows anything of it."

"I don't suppose it, as I have said. I am only asking for information. That is all your resident family, I take it, and you know nothing of anybody else's movements—except, perhaps, Mr. Lloyd's?"

"Lloyd? Well, you know yourself that he was out with the ladies when the first robbery took place. As to the others, I don't remember. Yesterday he was probably in his room, writing. I think that acquits *him*, eh?" Sir James looked quizzically into the broad face of the affable detective, who smiled and replied:

"Oh, of course nobody can be in two places at once, else what would become of the *alibi* as an institution? But, as I have said,

I am only setting my facts in order. Now, you see, we get down to the servants—unless some stranger is the party wanted. Shall we go outside now?"

Lenton Croft was a large, desultory sort of house, nowhere more than three floors high, and mostly only two. It had been added to bit by bit, till it zig-zagged about its site, as Sir James Norris expressed it, "like a game of dominoes." Hewitt scrutinized its external features carefully as they strolled round, and stopped some little while before the windows of the two bedrooms he had just seen from the inside. Presently they approached the stables and coach-house, where a groom was washing the wheels of the dog-cart.

"Do you mind my smoking?" Hewitt asked Sir James. "Perhaps you will take a cigar yourself—they are not so bad, I think. I will ask your man for a light."

Sir James felt for his own match-box, but Hewitt had gone, and was lighting his cigar with a match from a box handed him by the groom. A smart little terrier was trotting about by the coach-house, and Hewitt stopped to rub its head. Then he made some observation about the dog which enlisted the groom's interest, and was soon absorbed in a chat with the man. Sir James, waiting a little way off, tapped the stones rather impatiently with his foot, and presently moved

away, walking toward the house.

For full a quarter of an hour Hewitt chatted with the groom, and, when at last he came away and overtook Sir James, that gentleman was about reentering the house.

"I beg your pardon, Sir James," Hewitt said, "for leaving you in that unceremonious fashion to talk to your groom, but a dog, Sir James,—a good dog,—will draw me anywhere."

"Oh!" replied Sir James shortly.

"There is one other thing," Hewitt went on, disregarding the other's curtness, "that I should like to know: There are two windows directly below that of the room occupied yesterday by Mrs. Cazenove — one on each floor. What rooms do they light?"

"That on the ground floor is the morning-room; the other is Mr. Lloyd's—my secretary. A sort of study or sitting-room."

"Now you will see at once, Sir James," Hewitt pursued, with an affable determination to win the baronet back to good humor—"you will see at once that, if a ladder had been used in Mrs. Heath's case, anybody looking from either of these rooms would have seen it."

"Of course! The Scotland Yard man questioned everybody as to that, but nobody seemed to have been in either of the rooms when the thing occurred; at any rate, nobody saw anything."

"Still, I think I should like to look out of those windows myself; it will, at least, give me an idea of what was in view and what was not, if anybody had been there."

Sir James Norris led the way to the morning-room. As they reached the door a young lady, carrying a book and walking very languidly, came out. Hewitt stepped aside to let her pass, and afterward said interrogatively: "Miss Norris, your daughter, Sir James?"

"No, my niece. Do you want to ask her anything? Dora, my dear," Sir James added, following her in the corridor, "this is Mr. Hewitt, who is investigating these wretched robberies for me. I think he would like to hear if you remember anything happening at any of the three times."

The lady bowed slightly, and said in a plaintive drawl: "I, uncle? Really, I don't remember anything; nothing at all."

"You found Mrs. Armitage's door locked, I believe," asked Hewitt, "when you tried it, on the afternoon when she lost her brooch?"

"Oh yes; I believe it was locked. Yes, it was."

"Had the key been left in?"

"The key? Oh, no! I think not; no."

"Do you remember anything out of the common happening—anything whatever, no matter how trivial—on the day Mrs.

Heath lost her bracelet?"

"No, really, I don't. I can't remember at all."

"Nor yesterday?"

"No, nothing. I don't remember anything."

"Thank you," said Hewitt hastily; "thank you. Now the morning-room, Sir James."

In the morning-room Hewitt stayed but a few seconds, doing little more than casually glance out of the windows. In the room above he took a little longer time. It was a comfortable room, but with rather effeminate indications about its contents. Little pieces of draped silk-work hung about the furniture, and Japanese silk fans decorated the mantel-piece. Near the window was a cage containing a gray parrot, and the writing-table was decorated with two vases of flowers.

"Lloyd makes himself pretty comfortable, eh?" Sir James observed. "But it isn't likely anybody would be here while he was out, at the time that bracelet went."

"No," replied Hewitt meditatively. "No, I suppose not."

He stared thoughtfully out of the window, and then, still deep in thought, rattled at the wires of the cage with a quill toothpick and played a moment with the parrot. Then, looking up at the window again, he said: "That is Mr. Lloyd, isn't it, coming back in a fly?"

"Yes, I think so. Is there any-

thing else you would care to see here?"

"No thank you," Hewitt replied; "I don't think there is."

They went down to the smoking-room, and Sir James went away to speak to his secretary. When he returned, Hewitt said quietly: "I think, Sir James—I *think* that I shall be able to give you your thief presently."

"What! Have you a clue? Who do you think? I began to believe you were hopelessly stumped."

"Well, yes. I have rather a good clue, although I can't tell you much about it just yet. But it is so good a clue that I should like to know now whether you are determined to prosecute when you have the criminal?"

"Why, bless me, of course," Sir James replied with surprise. "It doesn't rest with me, you know—the property belongs to my friends. And even if *they* were disposed to let the thing slide, I shouldn't allow it—I couldn't, after they had been robbed in my house."

"Of course, of course! Then, if I can, I should like to send a message to Twyford by somebody perfectly trustworthy—not a servant. Could anybody go?"

"Well, there's Lloyd, although he's only just back from his journey. But, if it's important, he'll go."

"It is important. The fact is we must have a policeman or two here this evening, and I'd like Mr.

Lloyd to fetch them without telling anybody else."

Sir James rang, and, in response to his message, Mr. Lloyd appeared. While Sir James gave his secretary his instructions, Hewitt strolled to the door of the smoking-room, and intercepted the latter as he came out.

"I'm sorry to give you this trouble, Mr. Lloyd," he said, "but I must stay here myself for a little and somebody who can be trusted must go. Will you just bring back a police-constable with you? or rather two—two would be better. That is all that is wanted. You won't let the servants know, will you? Of course there will be a female searcher at the Twyford police-station? Ah — of course. Well, you needn't bring her, you know. That sort of thing is done at the station." And, chatting thus confidentially, Martin Hewitt saw him off.

When Hewitt returned to the smoking-room, Sir James said suddenly: "Why, bless my soul, Mr. Hewitt, we haven't fed you! I'm awfully sorry. We came in rather late for lunch, you know, and this business has bothered me so I clean forgot everything else. There's no dinner until seven, so you'd better let me give you something now. I'm really sorry. Come along."

"Thank you, Sir James," Hewitt replied; "I won't take much. A few biscuits, perhaps, or something of that sort. And, by-the-

bye, if you don't mind, I rather think I should like to take it alone. The fact is I want to go over this case thoroughly by myself. Can you put me in a room?"

"Any room you like. Where will you go? The dining-room's rather large, but there's my study, that's pretty snug, or——"

"Perhaps I can go into Mr. Lloyd's room for half-an-hour or so; I don't think he'll mind, and it's pretty comfortable."

"Certainly, if you like. I'll tell them to send you whatever they have got."

"Thank you very much. Perhaps they'll also send me a lump of sugar and a walnut; it's—it's just a little fad of mine."

"A what—a lump of sugar and a walnut?" Sir James stopped for a moment, with his hand on the bell-rope. "Oh, certainly, if you like it; certainly," he added, and stared after this detective of curious tastes as he left the room.

When the vehicle bringing back the secretary and the policemen drew up on the drive, Martin Hewitt left the room on the first floor and proceeded downstairs. On the landing he met Sir James Norris and Mrs. Cazenove, who stared with astonishment on perceiving that the detective carried in his hand the parrot-cage.

"I think our business is about brought to a head now," Hewitt remarked on the stairs. "Here are the police-officers from Twyford." The men were standing

in the hall with Mr. Lloyd, who, catching sight of the cage in Hewitt's hand, paled suddenly.

"This is the person who will be charged, I think," Hewitt pursued, addressing the officers, and indicating Lloyd with his finger.

"What, Lloyd?" gasped Sir James, aghast. "No—not Lloyd—nonsense!"

"He doesn't seem to think it nonsense himself, does he?" Hewitt placidly observed. Lloyd had sunk on a chair, and, gray of face, was staring blindly at the man he had run against at the office door that morning. His lips moved in spasms, but there was no sound. The wilted flower fell from his button-hole to the floor, but he did not move.

"This is his accomplice," Hewitt went on, placing the parrot and cage on the hall table, "though I doubt whether there will be any use in charging *him*. Eh, Polly?"

The parrot put his head aside and chuckled. "Hullo, Polly!" it quietly gurgled. "Come along!"

Sir James Norris was hopelessly bewildered. "Lloyd—Lloyd," he said, under his breath, "Lloyd—and that!"

"This was his little messenger, his useful Mercury," Hewitt explained, tapping the cage complacently; "in fact, the actual lifter. Hold him up!"

The last remark referred to the wretched Lloyd, who had fallen forward with something between a sob and a loud sigh. The police-

men took him by the arms and propped him in his chair.

"System?" said Hewitt, with a shrug of the shoulders, an hour or two after in Sir James's study. "I can't say I have a system. I call it nothing but common-sense and a sharp pair of eyes. Nobody using these could help taking the right road in this case. I began at the match, just as the Scotland Yard man did, but I had the advantage of taking a line through three cases. To begin with, it was plain that that match, being left there in daylight, in Mrs. Cazenove's room, could not have been used to light the table-top, in the full glare of the window; therefore it had been used for some other purpose—*what* purpose I could not, at the moment, guess. Habitual thieves, you know, often have curious superstitions, and some will never take anything without leaving something behind—a pebble or a piece of coal, or something like that—in the premises they have been robbing. It seemed at first extremely likely that this was a case of that kind. The match had clearly been *brought in*—because, when I asked for matches, there were none in the stand, not even an empty box, and the room had not been disturbed. Also the match probably had not been struck there, nothing having been heard, although, of course, a mistake in this matter was just possible. This match, then, it was fair to assume,

had been lit somewhere else and blown out immediately—I remarked at the time that it was very little burned. Plainly it could not have been treated thus for nothing, and the only possible object would have been to prevent it igniting accidentally. Following on this, it became obvious that the match was used, for whatever purpose, not as a match, but merely as a convenient splinter of wood.

"So far so good. But on examining the match very closely I observed, as you can see for yourself, certain rather sharp indentations in the wood. They are very small, you see, and scarcely visible, except upon narrow inspection; but there they are, and their positions are regular. See—there are two on each side, each opposite the corresponding mark of the other pair. The match, in fact, would seem to have been gripped by some fairly sharp instrument, holding it at two points above and two below—an instrument, as it may at once strike you, not unlike the beak of a bird.

"Now here was an idea. What living creature but a bird could possibly have entered Mrs. Heath's window without a ladder—supposing no ladder to have been used—or could have got into Mrs. Armitage's window without lifting the sash higher than the eight or ten inches it was already open? Plainly, nothing. Further,

it is significant that only *one* article was stolen at a time, although others were about. A human being could have carried any reasonable number, but a bird could only take one at a time. But why should a bird carry a match in its beak? Certainly it must have been trained to do that for a purpose, and a little consideration made that purpose pretty clear. A noisy, chattering bird would probably betray itself at once. Therefore it must be trained to keep quiet both while going for and coming away with its plunder. What readier or more probably effectual way then, while teaching it to carry without dropping, to teach it also to keep quiet while carrying? The one thing would practically cover the other.

"I thought at once, of course, of a jackdaw or a magpie—these birds' thievish reputations made the guess natural. But the marks on the match were much too wide apart to have been made by the beak of either. I conjectured, therefore, that it must be a raven. So that, when we arrived near the coachhouse, I seized the opportunity of a little chat with your groom on the subject of dogs and pets in general, and ascertained that there was no tame raven in the place. I also, incidentally, by getting a light from the coach-house box of matches, ascertained that the match found was of the sort generally used

about the establishment — the large, thick, red-topped English Match. But I further found that Mr. Lloyd had a parrot which was a most intelligent pet, and had been trained into comparative quietness—for a parrot. Also, I learned that more than once the groom had met Mr. Lloyd carrying his parrot under his coat, it having, as its owner explained, learned the trick of opening its cage-door and escaping.

"I said nothing, of course, to you of all this, because I had as yet nothing but a train of argument and no results. I got to Lloyd's rooms as soon as possible. My chief object in going there was achieved when I played with the parrot, and induced it to bite a quill tooth-pick.

"When you left me in the smoking-room, I compared the quill and the match very carefully, and found that the marks corresponded exactly. After this I felt very little doubt indeed. The fact of Lloyd having met the ladies walking before dark on the day of the first robbery proved nothing, because, since it was clear that the match had *not* been used to procure a light, the robbery might as easily have taken place in daylight as not—must have so taken place, in fact, if my conjectures were right. That they were right I felt no doubt. There could be no other explanation.

"When Mrs. Heath left her window open and her door shut,

anybody climbing upon the open sash of Lloyd's high window could have put the bird upon the sill above. The match placed in the bird's beak for the purpose I have indicated, and struck first, in case by accident it should ignite by rubbing against something and startle the bird—this match would, of course, be dropped just where the object to be removed was taken up; as you know, in every case the match was found almost upon the spot where the missing article had been left—scarcely a likely triple coincidence had the match been used by a human thief. This would have been done as soon after the ladies had left as possible, and there would then have been plenty of time for Lloyd to hurry out and meet them before dark—especially plenty of time to meet them *coming back*, as they must have been, since they were carrying their ferns. The match was an article well chosen for its purpose, as being a not altogether unlikely thing to find on a dressing-table, and, if noticed, likely to lead to the wrong conclusions adopted by the official detective.

"In Mrs. Armitage's case the taking of an inferior brooch and the leaving of a more valuable ring pointed clearly either to the operator being a fool or unable to distinguish values, and certainly, from other indications, the thief seemed no fool. The door was locked, and the gas-fitter, so

to speak, on guard, and the window was only eight or ten inches open and propped with a brush. A human thief entering the window would have disturbed this arrangement, and would scarcely risk discovery by attempting to replace it, especially a thief in so great a hurry as to snatch the brooch up without unfastening the pin. The bird could pass through the opening as it was, and *would have* to tear the pin-cushion to pull the brooch off, probably holding the cushion down with its claw the while.

"Now in yesterday's case we had an alteration of conditions. The window was shut and fastened, but the door was open—but only left for a few minutes, during which time no sound was heard either of coming or going. Was it not possible, then, that the thief was *already* in the room, in hiding, while Mrs. Cazenove was there, and seized its first opportunity on her temporary absence? The room is full of draperies, hangings, and whatnot, allowing of plenty of concealment for a bird, and a bird could leave the place noiselessly and quickly. That the whole scheme was strange mattered not at all. Robberies presenting such unaccountable features must have been effected by strange means of one sort or another. There was no improbability—consider how many hundreds of examples of infinitely higher degrees of bird-

training art exhibited in the London streets every week for copers.

"So that, on the whole, I felt pretty sure of my ground. But before taking any definite steps I resolved to see if Polly could not be persuaded to exhibit his accomplishments to an indulgent stranger. For that purpose I contrived to send Lloyd away again and have a quiet hour alone with his bird. A piece of sugar, as everybody knows, is a good parrot bribe; but a walnut, split in half, is a better—especially if the bird be used to it; so I got you to furnish me with both. Polly was shy at first, but I generally get along very well with pets, and a little perseverance soon led to a complete private performance for my benefit. Polly would take the match, mute as wax, jump on the table, pick up the brightest thing he could see, in a great hurry, leave the match behind, and scuttle away round the room; but at first wouldn't give up the plunder to me. It was enough. I also took the liberty, as you know, of a general look round, and discovered that little collection of Brummagem rings and trinkets that you have just seen—used in Polly's education, no doubt. When we sent Lloyd away, it struck me that he might as well be usefully employed as not, so I got him to fetch the police, deluding him a little, I fear, by talking about the servants and a female

searcher. There will be no trouble about evidence; he'll confess: of that I'm sure. I know the sort of man. But I doubt if you'll get Mrs. Cazenove's brooch back. You see, he has been to London today, and by this time the swag is probably broken up."

Sir James listened to Hewitt's explanation with many expressions of assent and some of surprise. When it was over, he smoked a few whiffs and then said: "But Mrs. Armitage's brooch was pawned, and by a woman."

"Exactly. I expect our friend Lloyd was rather disgusted at his small luck—probably gave the brooch to some female connection in London, and she realized on it. Such persons don't always trouble to give a correct address."

The two smoked in silence for a few minutes, and then Hewitt continued: "I don't expect our friend has had an easy job altogether with that bird. His successes at most have only been three, and I suspect he had many failures and not a few anxious moments that we know nothing of. I should judge as much merely from what the groom told me of frequently meeting Lloyd with his parrot. But the plan was not a bad one—not at all. Even if the bird had been caught in the act, it would only have been 'That michievous parrot!' you see. And his master would only have been looking for him."

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