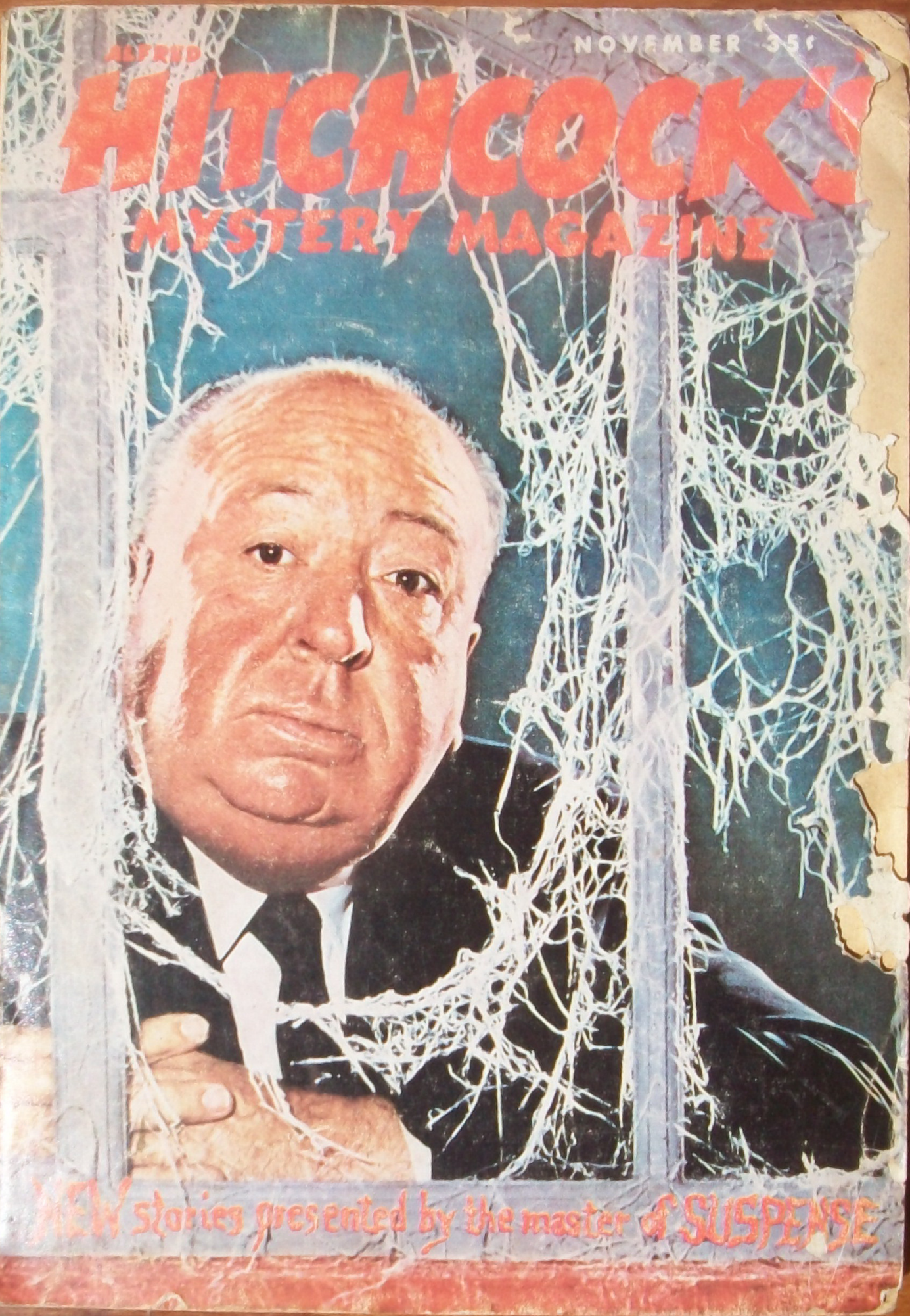
NOVEMBER 35¢
ALFRED
HITCHCOCK'S
MYSTERY MAGAZINE
NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

Dear Readers:

Since the first showing of THE BIRDS many moviegoers are convinced I have supernatural powers and can produce a flock of feathered friends wherever I go. I don't wish to disabuse such confidence nor fall from such celestial heights on the wing of their disillusionment, but I must.

Halloween, haunted houses, ghost stories and supernatural manifestations are synonymous. For me they can be calamitous. Hence my appeal to the Boys in Blue each Halloween, and my subsequent incarceration during All Saints' Eve. Here is where I sing a few old songs with the fellows in the constabulary and then return to the safety of my home after the bougainvillea bushes, the high ixora hedge, the patio and garage are checked for anti-Hitchcock merrymakers.

We admit it's all in fun until my wife tells me a ghost story and then I'm certain I've heard someone in the house as in August Derleth's story, ADVENTURE OF THE HAUNTED HOUSE, in this issue. This story and Michael Zuroy's, THE AWFUL EXPERIMENT, should supply horripilant material to spook any party, Halloween or otherwise.

Alfred Hitchcock

D HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 8, No. 11, November 1963. Single copies 35 cents. nd Possessions; elsewhere $5.00 (in U. S. funds) for one year. Subscriptions $4.00 for one year in the United ates. Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. Publications office, 10 Perry Street, Concord, N. H. ass postage paid at Concord, N. H. © 1963 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for d material. Manuscripts should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, ach, Fla. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing agazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

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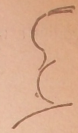
Occasionally situations coincide in such a way that there remains only one thing for a sensible person to do. These instances, appropriately enough, are referred to as matters of life and death.



A GIRL MUST be PRACTICAL

By RICHARD DEMING

THE PHONE CALL Lydia Hartman had been awaiting all day came just as she was leaving the office. She paused in the doorway and waited to see if it was for her.

She heard her boss say, "Apex Insurance. Mr. Tremaine speaking." Then he looked up and motioned toward her energetically.

Crossing the room, she took the phone from Tremaine's hand and said into it, "Mrs. Hartman speaking."

"This is Jules," a deep masculine voice said in her ear. "I'm calling from Buffalo."

"Buffalo!" she said abruptly. "You told me to stick with him no matter where he went," Jules Weygand said a trifle resentfully. "When he caught a bus to Buffalo, I drove my car up and was waiting at the depot here when he arrived."

Lydia glanced toward her boss, who had moved across the room and was lifting his hat from a clothes tree.

"Does he know you followed him?" she asked in a low voice.

"He hasn't seen me. I feel like a private eye, tailing him around like this from one city to the next."

From the doorway Mr. Tremaine said, "Night, Lydia. Lock the door when you leave, will you?"

Placing her hand over the mouth piece, Lydia said, "All right, Mr. Tremaine. Good-night."

Then, as the door closed behind her boss, she said into the phone, "Is he all right?"

"Of course he's all right," Weygand said with a shade more resentment. "He's registered at the Redmill Hotel, and since noon he's had two pints of bourbon delivered. I told you he wasn't planning anything but a drunk."

"Oh, my!" she said. "If he's drunk, he might do anything. I'm coming there."

"I thought you probably would," he said resignedly. "So I checked train and bus schedules. The next train leaves Rochester at six P.M. and gets here at seven-thirty. There isn't a bus leaving there until eight."

"I'll be on the next train."

"What do you expect to accomplish?" he asked.

"I might prevent him from doing something desperate, Jules."

"Like killing himself? Drunks don't commit suicide."

"Jim's hardly a drunk," she said sharply. "You can't blame him for going off the deep end after losing everything he had."

"He lost it for me too," Weygand said dryly. "I was his partner, remember?"

"I know," she said on a note of contrition. "You've been like the Rock of Gibralter in this, Jules. You could have prosecuted."

"I didn't hold off for his sake, Lydia. Only for yours. You know how I feel about you."

"I don't want to hear that as

long as I'm married to Jim," she said with a return of sharpness. "And I certainly can't leave him now, when he needs me more than he ever has."

"That sounds as though you finally plan to, once he's straightened out," Weygand said in a pleased voice. "It's the first real encouragement you've given me."

"Meet me at the station at seven-thirty," she said, and hung up.

Jules Weygand was waiting when Lydia Hartman got off the train at Buffalo. When she saw him standing, tall and lean and handsome, at the top of the inclined ramp leading up from the trains, it occurred to her that a month ago the sight would have made her heart skip a beat. But then he had been a successful businessman; now he was a bankrupt. She might have traded one successful businessman for another, but she had no desire to trade a bankrupt for a bankrupt. At thirty-two a girl had to start being practical.

He stood smiling down at her as she moved upward toward him, openly admiring the rounded slimness of her body. When she paused before him and he took the small overnight bag from her hand, she tossed her blond head pettishly.

"You shouldn't look at me like that," she said.

"You shouldn't be so beautiful," he countered, taking her elbow to steer her toward the main exit.

His car was parked on the lot only a few yards from the exit. Dropping the overnight bag in back, he held the door for her, then rounded the car to slide under the wheel.

Without turning on the ignition, he said, "Now that you're here, what are your plans?"

"To talk to him. If he won't come home, I'll stay here with him."

"And watch him drink himself into a stupor? He may stay on this a week."

"Then I'll stay a week."

"You'll lose your job."

"I can phone in the morning. Mr. Tremaine is understanding."

"But you've only been there three weeks, Lydia. Even an understanding boss won't put up with you taking a week off so soon."

"I'm not exactly a new employee," she said. "I worked for Apex Insurance five years while Jim was getting on his feet."

"You've been away five years too."

"Apparently I haven't been forgotten, or I wouldn't have been taken back with a set-up to chief clerk."

"Yeah," he said. "That hasn't helped Jim psychologically either, you moving back to your old employer with a promotion at the moment he's bungled himself out of business entirely."

"Bungled?"

"If embezzlement to play the ponies isn't bungling, I don't know what is. Why don't you leave him to stew in his own juice, Lydia? A month ago you were considering it."

"A month ago he wasn't down. I can't leave him now."

"Your damned loyalty," he said irritably. "He'll never get back on his feet, even if you stick with him. He's washed up."

"So I should leave him for you?" she asked sarcastically. "You're as bankrupt as he is."

"But not through my own fault. I'll spring back again, eventually. Jim won't. Even if you managed to help him back on his feet again, he'd fritter it away a second time. He's weak, Lydia."

"Perhaps. But he's my husband. And at the moment you're no better prospect than he is. I don't think you realize what a practical person I am, Jules. Even if I weren't married to Jim, I wouldn't have you at this point."

He gave her a surprised look. "Are you serious?"

"Completely," she assured him. "Maybe ten years ago I'd take the chance. As a matter of fact, I did with Jim. With youth, you don't mind helping a man struggle ahead. But I've gone through that once. Now I'm thirty-two and you're nearly forty. I'm not interested in any more financial struggles that can be avoided. I'm stuck with Jim, but I'm not about to jump from the frying pan into the fire. My next husband, if there is one, is going to be firmly established before we say the vows."

"You don't make sense," he growled. "You'll have a lot more financial struggle with Jim than you would with me."

"We happen to be already married. And I'm just as loyal as I am practical. Shall we go where he's staying?"

Wordlessly he started the engine and drove off the lot.

The Redmill Hotel was on lower Pearl Street, hardly the best section of town. However, Jules Weygand assured Lydia, it was a perfectly respectable second-class hotel. She left her overnight bag in the car when they went inside.

The building was ancient and both the furniture and carpet in the lobby were well worn, but it seemed a clean enough place. Two old men sat in the lobby reading newspapers and a middle-aged man with a bald head was behind the desk.

Going over to the desk, Weygand said to the bald man, "He still in

his room swilling the booze?"

The man merely nodded. Weygand led Lydia on toward the elevator.

"I slipped him a ten to keep track of Jim's activities for me," he said in explanation. "That's how I knew about the bourbon he had delivered."

"I'll repay all your expenses," she said.

"Don't be silly. What's a few more bucks when you're fifty thousand in the hole? I have enough ready cash."

They stepped on the elevator and Weygand said, "Seventh."

When they got off at seven, Weygand led the way down the hall and around a corner to a door numbered 714.

"Well, here you are," he said.

Over the door there was a transom with its glass painted white. It was open about four inches at the top, enough to show that a light burned in the room. Lydia gave the door a timid knock.

When there was no response, she rapped harder. After several moments of waiting, Weygand stepped forward and pounded several times.

A door across the hall opened and an elderly man peered out, then closed the door again.

Lydia said, "He must be asleep."

"More likely passed out drunk," Weygand growled. "I'll go down and have Baldy bring up a pass key."

Lydia waited in front of the door while Weygand went down stairs. In a few minutes he reappeared with the clerk.

"This is Mr. Simms, Lydia," Weygand said. "I've explained that you're Jim's wife. Mrs. Hartman, Mr. Simms."

"Pleased to meet you," the desk man said a little dubiously. "There isn't going to be any trouble here, is there?"

Lydia said, "I'm just concerned about my husband, Mr. Simms. We haven't been having any marital discord, if that's what you mean. I assure you he'll be glad to see me if you let us in."

"Well, I guess it'll be all right," Simms said reluctantly.

He fitted a pass key in the door, turned it and pushed on the knob. Nothing happened.

"He's got it bolted," Simms said. He pounded on the door until several doors along the hall opened and tenants peered out.

"Just a sound sleeper, folks," Simms announced generally. "Excuse the noise."

The tenants withdrew and their doors closed. The three in front of 714 listened for some sound within the room, but there was none.

Lydia said worriedly, "He usually snores, particularly when he's been drinking."

This made Simms look worried. He tried the pass key again, with no more result than before.

"Is there a fire escape?" Lydia asked.

Shaking his head, Simms pointed to a fire-exit sign up the hall. "Just fire stairs in each hallway. Maybe we can see something through the transom. I'll get a ladder."

He went away and was gone some ten minutes before he returned carrying a six-foot stepladder and a small, stubby screwdriver.

As he set the stepladder before the door, he said, "I know I won't be able to reach the release, because it's too far down. But I may be able to unscrew the sideplate and get the transom open that way."

Climbing the ladder, he attempted to peer into the room through the V-shaped crack left by the partially open transom.

"Can't see anything but a piece of the ceiling," he announced.

Holding the screwdriver, he thrust his right hand through the very top of the aperture and groped around for a moment. Then he withdrew it and climbed down the ladder.

"The metal plate holding the rod that opens and closes the transom is on the right edge about halfway down," he said. "My wrist's too thick to get my hand down that far. You want to try it, lady?"

"All right," Lydia said in a steady voice.

Taking the screwdriver, she climbed the ladder. Holding the screwdriver in her left hand, she inserted her right in the crack and felt for the metal plate. As Simms had said, it was attached to the edge of the transom about halfway down. Her hand and wrist were small enough to reach it easily. She couldn't see it, but with her fingers she could feel that it was held by two screws.

Withdrawing her hand, she transferred the screwdriver to it and pushed it through the aperture again. Even though she couldn't see what she was doing, the screwdriver was short enough so that with its butt end nestled in her palm, she could still touch the screws with her fingertips. Guiding the blade into the slot of the lower screwhead, she unscrewed it, pulled her hand back out and handed the screw down to Simms.

"Better hold the top of the transom with your other hand when you unscrew the second one," Simms cautioned. "Otherwise it'll bang down against the door and maybe break the glass."

Lydia put her hand through the

crack again, located the upper screw by feel and seated the blade of the screwdriver. Before unscrewing it, she grasped the top of the transom with her left hand. When the screw came all the way out, the transom was suddenly released from its rigid position. Handing down both the screw and screwdriver, Lydia cautiously let the transom move forward and swing down, climbing higher as she did and thrusting her arm farther into the room until the transom finally hung vertically downward against the door below it.

Only then did she peer through the oblong frame at the motionless figure lying on the bed. She stared at it silently for a long time.

"Is he all right?" Weygand asked.

The question roused Lydia to action. Kicking off her shoes and letting them fall to the floor, she climbed clear to the top of the ladder, steadied herself by grasping the upper part of the transom frame with both hands and slid her legs inside.

As she lowered herself to a seated position, Weygand said, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Going in to open the door," she said calmly.

Reversing herself to roll over on her stomach and transfer her grip to the bottom sill, she slid backward into the room and dropped to the floor. Quickly she crossed to the bed and bent over the still figure there.

Outside in the hall Jules Weygand tired of waiting for the door to open and climbed the ladder to peer in. His face appeared just as she turned away from the bed and began to move woodenly toward the door.

"What is it?" he asked worriedly when he saw her numb expression. He couldn't clearly see the figure on the bed because her body partially blocked the view.

Without answer she went to the door, drew back the bolt and pulled the door open. Weygand came down off the ladder, set it to one side and followed the bald-headed Simms into the room. Lydia quietly stepped out in the hall and put her shoes back on. Then she leaned against the door jamb and closed her eyes.

Inside the room the two men stared down at the figure on the bed. It was that of a man about thirty-five, good-looking in a weak sort of way, but beginning to go to fat. He wore nothing but socks and trousers, his shoes lying in one corner and the rest of his clothing wadded on top of a chair. An empty pint bottle lay next to him on the bed and another lay on the floor beside the bed. His hands were crossed on his stomach just below

a thin, horizontal slit of a wound on the left side of his chest, as though he had been reaching for the wound when he died, and hadn't quite had the strength to raise his hands that high.

Simms tentatively touched the dead man's cheek, then hurriedly withdrew his hand. "Cold," he said. "Must have been dead for a while."

"And I told her drunks never commit suicide," Jules Weygand said softly.

Simms gave him a sharp look. "Suicide? Where's the knife?"

Lydia's eyes popped open. Weygand's expression turned startled. After glancing about the room, he fell on hands and knees to peer under the bed. When he rose, he

stared at the desk clerk strangely.

"The door was bolted from inside," he said.

"Yeah," Simms said slowly. He glanced at the window, which was unscreened and wide open from the bottom.

"It's the seventh floor," Weygand reminded him. "And you said there's no fire escape."

He walked over to look out, then turned and stared at the closed bathroom door from narrowed eyes. Lydia's breath caught in her throat. The desk clerk gulped.

"You think the killer is still in there?" Simms whispered.

Without answering, Weygand returned to the bed, stooped and picked up the empty bottle lying next to it. Holding it by the neck,

he quietly approached the bathroom door and suddenly flung it open. He stepped in with the bottle raised high as a club.

Lowering it again, he came out, his expression puzzled. Simms's gaze strayed to the door of the closet.

Striding over to it, Weygand jerked it open, the bottle again held high. The closet was empty.

With a snort of disgust Weygand set the bottle atop the dresser. Returning to the open window, he peered out a second time.

"There's a ledge about a foot wide just below the window," he announced. "Who has the rooms on either side of this one?"

I'd have to check the register," Simms said faintly. "We'd better get out of here and let the police handle this."

"Yeah, I guess," Weygand said.

He moved toward the door. Lydia stepped back out of the way, swaying on her feet. Grasping her arm to steady her, Weygand gave her a sympathetic smile.

"I'll be all right," she said in a low voice.

Setting the spring lock, Simms pulled the door closed behind him and led the way to the elevator. Weygand steered Lydia after the desk clerk, still holding her arm. She moved stiffly, leaning against him for support.

Downstairs the two old men still sat in the lobby. Simms moved behind the desk and lifted the phone. Weygand led Lydia over to a sofa.

"I'll be all right now," she said, pulling her arm from his grip. "I don't want to sit down."

He gazed down at her speculatively. "You're sure?"

"I'm not the fainting type," she said straightening her shoulders. "I don't suppose we'll be able to go back to Rochester tonight, will we?"

"I hardly think so. The police will want to talk to us. And of course you'll have to arrange for a local funeral director to ship Jim home."

"Are you registered here?"

He shook his head. "I'm not registered anywhere. For all I knew, you meant to have me load Jim in my car and drive back to Rochester tonight. I didn't even bring a toothbrush."

"We may as well stay here, don't you think?"

"The place seems clean enough," he said with a shrug. "I'll see if I can get us a couple of rooms." He walked over to the desk just as Simms hung up the phone.

"They'll be right over," the desk clerk said. "You and Mrs. Hartman better stick around."

"We plan to," Weygand said. "Do you have a couple of rooms on the same floor, or perhaps adjoining?"

As Simms was checking his room chart, Lydia quietly walked to the door and outside. When Weygand finished registering, he turned to find her standing behind him with her overnight bag in her hand.

"You should have let me get that," he said, taking it from her.

"It isn't heavy," she said. "Did you get rooms?"

"Two right across the hall from each other on five. We may as well wait here until the police arrive, though. Mr. Simms says they'll be right along."

Lydia walked over to seat herself on the couch she had previously refused. Setting the bag next to the desk, Weygand went over to sit beside her.

A homicide team arrived five minutes later. It consisted of a burly middle-aged man who introduced himself as Sergeant Charles Carter and a lean, younger man named Harry Nicholson. Carter had a puffy, red-veined face and heavy-lidded eyes which gave a first impression of stupidity until you noted the shrewd glint in the eyes behind the drooping lids.

The first thing he asked was if Simms had phoned for a doctor.

"Yes, sir," the desk clerk said. "Before I called you. We have an arrangement with a man just up the street to be on call. He should be here any minute."

"Then let's take a look at the body," Carter said. "Harry, you stay here with these folks and send the doc up when he comes."

The sergeant and Simms moved off toward the elevator.

Harry Nicholson seemed to have no intention of asking any questions about the murder, for after making a comment about the pleasant weather Buffalo was having, he lapsed into silence. Five minutes passed before a thin, elderly man carrying a medical bag came in. Nicholson walked over to meet him at the door, and after a moment's conversation the elderly man proceeded to the elevator.

Lydia glanced at her watch and was surprised to see it was only eight forty-five, just an hour and a quarter since she had gotten off the train.

Silence resumed when Nicholson returned to his seat. Apparently any questioning to be done was to be conducted by Sergeant Carter. Twenty more minutes passed before Simms, the sergeant and the doctor all got off the elevator together. The elderly doctor went out the front door. Simms and Carter came over to where Lydia, Weygand, and the other detective were seated.

"It's homicide all right," Carter

informed his partner. "Somebody slid a knife between a couple of his ribs into his heart. He died so quick, he didn't even bleed. Funny thing, though."

"What's that?" Nicholson asked.

"Simms here says the door was bolted from inside and the transom open only a slit." He pushed a thumb toward Lydia. "She unscrewed some gadget to get the transom open and climbed through to unbolt the door."

Nicholson looked at Lydia. She said, "I was the only one with small enough hands to get a screwdriver through the crack."

Nicholson looked back at his partner. "The guy left by the fire escape?"

"There isn't any," Carter informed him.

"Hmm. Then he must have still been there when they found the body. Maybe hiding in the bathroom. He must have sneaked out when they left the room to call us."

Carter shook his head. "Simms says they had the same thought, and checked both the bathroom and closet." He looked at Weygand. "That right, mister?"

Weygand nodded. "I even looked under the bed."

"You mean we got a locked room mystery?" Nicholson asked in a querulous voice.

"Nope," Carter said. "It just narrows down to only one possible means of exit. There's a foot-wide ledge that runs clear around the building just below the window. A guy who didn't get dizzy could work his way along it to another room."

"Who's in the rooms either side of Hartman's?" Nicholson asked.

Simms said, "They're both vacant."

"I looked at them," Carter said. "The windows of both are closed, but unlocked. The guy could have pushed either up, then closed it again after he was inside. The doors have spring locks, so once he stepped out in the hall and pulled the door closed behind him, there'd be no sign of anybody ever being in the room."

Nicholson asked, "What's the doc say?"

"Dead three to five hours, which would make it three-thirty to five-thirty this afternoon. Probably closer to five-thirty."

"How do you figure that?"

"Simms delivered the guy a pint of bourbon at noon, a second one at two-thirty. If it took him two and a half hours to kill the first, it probably took at least as long to kill the second, which would take him to five o'clock. And both are empty."

Nicholson nodded. "That's logical. Where do we go from here?"

"You can call the ice wagon and the fingerprint boys and stand by here to show them around. Have the fingerprint guys catch the windows in the rooms both sides of 714 too. I'll take these people down to headquarters to get their stories."

Jules Weygand stood up. "I'd better move my car then, Sergeant. It's parked in the hotel loading zone."

Simms said, "I'll move it for you, Mr. Weygand, and you can pick up the keys at the desk when you come back. I'll put it on the hotel lot."

Weygand handed over the keys and Simms said, "I'll put Mrs. Hartman's bag in her room too. It's 521, Mrs. Hartman."

"Thank you," Lydia said.

"Okay, folks," Sergeant Carter said. "Let's take a ride over to headquarters."

Police headquarters was only two blocks away, also on lower Pearl Street. Sergeant Carter ushered them into an elevator, and when they got off upstairs, led them to a door lettered: HOMICIDE AND ARSON. Beyond the door was a large squadroom with several desks in it. The only person in the room was a man in shirtsleeves talking on a phone at one of the desks. Carter seated himself behind another desk on the opposite side of the room and waved Lydia and Weygand to a pair of nearby chairs.

"Smoke?" he asked, extending a pack of cigarettes.

Both Weygand and Lydia shook their heads. Carter lit one for himself, leaned back in his chair and regarded Lydia from beneath his drooping lids.

"I understand the dead man was your husband, Mrs. Hartman. That right?"

Lydia nodded.

"And you're here from Rochester?"

"That's right. Jules here too."

"Uh-huh. What was your husband doing here?"

"Just getting drunk," she said, flushing slightly. "He's been doing that recently. But up until this time he's always holed up in some Rochester hotel."

"This is just something recent? His drinking, I mean."

"The last few weeks. He's been depressed over business matters."

"Oh? What was his business?"

"Jim and Jules, here, were partners in the Weygand and Hartman Realty Company. They filed for bankruptcy three weeks ago and the company is in receivership. It was all Jim's fault, really."

"How's that?" Carter asked.

"He—he misappropriated some funds. Jules found it out too late to save the business. He's been wonderful about it. He could have had

Jim prosecuted and imprisoned."

"That wouldn't have saved anything," Weygand said dryly. "It would just have sent Jim to jail."

Carter turned his attention to Weygand. "Weren't you a little sore at your partner?"

"That's an understatement," Weygand said in the same dry tone. "I *would* have sent him to jail if it weren't for Lydia. I didn't want to hurt her."

"Oh? Why so considerate?"

"She hadn't done anything," Weygand said reasonably. "And I happen to like her."

After studying him for a moment, Carter turned back to Lydia. "How'd you know your husband was here in Buffalo?"

"Jules phoned me about five P.M. I had asked him to keep an eye on my husband, because Jim's been so depressed, I feared he might do something desperate. When Jules said my husband had registered here at the Redmill Hotel, and was having whisky delivered to his room, I took the six P.M. train here. I got in at seven-thirty and Jules met me at the train."

"Hmm. If you were in Rochester at five P.M., I guess you're cleared as a suspect." He swung his gaze back to Weygand. "You verify her story?"

"Of course," Weygand said in surprise. "You didn't actually suspect her of doing this thing, did you?"

"The wife is always a routine suspect when a man's murdered. Now about you. You tailed him here from Rochester, huh?"

"Not exactly. I watched him buy a bus ticket to Buffalo, drove here and picked him up at the bus depot again. When he checked in at the Redmill, I arranged with the desk clerk to let me know if he had any orders sent to his room. When I learned he was having whisky delivered, I phoned Lydia."

"I see. Seems to me you went to an awful lot of trouble for a guy who'd made you bankrupt."

Weygand flushed. "I wasn't doing it for him. It was a favor for Lydia."

"Kind of fond of her, huh?"

Weygand's flush deepened. "What are you getting at, Sergeant?"

"I'll spell it out for you," Carter said. "Hartman's wallet was in his hip pocket with sixty-three dollars in it, so the motive wasn't robbery. He was a stranger here, so it isn't likely he had any local enemies. You admit you had a grudge against him and you're fond of his wife. You married, Mr. Weygand?"

After staring at him for a time, Weygand said hotly, "No. But if you're accusing me—"

"I'm not accusing anybody, just yet," the sergeant interrupted. "I'm just pointing out that you seem to have a couple of good motives, and you tailed him here all the way from Rochester."

"But that was at my request," Lydia protested, her face paling. "I was afraid Jim might try to kill himself."

"Maybe your boy friend was afraid he wouldn't," Carter said cynically. "Until we turn up a better suspect, guess we'll have to hold you a while for investigation, Weygand."

Jules Weygand puffed up with indignation. But before he could open his mouth, the squadroom door opened and Harry Nicholson walked in. He was carrying a small paper bag in his hand.

As Nicholson approached the, desk, Sergeant Carter said, "Get anything?"

"The lab boys are still lifting prints. The guys from the morgue have been and gone." He set the paper bag on the desk. "You can handle this. It's already been checked for prints, and there aren't any."

Sergeant Carter peered into the bag, then reached in and drew out an open, thin-bladed clasp knife with a blade about five inches long. The blade was darkly stained.

Laying it on his desk blotter, Carter asked, "Anyone recognize this?"

Lydia managed to overcome her revulsion at the dark stain and leaned forward to examine the knife more closely. In its tancolored bone handle the initials "J.H." were inset in silver.

"It's my husband's," she said in a whisper. "He always carried it."

Carter looked up at Nicholson. "So he was killed with his own knife, huh? Probably he was passed out on the bed when the killer entered his room."

"What I figured," Nicholson said. "Of course we'll have to get the lab to run a check of the blood type on the knife against Hartman's, but I'll bet a beer they match."

"No bet," Carter said, "Where'd you turn it up?"

"I was making a routine check of Weygand's car," Nicholson said casually. "It was in the glove compartment."

It was nearly midnight when Lydia got back to her hotel room. She had stood by to protest Jules' innocence to the two unbelieving homicide officers, then had phoned a lawyer, waited until he arrived, and had outlined the whole situation to him. None of it had done any good. There was no bail in first-degree homicide cases, so Jules Weygand was in jail.

Her performance had helped her

own case, she knew, even if it hadn't helped Jules'. It would have been inconvenient if the police had suspected collusion between her and Jules, even though there had been none. As it was, they had seemed rather admiring that she had stood by her husband in his trouble to the extent that she had sent a friend to watch over him in case Jules attempted suicide.

Of course nobody, including Jules, suspected the real reason for her worry over Jim was that he might commit suicide before she could arrange a suitable accident.

Slipping off her dress and slip, she hung them neatly in the closet. As she peeled off her left stocking, she frowned at the small bloodstain on the inside of her thigh. Then she saw that a run had started where the point of the knife had punctured the nylon when she thrust it down inside the stocking.

Before removing the other stocking, she went into the bathroom and washed away the tiny bloodstain. Reaching down into the other stocking, she drew out a folded slip of paper, opened it and read it for the first time. There hadn't been time to read it in Jim's room, of course; only time to get it out of sight.

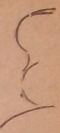
The note was almost illegible, obviously written in the last stages of drunkenness. But amid the erratic scrawling she could make out the phrase: "Sorry I have to take this way out, Lydia, but—" Nothing more was decipherable, but that was enough to indicate it was a suicide note.

Tearing it into small pieces, she flushed it away.

It was a good thing she worked for the insurance company where Jim was insured, she thought. Otherwise, she might have been unaware that his fifty-thousand-dollar policy contained a suicide clause which voided it in the event he took his own life.

It was only right that she should salvage something from a marriage to which she had devoted ten years, Lydia thought. And if she hadn't removed the knife from Jim's chest and the note from his hand, she would have nothing to show for the ten years.

Archery has been employed for almost everything from improving a young deb's posture to enhancing Zen contemplation. Seldom, however, has a man "with many strings to his bow" concluded a more dubious achievement.



The Missing Bow

by Arthur Porges

"Can a one-armed man with bad legs use a bow-and-arrow to kill somebody? Oddly enough, sir, the answer is yes. He just puts his feet against the inside of the bow, and draws back the string with his good arm. In fact, on some occasions, archers of the past made special long-distance flights that way—turning themselves into human cross-bows, so to speak."

Professor Ulysses Price Middlebie, once a teacher of the History and Philosophy of Science, and now a sometime crime-consultant, gave Sergeant Black a quizzical stare.

"If that is so, and I'm aware of the truth of your statement, what's the difficulty?"

"That a one-armed man can shoot an arrow very well indeed, if he's practised a bit, but how does he make the bow vanish into thin air?"

The professor blinked.

"Maybe you'd better explain that."

"I wish I could. All I know is that no bow was found, and that it wasn't possible for him to have disposed of it."

Middlebie was silent for a moment, then he said briskly: "Let's forget the missing bow for a while, and build up some background. I can't work in a vacuum. Who was killed; who's the suspect; and what was the motive, if any?"

"The victim was a Victor Borden—male, white, age thirty-four. I suspect Howard Cole, also white, male, but forty-one years old. As to the motive, that's a cinch. Fifteen months ago, Borden rammed his car into Cole's, killing the man's wife and child—an eight-year-old girl. Cole himself lost his left arm, and was so mangled below the waist that he can just barely hobble around now."

Middlebie looked grim.

"You mean Borden was entirely to blame for the accident?"

"Officially, no. In my opinion, definitely yes. He was going too fast, and had been drinking. Cole had the right-of-way. Borden claimed he acted in time to prevent the crash, but that his brakes failed. Said he'd been having trouble with them for several weeks. His garage mechanic verified that part but insisted he'd fixed them up the day before. But Borden's lawyer—a good man, too good for justice—proved that the mechanic had often been guilty of sloppy work, and even collecting for jobs not done at all. That was enough to confuse the jury. They knew Borden had been drinking and speeding but couldn't be sure about the brakes. What they didn't know—it can't be brought out during the trial—is that Borden has a long record of accidents, reckless driving, suspended licenses, and the rest. He was guilty, all right—to the hilt."

"But got off? Scot-free?"

"No; they gave him a lousy year for involuntary manslaughter. He was out in nine months—about eleven weeks ago, in fact."

"What was his trade, or profession?"

"A small-time fast buck operator, I'd say. Anything to make an easy dollar from some sucker. Not quite illegal, but close. Peddling shoddy merchandise as army surplus—that type of thing."

"And Cole?"

"That's the tragic part. Nominally he manages a sporting goods store. But his real work is as an expert archer. He did all the trick shots for the new 'Robin Hood' shows. Now here he is with one arm and stiff legs. Not to mention his family; he was crazy about them."

"Did he talk about revenge?"

"Not that we can find out. Cole's a reserved, laconic kind of man—a vanishing breed, if you ask me. Still water running deep."

The professor fixed his luminous gray eyes on Black, and said: "He didn't threaten, but you suspect him. Why?"

"Hell, he made it easy—too easy. Listen to this. Cole had a cabby—always the same one—drive him to Borden's flat every night for a week. Between seven and eight each time. He'd leave the cab parked a few feet from the opening to a sort of blind alley. The driver could see him go in, but not what he did towards the end, which was out of sight and dark besides. Let me tell you about that alley. Back doors of stores open into it, and they're all well-locked. Nobody leaves his door open in that neighborhood; there are more petty thieves to the block than empty muscatel bottles, and that's saying something.

"Borden lived over a store at the end of the alley. The night of the murder, he was in the bathroom, getting ready to shave; in fact, he was all lathered up, with his back to the open window. A perfect target. The window's about ten feet up, but set back from the store roof so that its distance from the alley where Cole must have stood is nearly thirty feet.

"Well, that night Cole comes in the cab as usual, and hobbles down the alley out of sight. The cabby swears he was carrying only one thing—the thing he always carried in there: a miniature tape-recorder. I'll explain about that later. Anyhow, a few minutes after Cole is out of sight of the cab, the driver hears an awful screech—that's from the woman who lived with Borden—and then Cole comes limping out. Now before he can even get into the cab, a squad-car rolls up. It seems that some old lady across the street has noticed the cab pulling in there every night for a week, and the cripple getting out and going into the alley. So that night she can't stand any more, and calls the police."

"I see," Middlebie said thoughtfully. "Cole goes into a blind alley with no bow, comes out the same way, and is captured on the spot."

"That's it," Black moaned. "No chance to hide the bow, even if he smuggled it past the cabby."

"And Borden was killed with an arrow."

"Yes. It had a heavy, sharp point—they tell me it's the kind used for hunting deer and such. It split Borden's spinal cord with one of the sharp edges. He fell, making a crash with junk from the medicine cabinet; that's when his girl-friend screamed."

"You searched the alley, of course."

"You bet. All the doors were locked; there was simply no place to hide even a small bow."

"Was the arrow traced to Cole?"

Black made a grimace.

"He has hundreds of arrows at home—in closets and in the garage. Some are souvenirs of old movies where he did stunt work. How can we identify an arrow from some picture made twenty-five years ago—say Errol Flynn's 'Robin Hood'? It's just a broad-head used for hunting, with only one funny thing about it."

Middlebie seemed to snap to attention.

"What was that?"

"There was a length of string tied to it, an inch or two below the feathers."

"Bow-string?"

"No; just light cord. The archery buffs on the force tell me this stuff could never shoot an arrow; it would break at the first few pounds of pull."

"Then your theory, I take it," Middlebie said slowly, "is Cole, while Borden was in jail, plotted revenge, and learned, possibly, to shoot a bow with one hand. Then he went to Borden's flat when the man was released, and familiarized himself with his habits, learning that Borden was apt to shave or wash between seven and eight. The cab driver was meant to be a witness of sorts—proof that Cole had no bow. The police-car merely added to his alibi—a sort of bonus."

"That must be it," Black said, rather glumly. "But with no bow, we don't have a case. It's barely possible he concealed a short one under his jacket, but if so, what happened to it?"

"You searched the roofs, of course."

"Yes; they're accessible only in a couple of places. In all the other ones, the buildings are four to six stories high; nobody could throw a stick up there. But we looked, anyhow. Nothing."

"And a string on the arrow," the professor murmured. "You realize that's the key; it has to be. Anything that doesn't fit is apt to be vital. Like the residue when nitrogen and oxygen were taken from a sample of air. The unexplained discrepancy led to the discovery of the inert gases—now no longer inert at all! Could he have wanted to pull the arrow back after it struck Borden? Why? And that has no connection with the missing bow, anyhow." The gray eyes were turned inward. Then he looked at Sergeant Black again. "Do you have a copy of the medical report?"

"Right here, at your disposal."

"Let me go over that, and do some thinking. I'm sure the data are available to us, and need only the prepared mind for resolution of the problem. Suppose you come back on Wednesday."

"Good," the sergeant said. He knew that once Middlebie put his great store of knowledge and insight to work, there was at least a chance to break this troublesome case. "I'll be back then—unless," he added hopefully, "I hear from you sooner. Tomorrow, say."

"Not very likely," was the dry comment. "Not even Faraday and Pasteur organized experimental data that fast, and I'm at best just playing the ape to their kind."

Black was about to deny this, but said nothing. The professor detested flattery, and often seemed suspicious of honest approval. It was not the worst trait a man could have, the sergeant thought; he knew some people couldn't function without lavish and constant praise. They were the devil to deal with.

So he gave Middlebie a boyish grin, full of warmth more expressive than words, and said: "Good hunting, sir." Then he left.

When Black had gone, the professor sat down at his huge, cluttered desk, and read the medical report. This done, he took pen and paper, and made some rather involved calculations, using a slide-rule from time to time. He studied his results, and his shaggy eyebrows rose. Interesting point, he thought. The arrow had been fired from an unusually weak bow—one of about fifteen pounds pull, his figures indicated—or else the archer had not drawn the string back more than a fraction of its normal range. It was a matter of basic physics. According to the medical report, the heavy, extremely sharp broadhead of steel had just severed the spinal cord. This relatively shallow penetration, when related to the known resistance of tissue, indicated the probable velocity of the arrow, from which the pull of the bow could easily be computed. Naturally it was not an exact determination, but the limits of error were known. Not more than fifteen pounds pull: that was as certain as Newton's Laws themselves.

He wondered then about the length of string: what was its breaking strength? Middlebie looked through some of the other papers in Black's report. He felt a glow of pleasure at his one-time pupil's competence. The boy had even checked the string. It broke at roughly three pounds of tension. It was obvious the stuff couldn't have functioned as a bow-string.

The professor had a pretty good idea what he ought to do now. He began with the article on archery in the superb 11th Edition of the Encyclopedia, reading it through with great care. He learned much about an ancient and fascinating weapon, but nothing that helped Black's case. Well, tomorrow he'd see what the university library had on archery, just in case. Meanwhile, there was another phase to work on.

He called the nearest sporting goods store, and had them send over a hunting arrow. When it arrived, he examined it closely, and then proceeded to experiment. Using a carefully calibrated spring device he improvised in his own well-stocked laboratory, he fired the arrow at a large block of wax which approximated human flesh in density. The experiment verified his calculations; the bow could not have had more than a fifteen pound pull.

The professor sat there, hefting the arrow in one hand. Suddenly his body tensed with excitement. He stood up, and gripping the center of the shaft, hurled the arrow with all his might at the wax target. It wobbled feebly through the air, struck the very edge of the wax block, then sagged to the floor. He tried several times from a distance of thirty feet, each shot being checked for penetration. He sighed, and put the arrow on the table. Another good idea gone to pot through experimentation. It obviously wasn't possible to throw an arrow hard enough to kill a man at thirty feet. Aside from the problem of aiming it, which would seem to be bad enough, the flight path resembled that of a drunken owl in a high wind. Middlebie dropped the problem for that day. He had less faith than ever in tomorrow's library work, but knew better than to skip it without a trial.

This attitude was fully justified by his session at the university. How odd that a book sixty years old should hold the secret to a recent murder. Yet there it was, in a fat tome called "The Crossbow", just reprinted after more than half a century of neglect. The only trouble was, what should be done now? In theory, the puzzle was solved, but getting a conviction was not so simple. Besides, the professor, although perfectly law-abiding, wasn't certain he wanted one.

In the circumstances, he decided to eall on the suspect, who was still at home, under surveillance, but not arrest, the police being cautious about the lost bow.

He found Cole to be a thick-set, chunky man, whose face, once good-humored enough, the professor inferred from the wrinkle-lines of laughter at the corners of the eyes, was now a bitter mask. He walked stiffly, with great deliberation, and seemed charged with restlessness. His right arm, in the thin, short sleeve, was powerfully muscled, as if all the man's strength was now concentrated there.

As Black had said, he was indeed laconic, so that Middlebie had to open the conversation, and carry most of it.

"So you see," he told Cole gently, "the sergeant asked my help, your ingenuity having baffled him completely, as well it might."

Cole said nothing, but his blue eyes, cold as polar ice, flickered briefly.

"Black thought there was a bow that disappeared, but we know better," the professor added, his voice softer still.

"Do we?" Cole retorted, biting off his words almost like a snapping beast.

"I can understand your wanting to kill the man, but it's possible the brakes did fail."

"They didn't. I was there. He never went for his brakes, but just tried to bull through. Too drunk and crazy to know it couldn't be done." Cole's voice was full of fury.

"So you hated him, of course, and wanted revenge."

"I didn't say so."

"You never say much. But you act. A vanishing breed, Black called you. Quite true. But you did kill—murder—him."

"How? He was shot with an arrow, and there's no bow connected with me. Therefore it must have been somebody else. Maybe his girl stabbed him with the arrow." There was a feverish glint in the blue eyes now, as if Cole felt an urge to talk for once.

"I did some research on archery," Middlebie said in a level voice. "Many years ago, in the 1880's or so, there was often a special feature of the sport—arrow throwing. Don't bother to look surprised; you knew about it long before I did. Maybe you've known for years; more likely, finding yourself full of hate, and with only one arm, you investigated the possibilities for an archer so handicapped. It's an amazing thing, but with practice, a man could throw a special, light arrow several hundred feet."

"Try it some time," Cole said dryly.

"Oh, I can't; I know that. Few could. But you were an expert to begin with; you had the eye, the reflexes, and above all the terrible motivation. But one reason why I

couldn't discover the secret for myself was the piece of string."

Cole blinked, and Middlebie knew he had struck home.

"The old archery book supplied that one vital link," he went on relentlessly. "Those long flights were accomplished mainly through an ingenious aid, related to the throwing stick used by spearmen among primitive tribes. The archer —I guess we must call him that, even without a bow—ties a string to the arrow, and by tripping one end in his hand, gets a sling-like whip to his throw. That device gives the extra power needed. You didn't want to toss a light arrow several hundred feet; you wanted to send a heavy, steel-headed one thirty feet, with enough force to kill. You had many months to practice, while Borden was in jail. The cabby who took you there to get a line on Borden's habits was also to be your alibi—proof that no bow was involved; just an arrow with string, hidden under your jacket."

Cole gave him a long, cool stare. Then, true to his nature, he said with slow emphasis: "You're wrong. Ask Black about the tape-recorder. All I wanted was proof that Borden never even hit the brakes. I hoped he'd say something to his girl, and I'd be able to tape it. Then I'd have the skunk cold."

"Could they try him again?" Middlebie wondered aloud. "I doubt it, and am sure you had no plans of that sort."

"There's an old Scotch motto on some university," Cole said. "Something like, 'They say. What say they? Let them say.' A nice theory, but will it hold up in court? Do you know how difficult it would be—I'm just theorizing, not having had any practice!—actually to throw an arrow thirty feet, string or no string, and split a man's spinal cord? A jury would have to see it done, and nobody in the world today can do it. I know archery, and I'm telling you."

"One man can do it," the professor said steadily.

For the first time Cole smiled—a grin of the damned.

"Will he demonstrate for the D. A.?"

Middlebie looked at him with a kind of pity. "I'm afraid not," he said in a low voice. His gray eyes fastened to the photograph on the mantel, a plump, smiling woman with happy eyes; a dark little girl, like an elf. Maybe if I lost them, he thought . . . Well, I must tell Black, but he'll never make it stick.

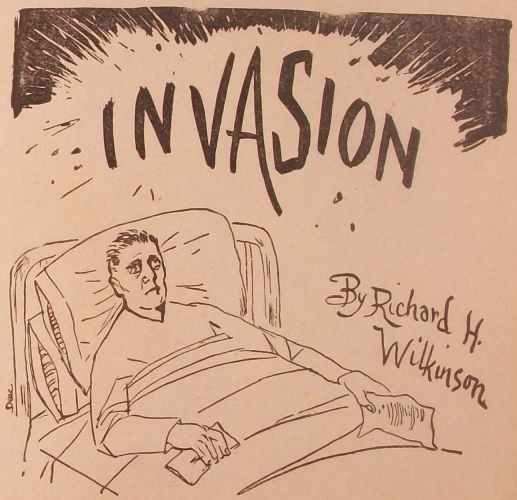
"Good night, Mr. Cole," he said gently.

The murderer gave him a silent nod.

Among the perils of war, we automatically consider that, for some, time will have a stop. Yet even among these unfortunates is the exception that proves the rule.

INVASION

By Richard H. Wilkinson



HE AWOKE SLOWLY. For a long time he lay staring up at the ceiling. Realization came at last that he was in a hospital. He turned his head slightly and saw the night stand, confirming his suspicion.

He wondered what had happened to him and how he had gotten here, but his mind seemed a blank. He scowled, trying to think. Then gradually, bit by bit, the picture began to take form.

There had been a briefing, as there always was prior to the many

missions that were preceding the invasion of France. The target had been an ammunition dump near Augsberg.

Other, smaller things, began to take shape in his mind. He had nicked himself while shaving that morning. He had had eggs and little pink sausages for breakfast. He had written to Sandra as he always did before taking off on a mission. Her last letter to him was in the pocket of his uniform.

Thoughts of Sandra brought a smile to his lips. She was everything, the whole meaning of life to him. He had no family at all, no one but Sandra. They were to be married as soon as the war ended.

He put Sandra from his mind momentarily and tried to fill in the gap between the moment he had mailed the letter and right now.

He remembered the briefing vividly. It had been important. Nothing had been said definitely, but there was a strong rumor that the invasion was set for June 6th. He wanted to be part of that invading force, had been looking forward to it.

He remembered strapping himself into the pilot's seat of the B-17. He remembered the clearance and take-off. Then things went blank again and he scowled. It was like a picture that had faded out but was now slowly fading back in focus.

He heard again the roar of the B-17's powerful engines. He remembered watching his own escort fighters engaging the German fighters. Then came the flak, burst upon burst of it, too close, too dangerous.

The impact, when it came, caused the whole great ship to shudder and yaw. There was another muffled explosion within the ship itself. The stick in his hand went suddenly limp. A voice was screaming into his earphones.

"Skipper! They've got us! We're afire!"

He tried to keep his own voice calm, and managed, he thought, to do so. He gave the order to bail out.

He was the last to go. The ship was whirling crazily and he bumped his head. He remembered falling and yanking at the rip cord. Thereafter there was nothing. Only blankness. Nothing at all until now.

He opened his eyes wide, his body stiffening. Was this a German hospital? Was he a prisoner? The thought horrified him. He felt, unreasonably, ashamed for having been captured. If he were a prisoner he wouldn't be able to participate in the invasion. The thought depressed him.

Abruptly, embarrassed because he hadn't thought about it before, he wondered about his crew. He had watched them all bail out, had seen their 'chutes open. They were, he thought bitterly, probably all sweating it out in some stinking concentration camp. They would be questioned, he knew, one by one, probably tortured for scraps of information that might be of some value to the enemy.

He heard a door open and turned his head. A nurse entered, took one step toward his bed and stopped abruptly. Her eyes became as round as saucers.

"You—you're awake!" Her voice had a trace of German accent, and the shred of hope to which he had been clinging faded.

He nodded and said simply, "Yes."

She came toward him slowly, her eyes still wondrous, but with a smile on her lips. "Do you—remember your name?"

His tone somewhat irritable, he said, "Of course I remember my name. It's Colonel Kent Burgess, United States Air Force." He rattled off his serial number and asked, "Where am I?"

The nurse didn't answer at once. She watched him for a moment, then turned away. "Excuse me. I must tell Doctor Schroeder."

She was gone before he could protest, and he lay scowling at the closed door. There was something screwy here. This wasn't the procedure, he had heard, accorded to allied prisoners of war.

He heard quick footsteps beyond the door. Then it burst open and a white-coated doctor rushed into the room. He had a quiet, kindly face that just now wore an expression of incredulity and wonder.

He came to the side of the bed and stood looking down at the American. He seemed to be wrestling with something in his mind and was unable to grasp it. "Incredible," he muttered. "It is a day I had long given up hope of seeing." His accent was no more pronounced than that of the nurse.

Burgess said, annoyed, "What is this? What's going on?"

The doctor didn't answer at once. He pulled down the bed covering and applied his stethoscope to Burgess' chest. He listened for a long time, moving the instrument every few seconds. At length he stood erect, sighing deeply, shaking his head. "Remarkable. Absolutely a miracle."

"What is? What's all the mystery about?" Burgess was getting mad, without really knowing why. He guessed it was because of all the double talk.

There was now a look in the doctor's eyes that Burgess could only interpret as pity. He sat down

in a chair near the bed and leaned slightly forward. The nurse was standing quietly by the door, her face strained.

"Colonel Burgess," the doctor began slowly, "do you know what day this is?"

Burgess scowled. "Of course I know what day it is," he began, then stopped. Was this some kind of trick? What difference did it make what day it was? He pondered the matter for a moment, then shrugged. "Unless I've been knocked out longer than I thought, it's May twenty-fourth."

The doctor sighed again and the pitying look in his eyes deepened. "Colonel," he said gently, "can you tell me the year?"

"The year?" An icy finger began tracing its way up and down Burgess' spine. "The year?" he repeated, and wet his lips. "It's nineteen forty-four, of course."

The doctor smiled sadly and stood up. He paced the floor, as though preparing himself for what he had to say. He turned at last and looked straight at Burgess. "Prepare yourself for a shock, Colonel. It is now August tenth, nineteen hundred and *fifty*-four."

A ringing began in Burgess' ears. He closed his eyes, conscious that goose pimples were covering his entire body. He would not allow his mind to accept what he had just heard. It was a lie, a trick. It was some new and heinous form of torture they had devised.

He heard the nurse say in hushed tones, "Should you have told him so soon, Doctor? The shock may be—"

"There would be no worse effects from shock now than there would be later."

Burgess opened his eyes. The doctor, arms folded, was still standing in the same spot. The nurse had come to stand beside him. She seemed unhappy and anxious.

Burgess whispered, "It's a lie. It's some new form of torture."

The doctor's eyes opened wide in astonishment. Without unfolding his arms he turned his head, glancing about the room as if seeking something. His eyes fell on a newspaper lying on a table. He strode toward it, picked it up, folded it open to the front page and returned to the bed. Silently he handed it to Burgess.

It was a German newspaper. The colonel understood only a smattering of the language. Few of the words meant anything, but the figures were there. The figures "10" and "1954."

Burgess put his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. He felt numb, paralysed. His mind became a kaleidoscope of pictures and thoughts. Ten years! Ten years taken from his life. A thousand thoughts pounded at his brain. He must regroup his thoughts, remarshall them. He must ask the questions one at a time, assimilate each answer before he asked a second.

He heard the doctor sit down on the bedside chair, and opened his eyes. He stared at the medical man a long time before speaking. The doctor's expression was sympathetic and kindly.

Burgess said, "The war has long since ended, of course."

Dr. Schroeder nodded, closing and opening his eyes. "In nineteen forty-five. The allies, as you can well imagine, were the victors. Germany was an exhausted nation, a foolish nation." He paused. "Japan surrendered a few months later." Again a pause. A faint, rueful smile touched the doctor's lips. "The world," he said, "is almost ready for its next war."

Again there was a silence while Burgess assimilated this information. The doctor seemed to understand what was happening and merely waited.

Burgess said, almost reminiscently, "Then the invasion of the continent was successful after all." He was thinking of the time, the effort, the thought, the planning—and the fears and doubts that had gone into the planning. He knew that thousands of men must have died.

"Yes, the invasion was successful. It happened . . ." The doctor closed his eyes and thought a moment. "The exact date escapes me. We Germans held out for nearly a year afterward. Then came the final drive on Berlin—the allies from the west, the Russians from the north."

Burgess lay silent, tracing this over in his mind. He felt like Philip Nolan, the Man Without A Country who, in the last days of his life, was told about the events that had taken place in his beloved homeland. Unlike Nolan, Burgess was going to have a chance to pick up his life again, to adjust, and he wondered if this were possible. He said at last, "Tell me—what happened." He closed his eyes to listen.

The doctor's voice was kindly, considerate. "I will tell you, but please do not try to grasp it all at once. What has happened to you is a miracle in the medical world." He paused. "Our ground gunners shot down your B-17. You were brought here on May twenty-fourth, nineteen hundred and forty-four. You were in serious condition. It was thought that you had no chance of surviving." A pause. "I was called in to examine

you. Your condition interested me. I am a specialist in nerves and nerve pressures. I asked for and received permission to have you placed under my personal care. But each examination continued to strengthen my original diagnosis that your chances of survival were practically nil. Yet I continued to hope. It would be a great contribution to medicine if I could keep you alive and eventually restore you to consciousness."

Burgess opened his eyes. "And you succeeded."

"I think it was as much your own subconscious will to survive as my medical ingenuity."

Burgess lay still for a long time. It was a lot to grasp, to comprehend. Ten years. His mind still wouldn't fully accept it. He asked at last, "After the war ended was the army notified, the United States Army?"

"Of course. We were told that you had no family. But there was a girl, a very lovely girl, named Sandra Pierce. She was here."

"What?" Burgess struggled to sit up, but the doctor forced him gently back, nodding, closing and opening his eyes in that way he had.

"Yes. A month after the proper authorities were notified she came here, bringing with her a specialist, a Doctor Paul Avery, from your Johns Hopkins Hospital in the city of Baltimore. Doctor Avery examined you, and was forced to agree with my diagnosis: it might prove fatal to have you moved."

"But Sandra? What did she say—and do?"

"There was little that she could say or do. She pleaded with us to let her take you home. It was no easy task to convince her that taking you home would be a risk to your life."

"Then—she left me here?"

"You must not blame her. She had no alternative." The doctor shook his head sadly. "She asked, but we could give her little hope that you would survive. Put yourself in her place, Colonel. What other course could she have taken?"

Burgess turned his head sideways on the pillow, an all consuming feeling of wretchedness and despair sweeping through him. In spite of himself a tear squeezed from beneath his tightly closed lids and coursed down his cheek. He brushed it aside and looked at the doctor again. "Did she ever contact you again?"

"Many times. By correspondence and cable." The doctor paused. "Five years ago we received a letter from her addressed to you." He opened a drawer in the night stand, rummaged around and presently pulled out a sealed letter.

Sight of the familiar handwriting was a stab of pain in Burgess' heart.

"Miss Pierce asked that the letter only be opened if you returned to consciousness," the doctor said. "It has lain in this drawer for a little more than five years."

Burgess took the letter eagerly, his heart pounding. The doctor rose. "I know that you will want to be alone when you read your letter. I think perhaps we have talked enough for now, in any event. I will return tomorrow."

Alone, Burgess lay for a long time merely staring at the sealed letter. He noted that it was postmarked in New York on June 18, 1949. Fear was nudging him, fear of what the letter contained. He *knew* what it contained. Sandra was young and beautiful and eager. She could not be expected to wait.

At last he slit the flap and withdrew the letter. Even so, despite his preparation, the words were a shock. She had waited, hoping, always hoping. But with each passing day hope grew dimmer. And then, a year ago, (that would be 1948), she had met a man . . . fallen in love with him . . . they were to be married in a month.

Burgess closed his eyes and let the letter fall to the floor. How could he blame her? It had been as though he were dead. It would be selfish to think that she would deny herself happiness for the rest of her life on one single grain of hope. Yet theirs had been such an undying love, so deep, so tender. A lump rose in Burgess' throat and stayed there.

In the early evening the nurse came in with a tray of food. She was smiling cheerfully.

"We have been in contact with your government. They are sending someone at once. You will be on your way home not later than the day after tomorrow."

She saw the letter lying on the floor. She picked it up, returned it to its envelope and opened the night stand drawer. Her eyes were filled with pity and understanding. "I am sorry." she said. "So sorry."

Burgess shrugged imperceptibly. The nurse rolled up the head of his bed so that he was in a sitting position, and placed the tray conveniently in his lap. Her bright smile returned. "And now you must eat and rest. When your people arrive we want them to see that you have been given good care."

Burgess didn't answer and after a moment the nurse left the room. He was alone and the aloneness intensified the ache and pain in his heart. He would always be alone. He wished that he had nev-

er returned to reality, to feeling.

The nurse returned a half hour later, frowned reproachfully when she saw that he had barely touched his food. But, removing the tray, she smiled again. "It is a shock, I know. But you will adjust. Everyone does. Time—" She broke off, biting her lip.

Burgess turned his head. Time, yes. Time heals all wounds, but only if a person is aware of the passing of that time. Sandra had had five years of time. But he, Burgess, had had less than a day. As far as he was concerned it was ten years ago, and the knowledge that he had lost Sandra was a savage pain in his heart.

The nurse arranged his bed for the night and went out. Burgess lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. He didn't think he would sleep, but he must have because suddenly it was morning and the nurse was staring down at him. The inevitable smile was on her lips and her eyes were bright.

"I'm sorry to be so cheerful, but everyone here in the hospital is excited. We seldom have miracles in the medical profession. Doctor Schroeder is justly proud."

Burgess said nothing and the nurse put his breakfast tray in front of him. "After you've eaten, your barber will be in. We must start getting you ready."

He ate as much of the eggs and ham and buttered toast as he could, then rang for the nurse. She appeared almost at once, followed by a big, rotund man whom she introduced as Herr Kiediasch, the barber who had attended the colonel for the past ten years. Herr Kiediasch couldn't speak or understand English, and for this Burgess was grateful.

The nurse said, "Doctor Schroeder will be in later on. He will answer any further questions you might have and tell you the exact time of your departure and arrival in America."

The barber worked swiftly and skillfully. When he had gone, Burgess rummaged in the drawer of the night stand until he found a mirror. He wanted to see what he looked like after his ten year sleep.

He couldn't see that he had changed much, but he supposed that was due to lack of activity and worry. He rubbed his hand over his now smooth cheek, as a man will do who has just shaved himself or been shaved. There was a slight cut on his upper lip just under his left nostril, and he thought the barber hadn't been so skillful after all. He frowned at the cut—and then suddenly he froze. His whole body stiffened and the goose pimples appeared again.

That cut wasn't freshly made! It was at least a day old, possibly two. It was the nick that he himself had made when he shaved before the briefing!

Wild eyed, Burgess stared about the room, his thoughts in a turmoil. Gradually he calmed himself and a weird sense of understanding came. It was a trick! A hoax! He reached into the drawer again and pulled out Sandra's letter, this time examining the handwriting closely. Forged! Skilfully executed, but nevertheless he knew it wasn't Sandra's writing. The postmark on the envelope glared up at him. That was a masterpiece. They must have worked like madmen to prepare it in such a short space of time.

Burgess lay back on his pillow, his heart pounding. Why? Bit by bit he went over every detail of the conversations he had had with the doctor and nurse. There leaped into his vision a picture of Schroeder closing his eyes, pretending to think, saying: "Yes, the invasion was successful . . . the exact date escapes me." And Burgess *knew*. He knew the reason for this elaborate plan of deception. They hoped that, in conversations about the past, Burgess would tell them the exact time and place of the planned invasion.

Burgess lay perfectly still. What a fool he'd been not to have realized it had been a hoax when they'd told him he'd been unconscious for ten years. A man who has been in a coma for that length of time doesn't suddenly wake up feeling alert, able to sit up and eat and talk rationally. The process would be much more gradual.

But they had been clever. They had gambled on their cleverness. They had counted on his rational thinking being distracted by the shocking news of what had happened to him. And they had won. Or so they thought.

Burgess' mind was suddenly clear and alert. How much time did he have? The nurse said that the doctor would look in on him later on. That could mean any moment.

He had to plan his own strategy, his own deception. Yesterday Schroeder had said he would be returned to America the day after tomorrow. This meant that they would have to obtain the information they wanted today. Why weren't they keeping him here any longer? The answer to that was simple. Once he returned to consciousness it would seem strange if his own government weren't notified at once.

Suddenly he scowled. How did they know that he had no family, that Sandra was so important to him? The answer came at once.

Clearly he could see the sentence in Sandra's last letter, the one that he had with him at the beginning of the mission. It read: "Darling, you have been without a family so long, I can hardly wait for your return so that we can start one of our very own . . ."

Where was the letter? Probably they would produce it if he demanded, but they hoped that he wouldn't. The discrepancy in the two handwritings might become obvious if a comparison were made. So far, their strategy had been perfect, brilliantly and convincingly executed.

But now he must stop thinking about their strategy and think about his own. He must compose himself. When the doctor came in to question him again there must not be the slightest indication in his manner or expression that he knew of their plan. He closed his eyes and tried to think of himself as he had an hour ago—when he believed that he had been robbed of ten years of his life.

It wasn't easy. His heart began to pound abnormally fast. But gradually it subsided; his nerves steadied. He was actually dozing when at last he heard the door open. He didn't open his eyes until he sensed that the doctor was standing beside the bed.

"Asleep?"

Burgess opened his eyes and stared up at the doctor in what he hoped was a listless manner.

"Dozing, I guess."

The doctor pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Care to talk any more? Questions you want answered?"

Burgess shrugged imperceptibly. "You know, Doctor, the first reaction I had when you explained my predicament to me yesterday was one of regret."

"Regret?"

"Regret because I hadn't been allowed to participate in the invasion. I suppose you could hate me for that. A lot of Germans must have died."

"That's all behind us. Germany and America are now friends."

"It isn't that far behind me. You can understand that?"

"Of course."

"It's a date that is indelibly imprinted on my mind." Burgess stared into space, his expression reminiscent. "The Fourth of July." He smiled crookedly.

"The Fourth of July?"

"Independence Day. That's a holiday in the States. The day we declared our independence from England."

"I see."

"No American ever forgets the Fourth. That's why we thought it fitting."

"I recall now that that was the date."

Burgess closed his eyes again and murmured as though he were speaking to no one in particular. He opened his eyes, his expression apologetic, but the doctor's face had changed. A certain cold and shrewd cunning had come into his eyes. There was an air of excitement about him. He stood up abruptly, only now there was a military bearing about his every move. He stood stiffly erect.

"Herr Colonel, I thank you. You have provided the information we have been wanting." A wry smile touched his lips. "You will probably be happy to know, Colonel, that you fell easy prey to a rather cleverly concealed hoax. Other 'methods' of obtaining information from you American flyers having failed, we decided upon a new approach. It seems to have worked."

Burgess stared at him, contriving to make his expression one of blank astonishment and bewilderment. He wet his lips.

"You mean—"

"I mean, Herr Colonel, that it is still May, nineteen hundred and forty-four and that you are a stupid pig."

The doctor clicked his heels together, bowed stiffly, did an about face and went out of the room.

The moment the door closed Burgess scrambled out of bed, moved swiftly across the room and put his ear against the panel. He could hear the doctor's footsteps retreating down the hall. Abruptly they came to a halt. There was the sound of a knock, a door opening, and then a guttural voice asked: "The American has talked?"

"Ja," came Schroeder's reply.

There was the sound of footsteps, and the door closing. Burgess could hear no more. He returned to the bed and sat on its edge. He felt more alive than he had ever felt in his life. There was a glow inside of him, a sense of complete satisfaction and elation.

He lay down and stared up at the ceiling. He knew that would not be the end of the questioning. They'd be back. They'd probably question him around the clock. There would be no pretense now. They'd employ the "methods" they had tried on others.

He wondered if the rumors he'd heard about the June 6th landing on the Normandy beaches were accurate. He hoped so. If they were, the invasion was less than two weeks away. He wondered if he could hold out that long. He thought he could.

Long have we been subjected to the archetypical image of the "dumb cop." Unlike the mass of mythologically based truisms, it is surprisingly difficult to substantiate these claims, try though we may.

THE KID got it in the back at seven-thirty that evening.

He'd answered the service station's inside phone, listened, then covered the mouthpiece and said to Jim Daly, "Duck! It's The Sniper. I'm going to call his bluff."

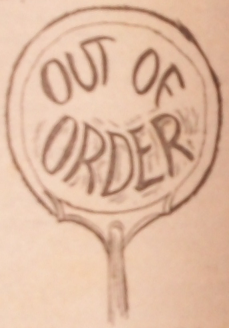
"Don't." Jim had warned, feeling exposed with glass on four sides of the office.

But the kid ran out to call the police from the phone booth near the driveway. A customer, driving in, made him swerve, slipping on a glob of grease. So there was no telling whether the slug got him before or after he began twisting down. No telling from which direction it came. And no sound of a shot either.

Jim Daly, with hair as black as the grease on big knuckles he kept rubbing into a palm, told all that to Whitehead, the squat, blond detective who came in the second police car while the ambulance guys were covering the kid with a canvas.

"So that's an out for you, I suppose," Daly added.

This was the seventh such robbery of a service station. Somebody phoned and said, "You're covered with a gun, every move. Put a clip or rubber band on the bills from the till. Drop them over the wall behind the air hose, then go on with your work. Don't get nosey



or call the police. You'll be covered every moment." Seven of them, and the police, as usual, said they were working on it. Now the kid was dead. The first killing.

Whitehead's square face got a little white, then he spoke quietly. "Seeing anybody killed is hard to take, but was he something special to you?"

Jim Daly looked toward the canvas, a hub for a ring of morbid stares being held out of the station by uniformed police.

"He tried to hold me up once," said Daly. "I talked him out of it and gave him a job."

Whitehead stared. "Instead of calling us."

"All he needed was a break," snapped Daly.

"That's all we need too," Whitehead murmured. His partner, a thin man with razor-sharp gaze, said nothing.

"In other words," Daly charged, "you haven't done a damn thing. Now a good kid's dead, mur-

by Carl Henry Rathjen

dered. He never had a chance."

Whitehead seemed to sort words before he spoke. "You'd know better than I would how many service stations there are in the metropolitan area. Close to a couple thousand, isn't it?"

"All right," said Daly. "You can't stake out every one of them. But you guys are supposed to know how to run down these killers."

"It takes time," Whitehead began.

"I can't get away with that in my business," Daly declared. "I'm expected to trouble-shoot a customer's car in five minutes."

Whitehead nodded, staring around at apartments across the avenue, store windows facing the sidestreet with a slice of night sky showing in the alley.

"And the customer," he said with a slight smile, "expects it because he thinks it's easy, doesn't know the problems of your job. That works two ways, Daly. If you were a policeman, you'd know."

"I tried to know once." Daly pressed his lips.

Whitehead faced him curiously.

"Why'd they turn you down?"

Daly answered defiantly, staring at a fist making his thumbnail white as the blood squeezed back. "I did time once when I was a kid."

Whitehead studied him. "That's why you gave this one a break."

Daly nodded. "That's why I'm sore, damn sore. A guy sees he's

made a mistake and more than makes up for it. Then someone louses it up for him, and you hand me the usual hogwash alibi. Save it for somebody else. I'll find who got him."

"Take it easy," Whitehead began.

"That's the trouble. I have, waiting for you to do something."

Daly pulled off his coveralls.

But he was still in the station at midnight, though not open for business, when Whitehead drove in with his partner.

"Got it solved, Daly?" he asked, neither sarcastic nor hopeful as he leaned against the desk, hands in the pockets of his topcoat.

Daly poked a thick finger in a cigarette pack that looked as though it had been sat on. "It's like tracking down a miss in a car. I've found out where it can't be from."

"I know what you mean," said Whitehead. He waited. Daly carefully straightened out a bent cigarette, then thumbnailed a wooden match. He waited too. Whitehead sighed, and smiled. "All right, I'll tell you. We know where it couldn't have come from too but, being police, we had to check it out anyway. The shot couldn't have come from the apartments or stores. They've all been occupied a long time. No stick-up artist is going to have friends living in the vicinity of every place he plans to knock over. He wouldn't be on a roof either. Couldn't watch his victim at the phone. We know that from other jobs that have been pulled where he mentioned what the victim was doing while being warned."

Daly blew smoke toward the door. "You don't have to be a cop to figure that out."

Whitehead looked at the No Smoking sign, glanced at the locked gasoline pumps, then got out his own cigarettes.

"And it doesn't take a police officer to figure it took two of them to pull these jobs. One to make the phone call, the other to watch from a dark parked car."

Daly took a long drag, then gestured with his thumb toward the side street. "My guess is the car was parked up there."

Whitehead's partner shifted to peer in that direction, then turned to look where the kid's body had been. Whitehead just leaned against the desk.

"Police officers have one advantage over citizens who think we're not doing our job. Take the chip off your shoulder and listen, Daly. We looked up records. When the kid tried to hold you up, it wasn't the first job he'd pulled, nor the last."

Daly closed his eyes and took another long drag. "I wish you hadn't told me." He looked up suddenly. "You think he was in on these sniper jobs?"

Whitehead nodded. "And he wanted a larger split. That's why he was shot."

Daly frowned "But they tried to hold me up."

"That's what doesn't fit," said Whitehead. "They hit only stations doing a good business. We've checked on gasoline purchases with the wholesaler. You haven't been doing so well here since the freeway pulled traffic away. A lot of nights it's not even been worth staying open."

"It was a phony stick-up then," Daly growled. "Just to get the kid."

"A phony, sure," Whitehead agreed, "because we figure the kid was shot in the back, dying out there while he staggered, running to get away from *you!*"

Daly straightened. Whitehead's partner suddenly had a gun in his hand. Whitehead took his hands out of his pockets. One of them held handcuffs.

"You overplayed it, Daly. Too positive we were going to be dumb cops. Too dumb to wonder what happened to the supposed customer who made the kid swerve so you couldn't tell where the shot came from. Too dumb to thoroughly check everything out, records of all kinds, the possible and the impossible. We were even so dumb we tried the phone company, even though we figured the call couldn't be traced. It couldn't, because the kid forgot to tell you—or didn't have time to—that he'd reported earlier this evening the phone was out of order."

Daly expelled smoke. "What does that prove? I might have been confused by the shock of his being killed. I guess he took the call on the outside phone."

"The same as you were so confused," Whitehead suggested, "you forgot to rub grease on your thumbnails when we arrived. So confused you told us yourself that we had killers, not just one man, to run down on these hold-ups. You also thought we were too dumb to have men watching you while you pretended to begin tracking down the kid's killer. There's a crew opening the sewer now to retrieve your silenced gun."

He put the cuffs on Daly and guided him toward the car.

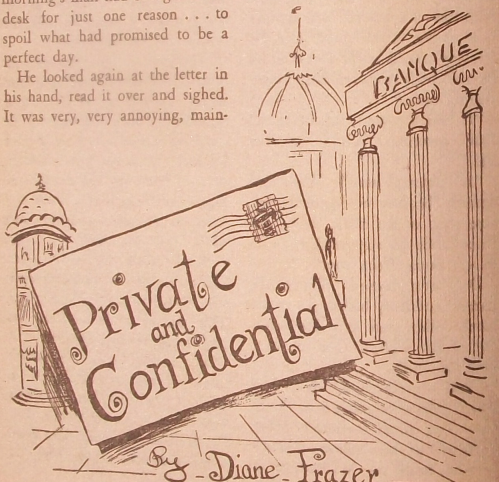
"You know," he said, "it doesn't bother us that people think we're dumb. It takes time, but we find in the long run that we meet plenty who are dumber. You'll have a lot in common with them, Daly . . . in prison."

Honesty, especially in banking circles, is generally taken for granted, but in just such an environment suspicions multiply and their effect can be irretractable.

HENRY DUVERNOIS, president of the Merchants Bank, was standing at the window of his office, which overlooked the busy Boulevard Haussman. He was thinking morosely of the letter which that morning's mail had brought to his desk for just one reason . . . to spoil what had promised to be a perfect day.

He looked again at the letter in his hand, read it over and sighed. It was very, very annoying, mainly because something had to be done about it, and right away, which meant that he wouldn't be able to take his apéritif as usual at Fouquet's.

The envelope in which the letter had arrived was marked, he noted wrathfully, PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL: FOR M. DUVERNOIS PERSONALLY, which, of course, was the reason that he was now personally bothered with this distressing matter. He went back to his desk and buzzed his secretary to come in.



Mlle. Arlette entered, the radiant morning smile firmly entrenched on her lovely face. "Yes, Monsieur," she said throatily. "You want me, sir?"

He thought it over for a moment. If the occasion weren't so earnest, demanding his undivided attention, he might have responded jovially and perhaps even equivocally. Henry Duvernois was a democratic man and Mlle. Arlette the prettiest secretary he had had in years. But this was no time for frivolities. "How did this get to my desk?" he asked, pointing with disgust to the envelope which lay there.

Mlle. Arlette came a step nearer to inspect the object in question at closer range. She uses Miss Dior, he thought automatically. I wonder how she can afford it. Probably takes it out of petty cash. You can't trust anyone any more.

Mlle. Arlette finished her inspection. "This, Monsieur?" she asked, modestly stepping back again. "Why, it came in the morning mail and as it was marked private and confidential I thought . . ."

"You are my private and confidential secretary," he reminded her. "Are you not? Why do I have to be bothered with every detail?"

"But you told me only last week, Monsieur, that private letters addressed to you should not be opened by me," she said, hurt. "I was merely following your instructions."

She knew, of course, what kind of private letters he had meant. You could smell them a mile. The letter on M. Duvernois' desk was obviously not one of 'those' letters.

"Tell M. Bourdely to come in," he ordered. "That is, if he has arrived by now. We are keeping strange working hours around here."

"M. Bourdely is in his office," she said stiffly. "I'll tell him you wish to see him."

"I would appreciate that very much indeed," he said sarcastically and Mlle. Arlette left in a huff. Duvernois looked at his watch. Already eleven o'clock. He wouldn't make it for apéritifs and it was such a beautiful day. The Champs Elysées at noon hour would be filled with pretty women.

"You wanted to see me?" Edmonde Bourdely, treasurer of the Merchants Bank, had come in, silently, as was his irritating habit.

"Yes, Edmonde, something extremely annoying has come up. Look at this." He pushed the envelope over to Bourdely, who extracted the letter and began to read. "No signature," he said, when he had finished. "Anonymous. I wouldn't pay any attention to this kind of thing."

"You wouldn't, eh?" Duvernois said. "Just ignore the whole business. And let this man go on robbing us?"

"You don't seriously think these accusations are true? Why, this letter is unsigned. Why didn't whoever wrote it come out in the open if he is convinced that what he writes is true?"

"People down there are pretty careful," Duvernois said. "They don't want involvement if they can help. Why should they? For all we know the man he accuses of pilfering might be influential. The mayor might be his brother, or the sous-préfet his cousin. You never know. Or the writer is an employe of the bank and prefers to remain anonymous, not knowing what action we will take."

"You really believe there's some truth in this, sir?"

Duvernois shrugged. "Might be. Why would someone make such an accusation if it isn't the truth?"

"You know this Lachetez, the so-called embezzler?"

"Vaguely. Nimes is a key post, in a way. Not one of our bigger branches but an important one. The wine and olive growers of the region are valued customers. The olive trees yield only every other year. They need credit and we gladly extend it. We do quite some business down there."

"And this Lachetez?"

"Used to be chief cashier. He was made provisory manager when Deletraz died three years ago."

"Three years ago. You mean he's been acting as manager for three years and hasn't been formally assigned this post?"

"There were circumstances." Duvernois looked annoyed. "It's really a plum; not too much work, not too much responsibility. Yet a fairly high-rated position. I've meant to send someone from Paris down there but I haven't got around to it."

"In the meantime this Lachetez works as manager for a cashier's pay."

"As I said, it was a temporary arrangement. He's written me a few letters over the years, that's why I remember his name. He's stressed, rather immodestly, I'd say, what excellent work he's done and that he feels entitled to a manager's status. I meant to work something out but you know how it is. I've more important things to attend to."

"So he lost his patience and began dipping into the till. That's what our anonymous writer claims. He speaks of large sums. How would it be possible? Audits every quarter; nothing irregular has come to my attention."

"You don't know the situation down there," Duvernois said impatiently. "Our auditors needn't find a thing. The books are probably in perfect order. To find out if there's foul play we'd have to check loans and see if those who were presumably the recipient of same actually received them. All Lachetez has to do, if he's dishonest, is to enter fictitious loans in the books. It would take some time before our people could ascertain whether or not the money went to the farmers or into Lachetez' pockets."

"If you're really suspicious we'll have to send someone down to make a thorough check; contact all the loan holders."

"As simple as that?" Duvernois sneered. "Ask people if they actually received a loan from us, or does our manager just pretend they did. Oh, that would do wonders for our reputation!"

"Then what else? I don't see—"

"Oh, you don't. Let me inform you that the Merchants Bank not only loans money, it also receives money from depositors. Let me tell you also that the people down there are the most distrustful in all of France. It's taken us years to convince them that their money is safer with us than under their mattresses. If they thought there was something fishy they'd see their worst fears confirmed and before you know it they would yank out all the money they've deposited with us."

"We could discreetly question Lachetez?"

"Would you mind telling me how? Ask him in all confidence to be good enough to tell us whether or not he has embezzled money? You don't know this region. Nothing there can be done discreetly. Even if we send a couple of accountants to recheck the books, the bank employes would know right away that something was up. In a matter of hours it would be all over town. And there's Lachetez,

of course. This requires tact."

"What about him?"

"Well, he's innocent until proven guilty. After all, he's worked for us for more than twenty years. I can't gamble on hurting or embarrassing him. In a relatively small city like Nimes even a shadow of suspicion could damage him irrevocably."

"What else can be done, then?"

"I thought you might have a suggestion. That's why I asked you to come in. After all, I have so many important things to attend to." He looked furtively at his watch . . . 11:45. He might still make it for apéritifs at Fouquet's.

"The only suggestion I can offer is to send accountants down. Not make it a surprise check, but inform Lachetez that we're making these checks all over the country."

"The last audit took place only two months ago and ostensibly everything was in order. But if you can't come up with anything better, then I suppose . . . write a letter to Lachetez, a nice letter, please, and give some excuse for this unusual procedure."

"I'll do that," Bourdely said. "Personally I don't believe there's anything to it. I never trust anonymous letters."

"I hope you're right. Please excuse me now, I have an important engagement."

A week later there was nothing to report. "Absolutely nothing," Edmond Bourdely declared. No unusual loans granted; as a matter of fact, far less than at the same time last year. Lachetez, according to everything said about him, was a very busy and dedicated man.

Duvernois listened with obvious relief. Did they say how Lachetez took it, he wanted to know. "They tell me he wasn't fooled," Bourdely admitted. "Indeed, he seemed to be quite upset . . . even offered to resign."

"Resign?"

"He said we obviously didn't trust him, and maybe it would be better to send someone from Paris to take over his duties, which he claimed were strenuous and . . . unrewarding."

"But he *didn't* resign?"

"No, but I guess he's thinking about it." Bourdely looked a little uncomfortable.

"This is what I might have expected," Duvernois said. "Here he is one of our oldest employes . . . we'll have to do something. Everything seems to be in order and we have nothing to worry about except Lachetez. Write him a conciliatory letter. He'll calm down, you'll see."

Henry Duvernois stared at the letter in his hand. It looked the same as the other one and the envelope once more was PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL. Again Mlle. Arlette had put it on his desk unopened. He threw the switch on the intercom. "Ask Bourdely to see me immediately," he bellowed.

When the treasurer came into his office Duvernois shoved the letter across the desk. "You and your suggestions," he spat. "This scoundrel Lachetez has had you . . . you and your accountants. All he had to do when he got your letter was to take the embezzled money from wherever he had it hidden and put it back in the safe, make a few corrections in the books. He probably has two sets of books anyway! We made it easy for him."

"May I remind you that it was your idea to inform Lachetez of our proposed audit, sir? You even told me to make it a 'nice' letter. Well, what are we going to do now?"

"Have you seen what our anonymous correspondent threatens to do? Write poison letters to our depositors, informing them that their money is going down the drain. You know what that could mean?"

"How old? What in creation has Bourdley asked.

"How old? What in creation has that to do . . . fifty . . . fifty-five. How am I supposed to know?"

"I see you haven't read this letter carefully. It says something about Lachetez and a young girl."

"I was upset," Duvernois defended himself. "Let me see. Why of course, that's the perfect reason . . . the old, old story. We'll have to act, and quickly."

"Send our men down there again?"

"No, we'll go, you and I. It's too important to leave to others."

"But—"

"I tell you we'll go. Our whole business in the Southwest depends on our acting quickly and efficiently. This time we won't give Lachetez warning. We'll take a plane and be there in three hours."

They arrived at Nimes, via a rented car from Marseilles, in good time. At the bank they asked for the manager. "M. Lachetez isn't here," the assistant cashier told them.

"Not here? What do you mean, not here? Where is he, then?"

"He left for a short trip. Just a while ago. A young lady came for him and they both left. He explained that he had some business to do and would be back tomorrow."

"A young lady . . . a short trip. Who was the young lady, and where did they go?"

"I don't know, Monsieur." The

cashier looked puzzled. "Is there something I can do?"

"What trains are leaving?" Duvernois asked, grabbing hold of the man's lapel. "We *must* speak to Lachetez before he leaves."

"He might have got a train already," Bourdely said.

"No, there would be no train after the ten o'clock until the Catalan for Geneva. Probably M. Lachetez is taking that. It is due in about seven minutes."

"The Catalan . . . Geneva . . . that's it," Duvernois said, releasing the man. "The station, Bourdely. Get a cab."

The cashier gestured. "I don't think you could possibly make it. The station is too far away."

"Give me the phone," Duvernois said hoarsely. "Quick! Give me the phone."

"But I don't understand," Auguste Lachetez said with tears in his eyes. "I do not understand at all. The gendarmerie at the station, and all those people staring at me."

"I'm afraid it was necessary, Lachetez," Duvernois said shortly. "Who is this young lady, sir?"

"My daughter, Eloise. She was raised by my sister in Arles, since my wife passed away. I was going to take her to Geneva to a boarding school. Now I have missed the train. Monsieur, please tell me: why was I prevented from taking the train and brought back here?"

Duvernois' jaw fell. "Your *daughter?*"

"Yes . . . say 'bon jour' to M. Duvernois, Eloise."

"And you were taking her to a boarding school?"

"Yes, there is a fine one, managed by the sisters. It's an excellent school and not too expensive for a man who is not rich. I had intended to take the night train back."

Duvernois looked at Bourdely, who looked quickly away. "I regret very much," Duvernois said with a sense of growing uncertainty. "We would like, that is M. Bourdely would like to look at the books. He might as well, now that we're here, and I'll explain later. I assure you that I'll explain everything. Bourdely?"

"The books? Again?" Lachetez' face went stony. "But of course, Monsieur, the books."

"Since we're here," Duvernois said uneasily.

"I don't know what to say, Lachetez," Duvernois muttered miserably. They were in his hotel room at the Cheval Blanc. Lachetez was seated in a leather chair, a broken man.

"I am finished," he said, bowing his head. "I might as well go to America. Arrested at the train station by gendarmes, taken forcibly back to the bank, with my young daughter. It is too terrible!"

"I know, I know. This is a nightmare. M. Bourdely says that your management appears to be in excellent shape. In excellent . . ."

"Of course, Monsieur. I have been working in your bank for twenty-three years. And you thought something was wrong. That's why you had examiners here only a short while ago, and now you come personally. Why, Monsieur? Why?"

"I can't explain, Lachetez, not right now. I will later. But I sincerely hope that you will allow me to compensate for your . . . unh, inconvenience."

"Inconvenience, M. Duvernois? That is indeed a mild word. I, Auguste Lachetez, arrested at the station like a criminal! Of course it is all over town by now that I've done something frightful. No, Monsieur, I will have to leave the city; the country."

"You will do nothing of the sort, Lachetez," Duvernois said sternly. "Nobody around here will think ill of you, believe me. After all, I don't make a promotion . . . manager of the Nimes Branch of the Merchants Trust . . . unless that someone is absolutely and irrevocably of the first quality."

"Manager . . ." Lachetez stammered, somewhat lost for words.

"Yes, manager, of course. You should have had the designation long ago. And the salary. Never too late, eh, Lachetez?"

"I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing. Just enjoy it. We will let everyone know immediately. That will quiet any rumors. I think you need a vacation. I'm sure someone here can take your place for a week. You come to Paris with us as our guest. You and your lovely daughter. Yes, that's what we'll do. It fits in too. We will let it be known that you weren't arrested, of course. I had to prevent your leaving for Geneva because we needed you in Paris for an important conference. The new manager of the Nimes Branch was asked to attend board meetings. How does it sound, Lachetez? You show your daughter around and then you can take her to Geneva from Paris, at the end of the week. It's only an hour by plane."

M. Lachetez' color began to return. "It sounds wonderful, M. Duvernois," he said gratefully. "Did you hear that, Eloise? We are going to Paris! Notre Dame, the Louvre . . . and I, to be the new manager of the Merchants Bank in Nimes. I don't know what to say!"

"Say nothing," Duvernois repeated. "You deserve it," he add-

ed expansively. "Indeed you do."

"How do you like Paris, Uncle Auguste?" Arlette asked. They were having dinner at her tiny apartment in Neuilly.

"It's astounding," Lachetez said, hungrily eating his oeufs tapenade. "A miraculous city. And Arlette, my dear, how can I ever thank you for all you have done?"

"It was nothing. A pleasure, dear Uncle. We were all outraged that you were shown no recognition, after three years! But it was your plan, after all. What a clever man you are, Uncle Auguste."

Lachetez beamed. "I think, too, it was an ingenious scheme," he agreed complacently. "I wasn't too sure about the first letter, but I knew the second one would bring real results. I didn't know exactly what, but I felt fairly safe, knowing that you would get word to me what Duvernois meant to do about it."

"It was easy," Arlette crowed. "It was I who had to make their plane reservations to Marseilles, and he told me, without my having to ask, that he would be doing business in Nimes. It was almost too simple, Uncle."

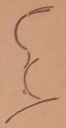
"As soon as I got your call I had Pepe check the plane at Marseilles and he saw them renting the car. It was child's play from then on. I had Eloise pack the suitcase and fortunately it worked out perfectly, with the Catalan leaving around that time. It was even better that they didn't have a chance to go to the station themselves. Having them call out the gendarmerie made it so much more dramatic."

"Have some more sauce," Arlette said. "You too, Eloise. I'm a good cook, yes?"

"Magnificent, cherie. Say, isn't this a funny life? I wrote letters and letters telling him what an honest and efficient man I am and I didn't even have an answer to any of them. But when I finally told him I was a scoundrel and a thief, he made me a manager."

"To your health, Uncle," Mlle. Arlette said, raising her glass of vin rosé. "A votre bonne santé."

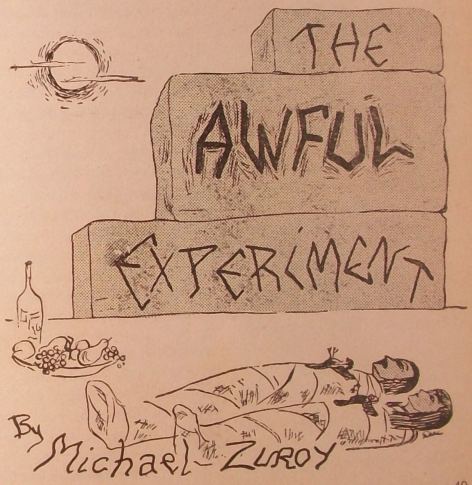
Our quest for immortality utilizes today—in lieu of sacrificial rites—devices such as discovery and fame. Though such pursuits may warm the scientific heart, there are some experiments best left unconducted.



EVEN HERE, in the prison deathhouse, I derive what is probably a perverse amusement from knowing that I shall be the first Professor of Archaeology ever to be executed by law in the country, possibly in the whole wide world.

A unique distinction, I feel; even a sort of success. I wonder, shall my dear wife, Freda, ever share this view?

My name is Holloway S. Dutt,



professor without portfolio at the moment, a qualified Archaeologist who was once driven like a charlatan from my badly needed position by the intolerance, pettiness and narrow vision of my allegedly distinguished colleagues.

Why was I fired from the faculty of the University of West Pendergast? They said I drank to excess. Yes, I did at times; I had reason. They said I was a gambler. Who has not a touch of the gambler in him? If I risked my money at the races it was also for good reason—I needed more money for my researches. They said I was incompetent. Ah, this was the wicked charge!

The truth is, they were shocked by my work on the long-dead of the ancient Egyptians.

Mumbo-jumbo, they scorned. A faker, they called me, a man with the semblance of a scientist dabbling in futile occult nonsense. An incompetent.

I have not always been confident, assured of my standing as some of my colleagues, but if ever I hoped to accomplish a great thing, it was in this matter. My mistake was to reveal my work prematurely—I had hoped that needed funds would be granted. I should have realized that there are no bigots, no witch-hunters like the scientists when their principles are threatened. Yes, I might hope for funds from a Mrs. Pummerly, not from science.

The ancient Egyptians mummified their dead because they believed that their souls might some day return. They believed that the preserved bodies might someday live again.

A scientist must hold an open mind, even to the unthinkable. The thing had never been fully investigated. Why should I not try? Perhaps no one but my dear wife, Freda, shall ever understand with what passion I wished to try.

Consider what I had accomplished before I was dismissed:

I had actually learned five of the conditions.

To discover at all this secret, known only to the highest ranking of Egyptian priests, that six conditions must be fulfilled to bring the long-dead to life, was in itself an accomplishment. To uncover five of the conditions took endless, painstaking search of ancient records, transcriptions of heiroglyphics and papyrus writings from many different dynasties, a patient piecing together of clues and scraps of information. And I had done this. Only the sixth condition still eluded me, and I was on the track of that; somewhere in the narrowing body of writings awaiting my attention I felt I would find it.

These were the five conditions that I had uncovered:

That of the Hawk
That of Repose
That of Sustenance
That of Love
That of the Moon

Consider also that I had agents in Egypt who had found mummies suitable for my experiments and were ready to ship them.

Consider also that for additional experimentation it was even possible for me to make use of fresh cadavers. There are channels through which one may obtain cadavers. I had discovered how to mummify a cadaver in a matter of hours—and the existence of this process, which took so much long research on my part, I had revealed to no one. The popular belief that the art of mummifying was lost with ancient Egypt is incorrect. All three of the methods used are well known to archaeology. I had simply discovered how to use modern chemicals to speed up the process.

It will be admitted, then, that I had made much progress at the time I was suddenly severed from my position and my income. Hard hit though I was, never for a moment did I consider giving up the project that had become so important to me. But how to go on? I was practically destitute, having spent all my personal funds on my work or in ill-fated ventures to increase my means at the races. I had not even access to a laboratory any more.

It was then that I received the invitation from Mrs. Thornwood Pummerly, president of the Women's Cultural Group of the town of Fallingford. I had lectured to her group once. She wanted to engage me to lecture again. She would be honored if I would stay at the Pummerly residence while I was in town.

Here, it struck me, might be an opportunity. I was not thinking only of the fee I could charge, helpful, but inadequate to solve my problem. I was also thinking of the fact that the Pummerlys were wealthy.

I was remembering Mrs. Pummerly's respect and dogged interest in the cultural arts and sciences. Like many others of no personal talent in these pursuits, she worshipped at the shrine.

I was remembering, above all, the effect of my own charm upon Mrs. Pummerly. I hope my dear wife, Freda, will forgive this, but I was desperate.

Objectively and without conceit, let me explain that I am a man of striking appearance, accustomed

from my earliest youth to the interest of the ladies. In my early forties when Mrs. Pummerly met me, I was tall, distinguished, with handsome eagle-like features, yet eyes that have been characterized as "dreamy", thick hair bearing a wave of gray, impeccable attire covering a vigorous physique. My voice is a vibrant baritone which I can modulate to reach down into a matron's toes. In short, I could be cast as a certain movie species of archaeologist, which, by the way, I believe to be another factor that aroused the distrust and resentment of my distinguished colleagues. As though one could not be both handsome and able at the same time!

However that may be, I will remembered the rather warm way in which Mrs. Pummerly's eyes had rested upon me during my last visit, the lingering touch of her fingers on my arm. Might there be a chance that I could charm and influence Mrs. Pummerly into acting as a patroness of science, financing and supporting my researches? I need not, of course, reveal my project, which might only terrify her; I could easily fabricate an acceptable objective for her benefit.

Furthermore, I was sure that Mrs. Pummerly had not heard of my change of status, else there would not have been an invitation.

Here was a chance that I must grasp, and I did—at once. Nothing of this could I say to my dear wife, Freda, but I bade her a sad farewell, hoping that she would in time understand how necessary it was that I leave her in loneliness, for now.

Mrs. Pummerly met me at the station, driving one of her expensive cars. "How wonderful that you could come, Professor Dutt," she said in a throaty contralto, holding on to my hand.

There was no doubt about my welcome.

I wasted no time. "So formal?" I smiled at her. "Please call me Holloway. After all, we're no longer strangers." I have a certain virile yet teasing manner when I wish.

A pleased pinkness expanded upwards from her neck. "Then you must call me Valerie!"

We chatted easily during the drive to the Pummerly estate. Wasting no time, as I say, I dropped a few remarks about how valuable a contribution she was making to science and culture by arranging these lectures and how, although she might not be aware of it, certain distinguished circles had already taken note of her activities, and how I hoped that her reputation would continue to grow through the even greater future contributions I was sure she would make, but which I did not explain at the moment.

I punctuated these remarks by patting her arm occasionally. I also placed my hand upon her thigh once in somewhat more than a pat.

Yes, I can be quite bold with the women. Bold, promising and precipitous without losing the aura of dignity and correctness. Part of my charm. The women who succumbed to me before I was married never felt that they were doing wrong.

I noted that when we drew up at the Pummerly place, which was reached by a winding private drive, she was breathing somewhat rapidly and that the pink glow had deepened. She made an agreeable picture. Mrs. Pummerly was not unattractive, it must be realized. Not far from my own age, as I judged, she had a blonde fullness which, if a degree more buxom than it should have been, was still not at all objectionable. Yet, actually, she did not stir me. I was a rake once, yes, but since the moment I first saw the girl who became my dear wife, Freda, no other woman has owned me. In truth, I wished no affair with Mrs. Pummerly, only such flirtation as might advance my cause. To me, Pummerly was a means to an end.

The Pummerly mansion was a long and massive edifice of stone and slate, winged, turreted and gabled. Mr. Pummerly, I understood, had made his money in the manufacture of talcum powder from the local talc mines. I was installed in a comfortable room in a wing, attended by well-trained servants and dined well. Mr. Pummerly did not join us. Business to take care of, it seemed, which suited me.

After dinner a chauffeur drove Mrs. Pummerly and myself to the lecture hall.

Facing the largely female audience, I felt myself, as always on the platform, in my element. Supreme confidence came to me as the focus of all those approving and respectful female eyes. I knew how I could sway these unwillingly aging matrons, remove them through my magic from their dullness of existence in the town of Fallingford.

But, just as I was about to break the hush, a doubt assailed me, and for an instant I seemed to see myself through the eyes of my colleagues. "Dutt?" I could hear them sneering. "Sure, a flashy hand on the platform. Gets the ladies, all right. But there's nothing to him. No scientist. What's he ever done but fool around with some hocus-pocus . . ."

The doubt did not last long. I was after something big. If I succeeded . . . I began to speak.

It amused me to skirt the subject of my researches without revealing them. As I spoke that night of death practices in ancient Egypt, I watched with interest the shuddering fascination of my audience, the thrilled response to the nuances of my voice which ranged from the romantic to the ghastly . . . I spoke of the exotic life of Queen Akhotupu, of her dress and ornaments in life, of her sarcophagus in death, and the burial trappings it contained. I described the mummy wrappings and the three methods of mummification . . . "The most expensive method," I told them, "used by the nobility, cost about one talent of silver, which would be about twelve hundred dollars nowadays. The body was filled with myrrh, cassia and other spices and soaked in natron for months. Then it was wrapped in the finest of linens heavily smeared with gum, or sometimes pitch which, however, turned the mummy black, as in the case of King Rameses. So effective was this method that the soles of the feet of mummies three thousand years old are found to be still soft and elastic."

I said nothing, of course, about the case of chemicals among the equipment stored in my luggage, now reposing in the Pummerly residence, which could duplicate such mummies in hours, from an ordinary cadaver.

I went on to describe the cheaper methods. "The poor classes were simply put into a salt solution for about seventy days. We know that millions of mummies were made in Egypt throughout all the dynasties. As I have mentioned, the Egyptians expected that some of these mummies would one day walk again. Superstition, of course, but let us examine some rather curious facts. Certain insects, such as the wasps, lose their body juices in winter, seem to dry up and die, in effect to mummify, yet with the arrival of warm weather they return to vibrant life. Why not the human mummy then, under the proper conditions? Biological objections notwithstanding, the Egyptians believed that if the wandering soul, or Bai, would return, the mummified body would grow firm and elastic again, alive . . .

"Superstition, as I say, but I have found records of inexplicable incidents that occurred from time to time in the past. In 1905, for instance, Sir Reginald Farnsworth, a private collector of antiquities, found two mummies missing from his collection one morning. Theft unlikely. In 1884, a stranger visited

Arthur Thatcher of New York, a historian, and corrected him on material he had written about the Sixth Egyptian Dynasty. New findings later confirmed the stranger. Thatcher recalled that he bore a striking resemblance to a carving of Akhomen II, a Pharaoh of the Sixth Dynasty. In 1922, two more mummies disappeared from the University of Sorbonne collection. Inexplicably. A student swore that he saw them walking away before he fainted, but this was put down to hallucination."

They were all staring at me in rapt horror. I allowed a moment of silence, then dropping my voice, said, "So many millions of mummies. How can we be sure that some don't live again? Perhaps among you right now there is a resurrected mummy. Perhaps your neighbor, or your best friend."

For a moment, I had them. I had them believing. They sat in stricken dismay. Tiny stealthy sideways glances appeared here and there. I broke the spell before their own reaction could. I sent a booming laugh through the hall. "Come, ladies," I laughed, "only superstition, remember?"

They laughed with me in heady relief. My words and presence had chilled them, disturbed them, thrilled them, amused them. My lecture was, as always, a success.

"Holloway," said Valerie Pummerly to me that night as we strolled in her gardens, "you are a strange man. Do you know, I'm quite frightened of you?"

"Don't be, I beg you," I replied. "I'm just a plain man of science who, at the moment, feels much too

susceptible, much too vulnerable."

"Vulnerable?"

"To a lovely and intelligent woman."

"Come, now!" But she was not displeased. We strolled in silence. Presently, she inquired with obvious casualness, "You never told me, are you married?"

"Yes. But what does that matter?" Inwardly, I hoped that my dear wife, Freda, the only woman to whom I could ever consider myself married, would forgive the lie. "Valerie," I said. I deepened my tone to a certain vibrating, yearning timbre. "Valerie." I turned to her. She shivered. I embraced her. She fell into my arms like a wounded duck. Upon her yielding lips I deposited a kiss laden with fervid devastation.

"Holloway!" she panted, hands clutching at me.

I disengaged her. It took some strength. "Forgive me," I said. "This is madness."

"Holloway!" she said.

"Please don't reproach me," I said. "Although I admire and respect you, I couldn't help—" I gave her hand a passionate, promising squeeze. "I'll leave in the morning."

"No, no, I wish you'd stay. I mean—a few days visit—"

"I can't. I have much to do," I said gravely. "I am engaged in a private research project, while on leave from the university. It will take funds beyond my means, however. I must find a backer, a place to work. A most important project, you understand, which will add distinction to my name and to the name of whoever supports it. No, I must get started on this at once."

A thoughtful look came gradually to Valerie's face. "This project—tell me about it, I'm so interested."

An unused room in the wing of the house was turned over to me. "Mr. Pummerly used to store some odds and ends here once," Valerie told me, "but he has no real need for it." A generous fund was set up in a bank upon which I was at liberty to draw for my researches, keeping, of course, an accounting. The object of my researches, I explained to Valerie, was to trace the effect upon the cultural and social mores of ancient Egypt between the first dynasty and the eighteenth, Tutankhamen's time, of the art of the neighboring races such as the Syrians. I would have to send to Egypt, I explained, for certain transcriptions of records, certain artifacts. She seemed quite satisfied.

Mr. Pummerly, himself, did not seem altogether delighted with my presence. He was a thick, red-necked man with small cobalt eyes which glowered at me suspiciously. With the resignation, however, of a man who had apparently fought many losing battles with his wife's cultural and social aspirations, he made no overt objections. He seemed seldom about, anyhow.

Keeping Valerie at bay was something of a problem. I could not afford to lose her interest either, so that while on the one hand I seemed to glow with ardor and affection, on the other I put her off with lofty platonic sentiments whenever she managed to find me alone and away from my work. After a time, she acquired a rather frantic and predatory expression. I might, of course, have taken the easy way, but when I thought of my dear wife, Freda . . . No. Still, it was becoming difficult.

But it was my work that mattered. At last I could get at it. I immediately wired funds to my agents in Egypt, instructing them to procure and ship to me the mummies I needed for the experiment. I was glad that it would not be necessary for me to rely only upon making mummies from whatever cadavers I might acquire. The old, authentic article was best.

While I waited for the mummies to arrive, I spent most of my time searching through my innumerable copies of ancient heiroglyphics, seeking the sixth condition that still eluded me. It was slow work, and as time passed without results I began to fear that the proper condition of the moon might pass before I found it. This would mean I would have to wait another year, and I certainly could not expect to maintain my Pummerly set-up that long.

Of the five conditions I already knew, the condition of the Moon was the most fleeting. The Bai would only enter its mummy, the Egyptians believed, when the moon was in the position of Thomma. To us moderns, this is the moon's yearly position of maximum displacement from the orbital mean; I had no trouble in ascertaining the date. I had only a few weeks.

The other conditions could be fulfilled. The condition of the Hawk meant that the mummy of a hawk must be present during an attempt to bring life to the long-dead. This is the reason that mummified hawks are found in Egyptian tombs. My agents were sending me several.

The condition of Love meant that success would be more certain if the attempt was made with two mummies who had been lovers in life. My agents were sending me

the remains of Sethomana, a prince of Egypt during the second dynasty, and his consort, Tolatha, a couple whom, the records showed, had been always together during life holding each other dear. There were certain love poems in heiroglyphics.

The condition of Sustenance meant that wines and tempting foods must be on hand. No difficulty there.

The condition of Repose meant that tranquility and ease must surround the bodies. It would be best to lay them out on a cushiony surface.

Mrs. Pummerly was not yet aware that the mummies were on the way to her home. I judged it best to get them in before explaining to her that they were essential to my researches.

Still, the time went by and still, the sixth condition eluded me. Not even a clue could I uncover; I was certain only that it existed.

There were periods, late at night when my eyes smouldered exhausted in my head and the ache of weariness laid hold of me, that I knew discouragement and even despair. Were my colleagues right about me, after all? Was I a shallow trifler, an empty vehicle fit only to play at science and charm the ladies, a dabbler in nonsense? Was I pursuing this improbable chimera with no better basis than hope? What had I ever accomplished in my chosen field up to now? What discoveries, what unearthings, what travels, what hardships, what brilliant analyses, what papers, what books written? None.

It was the thought of my dear wife, Freda, waiting patiently for me at home that saved me then. Ah, Freda, Freda, you who always believed in me, who burst upon me when I *was* no more than a trifler and became a star to steady me. Freda, it was for you I had to do this and for you to prove one truth so that others might believe in me too and I might believe in myself.

Yes, come what may, I had to follow this awful experiment to its very end.

The Pummerlys were not home the day the mummies arrived. I was thankful for that. I had the truckmen put the massive wooden shipping cases into the room set aside for my researches. When they had gone, I asked the butler, Weed, to assist me in dismantling the cases. He was quite willing; his curiosity as to the contents was obvious. I saw no point in further concealment. I was sure there were duplicates of the key to the room and, in any case, the household would soon know.

They had not shipped the cumbersome sarcophagus, of which there was no need, but as we ripped the wood slats away, the caskets themselves appeared, painted, carved, wonderfully wrought. "Easy now, Weed," I said absently, hearing his pry bar clatter to the floor. Absorbed, I lifted a lid and exposed the mummy of Sethomana, prince of Egypt.

He had been preserved in pitch, so his face was black, but wonderfully life-like. The teeth were gleaming white in a smile, the hair was fair and silky about the black ears. He had been wrapped in fine amber-yellow linen.

As for Tolatha, she was dainty yet with full, sensuous lips formed as though to say some sweet word. Wonderful specimens. I was well pleased.

"Mummies, sir?" said Weed, his voice not entirely steady.

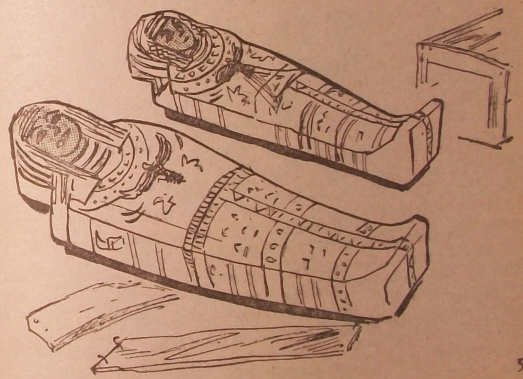
"Mummies," I said.

He stared at me without expression. Presently, one side of his face twitched. He turned and walked away jerkily, back stiff.

I had hoped to see Mrs. Pummerly that evening about my mummies, but she was staying with some friends for the night. I did not care to see Mr. Pummerly at all, so I retired early to my bedroom near my research room.

How was I to know that Mr. Pummerly would arrive late with a visitor?

The first I knew about it was



when their voices reached me from the hall. "Hits me sometimes," the man with Pummerly was saying. "Queasy stomach, you know. Usually, a stiffish drink fixes me up."

"Got just the thing," Pummerly's voice said. "Prime old stuff. Had it locked in a cabinet in this room for years." With horror, I heard Pummerly unlocking the door to my research room.

"Just a small snort," the visitor's voice said. "Then we can discuss our business, old man. Glad to place my orders with old-line stable people like you. Some of the people in these other outfits are nothing but eccentrics."

I heard the click of the light-switch. I heard feet crossing the floor. I remembered that the coffin lids were up.

There was then a small period of silence. A strangled gasp. A sick grunt. The visitor—"Mummies, Pummerly? You keep mummies?"

Incoherent sounds from Pummerly.

"Sick," the visitor's voice moaned. "My stomach. Got to get home. . ." Footsteps hurried away.

I only overheard a small snatch of the conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Pummerly the next day, although Pummerly was speaking rather loud. "That character," Pummerly was grating, "has got to go!"

I felt that he had taken the wrong tack, fortunately. Mrs. Pummerly did not take kindly to orders and criticism of her judgment.

Still, she appeared on the grim side at our interview. "Why, Holloway," she asked, "have you brought mummies into my home?"

I launched my persuasive explanation as to why I needed mummies for my studies of Egyptian mores. Had it been the evening before, it would have gone well. But now, after the incident, her grimness was not abating. Knowing the nature of the eternal female, I understood that partly behind it was pique at my resistance of her charms. I was afraid she might put me out, halting the experiment.

We were alone. There was only one thing to do. I made use of one of my qualities of voice, a seamless caress that absorbed her as within a pastel sea, I sent her a look of moody desire across a long diagonal, I touched the crook of her arm.

Presently, I removed my lips from hers and examined her rapt and hypnotized face. Enough. Firmly, I detached her. Her eyes opened. They were glazed. "We must stop, Valerie," I said sternly. "Our consciences, our honor."

"Honor," she repeated wildly.

"Lovely child," I whispered. "If I don't go from you this minute —"

"What, Holloway, what might happen—?"

"Don't torture me," I said hoarsely. Then, through the teeth, passionately, "I swear, Valerie, one day I shall lose control of myself—"

It was a promise that assured me of her continued backing. Rather neat of me, I thought. I had no trouble, for a time, after that. Mr. Pummerly remained suppressed. He said nothing about the mummy incident, in fact spoke to me not at all during the rare times that we met. I did note a somewhat malign glare, a barely audible rumbling in his throat.

Thomma, the time of the Moon, was drawing nearer. According to my astronomical tables, the moment when the dead might rise would come at two-forty-seven A.M. on that night. And still I did not know the secret of the Sixth Condition. I drove myself frantically, delving into the ancient heiroglyphics, working every possible moment.

It was a near thing. It was the day before Thomma that, at last, from a scrap of Third Dynasty recordings by an obscure priest the knowledge blazed at me.

The Sixth Condition.

It shocked me. It stunned me.

I read the incredible thing over and over again. No mistake. Could I steel myself to this? Did I dare?

That day was also the day the butler and the cook gave notice. Altogether, a disturbing day.

Mr. Pummerly's voice was raised so loud that morning that I could hardly avoid overhearing his quarrel with Mrs. Pummerly. "Damn him!" Pummerly was roaring. "Now he's driving the servants away! Invaluable man, Weed. Don't blame him for refusing to work in the same house with mummies! But it's the cook I mind most! We'll never find another one like her. Her fried chicken—If you don't get rid of Dutt today, I'll throw him out myself!"

Mrs. Pummerly's reply was too low-pitched for the words to come through, but the tone was firm, determined. I could tell that she was holding the line. Good girl.

"Refuse, do you!" Pummerly roared. "Why so attached to him, hey? Don't think I haven't wondered about this before." His voice went suspicious, grating. "What's going on between you two, anyhow?"

Again he had taken the wrong tack. Mrs. Pummerly's reaction was immediate and explosive. Her voice rose sharply in an offended torrent, all the more vehement I

knew for her illicit desires. It went on and on, ever more edged, until his attempts to break in grew weaker and further apart and finally died altogether. "All right," I heard him say morosely, suppressed, when she finally paused. "Sorry I said anything. All right, all right, let's not talk about Dutt anymore."

I silently applauded Valerie.

But the thing that mostly haunted me that last day was the Sixth Condition. The ghastly thing had to be done, but could I do it? To give up my experiment now was unthinkable. It was a chance for me to prove myself, yes, but more than that it was a chance to know. To know. To penetrate an everlasting secret of life and death, to learn if immortality existed . . . But to comply with the Sixth Condition was to enter into horror, to risk all, life itself . . . And still—was my goal not worth any risk? And yet—was it in me to do this thing? I had never been a saint, but this—? Could I?

In this manner I wearily agonized all day, but when night had come and deepened, I still could not tell what I would do. Mechanically, I made ready for the experiment so that all might be in order if I complied with the Sixth Condition. From among my instruments, I chose a suitable one and secreted it adroitly on my person.

I complied with the Condition of the Hawk, laying the mummified birds upon the breasts of my long-dead Egyptians.

The room was tranquil. I had bedded the mummies most comfortably in their caskets. The Condition of Repose was met.

Wines and food on the table fulfilled the Condition of Sustenance.

Outside, above the small dark clouds that now and then floated by, silver-rimmed, rode the bright full moon but a few hours from its appointment, slowly, inevitably, bringing the Condition of the Moon.

The Condition of Love—the serenity of Sethomana and Tolatha was that of love, of content in each other. Who could doubt that these two had loved, indeed still loved? It seemed to me that there hovered in the room now an intangible essence, an ectoplasm of love that defied the ages.

All ready. Almost midnight. Now, could I—?

A key turned in the lock and my door was flung open.

Startled, I saw Mr. Pummerly swaying in the doorway. He bared his teeth, strode in, slammed the door.

"You louse," he said.

I saw that he had been drinking. All day, no doubt, while he brooded about me. He was in a foggy, ugly state. "Goin' have pleasure," Mr. Pummerly stated heavily, "of punchin' you right in snoot. Then throw you the hell out." He began to stalk me. "All right," he was growling, "invade my house, all right. Bring in mummies, all right. Chase my customers, scare my butler, fool with my wife, all right. But when you lose me bes' cook ever had, s'too much . . ." He launched a wide swing at me.

Immobile with surprise, I was hit. I went down. I sprang up in furious reflex, my body awakening to violence. While a remote cell in my brain thanked Mr. Pummerly for making it easy for me to meet the Sixth Condition, I drew the instrument I carried, the knife, and stabbed him to the heart.

He died rapidly.

No stopping now.

I left the room, locked the door behind me, softly padded through the dark halls and chambers of the huge, sleeping house, up to the bedrooms. I did not worry about the servants, their quarters were remote and they must have retired. I entered Valerie Pummerly's bedroom.

I approached silently, cautiously—but she woke.

The moon filtered full upon me through the window curtains. "Valerie," I whispered tenderly.

She could come to only one conclusion. "Holloway," she breathed happily. "At last." She sat up, and the covers fell away revealing her buxom beauty straining within the flimsy nightgown. I felt regret, but not temptation, no, never temptation with the image of my dear wife, Freda, in my soul. I went into Valerie's open arms, feeling the softness of her flesh, the agreeable sleaziness of her gown, and with regret still—regret because she was comely and had been good to me—once more I drew my knife.

It entered her heart as she clutched at me. She coughed once. Her arms fell away. She dropped back.

Stealthily I carried her body through the silent house to my experimental room. Locked the door. Laid her out on the rug, next to the mummy of Tolatha. Then I laid out the body of Mr. Pummerly alongside the mummy of Sethomana.

Done. I had met the Sixth Condition—the Condition of Sacrifice. As required, I had provided the bodies of a mated couple, stabbed through the heart on the day of Thomma.

Now, if it was to be, these ancient dead would rise in little over an hour. I had only to wait. I sat with my eyes fixed on the mum-

mies as the moon drew ever closer to Thomma.

How can I confess what happened next? What vindication, when the experiment meant so much? Yes, my body and mind were exhausted from long labors, perhaps it was natural that in reposing—but there can be no excuse.

I fell asleep.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock . . . this time the sound that woke me, the only sound in that silent room, coming from the wall clock. The time was three twenty-six.

I had slept through the critical moment.

In the midst of my dismay and anger at my weakness, I realized something.

The caskets were empty. Sethomana and Tolatha were gone.

I examined the room. The mummy wrappings were there, empty. Some wine and fruit were gone. I raised the wine glasses to the light, illuminating the purple dregs and, yes, the cloudy imprints of human lips! I went to the door. It had been unlocked from the inside, the catch turned. I locked it again and sat down to think.

Although I had missed the awful spectacle, the evidence indicated that the experiment had been a success. Sethomana and Tolatha must be living again, somewhere outside, somewhere in the night. And in the wisdom that the ages had given their souls, I thought, they would know how to acquire protective coloration, to disappear into our modern civilization, to present the semblance of ordinary human beings. Undoubtedly, I speculated, others of the long-dead had done the same in the past. I had little hope of ever finding them.

This was disappointment. I had no proof to present to the world, to science, to my doubting colleagues, I had seen nothing, but at least— *I* knew.

But did I know? Was there another explanation possible?

To my knowledge, I have never sleep-walked.

But suppose this time I had, in wish-fulfillment? Suppose I had removed the mummies myself and destroyed them? Suppose it was I who had turned the lock, I who had eaten the fruit and drunk wine from two glasses?

I considered this possibility, then chose to dismiss it. It clashed with every instinct of mine, with that intangible conviction that comes to human beings to resolve their doubts. Proof or not, I felt that I *knew*. I had found a way to immortality.

Abruptly, I became aware of my danger. The bodies of the Pummerlys—. I ceased my musings and grew coldly practical. If the bodies were discovered, I would be convicted of murder. If it could be avoided, I had no wish to die just yet. Bodies were difficult objects to dispose of, but—

I knew exactly what to do. There were still some hours before daybreak, still time before the Pummerlys would be missed.

I had with me, as I have said, the means of changing ordinary cadavers into mummies in a matter of hours.

I mummified the Pummerlys.

As their bodies dried and their skins shriveled and blackened it was also possible for me to alter somewhat the cast of their features. Arranging with utmost care the mummy wrappings, I stowed the Pummerlys in the caskets in place of Sethomana and Tolatha. Their ancient dignity was splendid.

Even an expert could not have told them from Egyptian mummies thousands of years old. And who would think of suspecting mummies?

I was arrested, naturally. The servants contributed much unkind testimony. But none of them, not even Weed, recognized the mummies as their employers, nor even glanced at them, nor had desire to approach them.

As for the police, as I had expected, they were incapable of thinking the unthinkable. Other evidence was not wanting, bloodstains, garments, fingerprints, but no bodies. Their drawn out, painstaking, methodical searches amused me. I was greatly diverted on the occasion when a crack detective, leaning on the mummy casket that held Mr. Pummerly, eyes sliding blankly over the mummy, growled at me, "Come on, come on, we know you did it. We'll find them sooner or later so you might as well tell us. Where'd you hide the bodies?"

"What bodies?" I said innocently.

Yes, a hundred times the police must have by-passed the mummies without a spark of suspicion.

They gave up grilling me. I could not be convicted—no corpus delicti. I was released.

I should not be in the death house now, waiting to pay the supreme penalty for murder—but we all makes mistakes.

Needing money after my release, stripped of assets, having again lost what little remained at the races, I sold the mummies. I sold them to an amateur collector. I felt perfectly safe, entirely convinced that he could not detect the imposture.

However, it seems that I overlooked one small detail. When the

buyer curiously inspected his purchase later, he found on Mr. Pummerly's finger the ring that I had in my haste neglected to remove. There were certain symbols on the ring which the man recognized. He called the police because he could not understand how a mummy thousands of years old could have belonged to Mr. Pummerly's lodge.

So, sooner than I expected, I shall die. Regrettable, but there is no despair in me. I have now hope and faith that I shall live again. I have given certain instructions. My body shall be mummified, entombed in a crypt that waits for me in my home town, with a message to those who will live in the future. Though no one may believe, I at least have new pride in myself; I know that I have accomplished a greater thing than any of my colleagues; I have learned that death need not be final.

Ah, death that cruelly takes those we love from us, that often comes too early, too suddenly! It was when death took her from me after her illness, years ago, that I first embarked upon these experiments. My Freda, you were made for life and light, not for dark disintegration! But now—we who love so much shall be together again, we shall walk the earth again, we shall laugh together and once more hold each other tenderly.

It is for this I have worked.

It is for this that my mummy shall be placed in the same crypt where there has been awaiting me these past years, in lonely patience, the sweet and precious mummy of my dear wife, Freda.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
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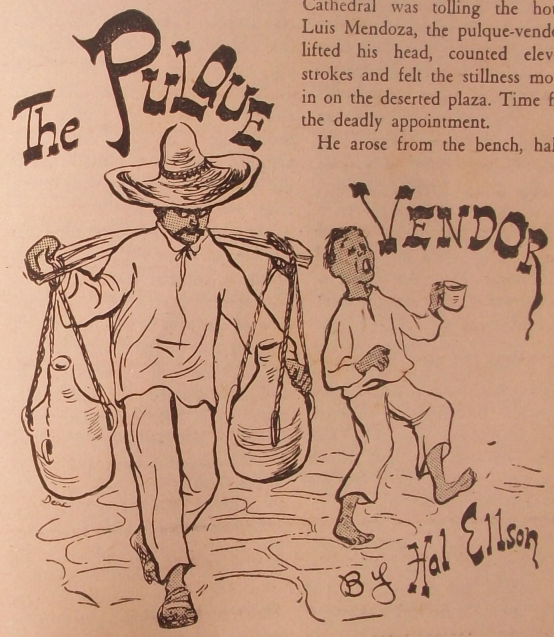
As Lord Acton so gently reminded us, "Power tends to corrupt. Absolute power corrupts absolutely." The logical continuum seems to be, "The tyrant must die". Frightening, isn't it?

The Pulque Vendor

By Hal Ellson



THE GREAT bronze bell in the old Cathedral was tolling the hour. Luis Mendoza, the pulque-vendor, lifted his head, counted eleven strokes and felt the stillness move in on the deserted plaza. Time for the deadly appointment.

He arose from the bench, half-

expecting to feel the wooden yoke on his neck and the weight of the two huge jars of pulque which he carried through the streets of the city from sun-up till the hungry shadows of night struck from the desert. Across the plaza he moved, striding rapidly through the shadows cast by sour orange trees heavy with fruit, past the fountain, then directly across the gutter toward the Municipal Building, dark and mute in its crumbling splendor. A half-dozen police motorcycles stood at the curb in front of Police Headquarters. Inside, a ragged beggar stood bare-headed at a desk, pleading with the officer on duty. Another beggar lay curled on a bench behind the wooden bars of a tiny cell. Mendoza frowned and moved on, rounding the corner into a narrow street where the shadows swallowed him. He emerged on a large plaza, more desolate than its counterpart, crossed it and vanished into another narrow street much like the one where he lived. Its houses were crumbling and silent, windows dark and barred, with not a single light to indicate the existence of tenants.

Halfway down the street, he stopped abruptly and glanced back. The walk was shadowed and empty. No one had tracked him, and none but the three inside the house where he stood knew of the meeting. For the moment he hesitated, wondering if he could go through with the task. The odds were against him. Others had failed dismally and lay in their graves, shot down by the General's gunmen.

Suddenly he made up his mind and entered the house. Three men awaited him in a small patio barely lit by the pale yellow light of an oil lamp. Greetings were exchanged. Mendoza remained standing and looked from one to the other of the three men. One was old, with white hair and a pale gaunt face. The other two were younger, dark like himself, with the same soft eyes that belied the anger smoldering in them.

The old man was Don Gonzalo Aponte, professor without students, aristocrat without funds. Indirectly, General Macia had deprived him of his post at the university, relieved him of the family hacienda, a proud but crumbling ruin, and appropriated the land surrounding it. The order had been signed by the Governor, who was no more than a puppet. The intent of the General was clear, to break the spirit of Don Gonzalo Aponte.

Aponte's spirit was far from broken, but he was old and weak. To strike back on his own was impossible. Still, there were others who hated the General. Some had been brave enough to join with Aponte, an even dozen men—and nine were already dead, slaughtered by the General's gunmen in three bungled attempts at assassination. Bandits, the newspapers called them, perverting the truth at the request of the General.

Thinking of the dead who'd been buried in the desert where they'd been shot, Aponte nodded to Mendoza. "So you came," he said, measuring the wiry frame of the pulque-vendor.

"I said I'd be here," Mendoza replied with a shrug.

Aponte nodded to the young man on his right. "Your friend Estaban recommended you. You know the risk?"

"I know it well."

"Nine men have already died."

"They were unfortunate."

"Death is always unfortunate. If you wish to withdraw. . . ."

"I wish no such thing."

A faint smile lit the old man's face. "There are few, if any, who would say that, but a question. Why are you willing to risk so much?"

"Because I am poor, Senor. I have use for the money."

"Many are poor, but . . ."

"Perhaps they like being miserable."

"Then your only concern is the money?"

Mendoza frowned, then shook his head. "The General is evil, the gunmen are animals. One kills them without feeling. Especially Pancho Negron, who murdered my friend. He has to die."

Aponte nodded and clasped his hands. A diamond ring flashed light. "You are ready?"

"Yes, Senor."

"Then it is tomorrow. You know the Mayor's residence?"

"I know it."

"At noon three cars will be there, and the gunmen. The center car will be for the General. The gunmen will be guarding the street. One will escort the General from the Mayor's residence to the car. A dozen men, all armed." A dry hacking cough wracked the old man. With his fist against his lips, he stemmed the attack and looked at Mendoza. "A dozen men," he repeated.

"I understand," said Mendoza.

"You will have no help. The odds are completely against you."

"It's a gamble," Mendoza conceded. "Twelve against one, but I still possess an advantage."

Aponte failed to see it and asked to be enlightened.

"It's very simple. I am only one man, a poor pulque-vendor," Mendoza explained. "The gunmen will hardly expect trouble from me, and so the element of surprise will be on my side. Besides, I have a plan."

"Which is?"

Mendoza smiled faintly. "That is something I prefer to keep to myself. If it succeeds, or doesn't, you will know about it tomorrow."

Aponte looked at the two younger men beside him and shrugged. "As you wish," he said, turning back to Mendoza.

"And now about the payment?" said the pulque-vendor.

"I see you haven't forgotten that."

"Nor my family," replied Mendoza. "I am doing this for them."

Aponte nodded gravely. "Tomorrow morning at the Cantina of the Matadors you will have your money. As for your mission, I wish you the best of luck."

"I'll need more than that," Mendoza shrugged. "Say a prayer for me." With that, he turned on his heels and left.

As the door closed after him, Aponte shook his head. "A brave fellow, a fool, or . . ."

"Or what?" said Estaban.

"Perhaps he is one of them."

"No, he's all right."

"Perhaps, but if it's money he wants, he may go to the General. If would be worth his while to betray us."

"I've vouched for him. He won't betray us."

Aponte nodded. "Perhaps not. Tomorrow will tell, but I wonder about his plan."

"Whatever it is, it's a gamble. He may kill the General, but he won't survive the gunmen."

"Perhaps he wishes to die."

"No," said Estaban. "But he's poor, and the poor are always desperate."

"He appeared very calm," said Aponte, rising slowly from his chair. His thin face was gaunt with fatigue, his hands had begun to tremble. The two younger men noticed and prepared to leave. As they said good-night and moved toward the door, Aponte halted them. "About the payment," he said to Estaban. "I suggest you leave the money with the barman, properly packaged, just in case. . . ."

"I trust Mendoza. I will give it to him myself," said Estaban.

It was still early, the city awake, clamorous and vibrating with life after the black stillness of sleep. As the bronze bell in the Cathedral crashed out the hour, Mendoza crossed the plaza and stopped before the huge main door with its carved figures worm-eaten and scarred by dry-rot to a point of semi-obliteration. A step brought him beyond the door into the dim interior. At first it appeared empty, but a black-shawled figure knelt on the floor; a sibilant whispering came to him, candles flickered palely on the altar. To the left a dim chapel appeared like a grotto. Entering it, he felt the chill motionless air. The flames of half a dozen candles burned like white jewels and lighted the smooth cheekbones of a dark saint of his own blood. He knelt before the statue and began to pray.

With the long morning still before him, Mendoza returned home. Suddenly he felt tired and went to bed. His eyes were barely closed when he heard a familiar sound that brought a smile to his face. His granddaughter had come in from next door. Her small bare feet padded through the house and into the patio, where she greeted and nuzzled his son's pet lamb which was tethered to a stake.

Back into the house she came, straight to Mendoza's bed to demand her morning kiss, then went off and he fell asleep with a smile on his face. Soon she returned, chewing fritto and bearing a cup of steaming coffee. She shared it with him and carried away the empty cup. Again he fell asleep and awakened to the voice of his daughter calling him to the kitchen table for breakfast—tortillas, with hot sauce and coffee. When his daughter returned to her own house, he lit a cigaret and stepped into the patio. A rare cold spell a month back had killed off the tops of the avocado and orange trees. Thought of the disaster made him frown, but tender new leaves were already appearing on the lower limbs in the heat of the morning. He smiled to himself and saw in this revival the fruits of his own loins, daughter, son and granddaughter. You die, but they live on for you, he thought in joy and sadness.

A moment later his son, Julio, stepped into the patio. His skin was a dark bronze like his father's; his black hair glistened.

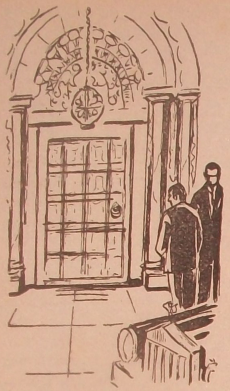
"You ate?" said Mendoza.

The boy nodded.

"Good." Mendoza went to a raffish shed in back of the patio where the lamb was tethered and lifted a wooden yoke to his shoulders. Two huge jars attached to it balanced each other. The boy brought him his sombrero.

"Let's go," he said and off they went, the man with his heavy burden, the bare-footed boy holding a cup before him.

The sun was well up now, the streets hot. Mendoza felt the yoke and the weight of the jars. Sweat dripped like water from his face, salt stung his eyes. He had no complaint. It was good to be alive, to hear his son's sharp cry— "Ay, pulque! Ay, pulque!" But now it was a lament, piercing the streets, the sun and his heart—an innocent and terrible announcement of the imminence of disaster.



They rounded the plaza and moved on to the flyridden market with its stench, crossed a bridge to a devastated area of shacks and crumbling adobes where goats wandered in the rutted streets. At eleven they re-crossed the bridge, sat on their haunches at a market stall, ate tortillas and a thin corn soup, then moved off to the Cantina of the Matadors.

Here Mendoza put down the ever-growing weight of the jars and stepped through the front door beneath a sign that proclaimed this to be the ENTRANCE OF THE BULLS. Estaban awaited him within. Over a bottle of beer the money was passed. Mendoza left through a side door, where another sign stated the legend—WHERE DEAD BULLS GO. Round the corner his son awaited him. Handing him the money, which was wrapped carelessly in a soiled piece of brown paper, he said, "Whatever happens, don't lose this. Put it inside your blouse."

"What is it?" asked Julio.

"Never mind. It is for you, your sister and the little one."

The boy put the money inside his blouse, and Mendoza placed the yoke on his shoulders. I may die, but they will have money, he thought, and nodded to his son.

"Ay, pulque! Ay, pulque!" cried the boy as they moved off.

It was very hot now, the streets almost deserted. At one minute of noon Mendoza and his son rounded the corner of the block where the Mayor's residence stood. Three cars were parked directly in front of the house, an ornate affair of white stucco, red tile and ornamental iron. Nine of the gunmen, including Pancho Negron, stood on the sidewalk. Three sat at the wheels of the cars. No one else was about.

"Ay, pulque!" Julio cried out, and suddenly Mendoza felt the yoke on his neck, the weight of the jars. One for pulque, and one for death, he thought, and the boy called out again.

A short man with broad shoulders and a pockmarked face, Pancho Negron's alert eyes riveted on Mendoza and his son. The others stood at ease, for the pulque-vendor and boy posed no threat.

"Listen to me," Mendoza whispered to Julio. "When I tell you to run, make certain to run as fast as you can."

The boy was puzzled, but asked no question. Again he cried out, and Mendoza glanced at the Mayor's house. No sign of the General. He slowed his steps, finally stopped before Negron and put down his burden.

"A drink, Senor?" he said, taking the cup from his son.

Negron made a face and shook his head. "From that filthy cup which everyone in the city has put his lips to?" The gunman spat to show his distaste.

Shrugging, Mendoza put a cigaret to his lips and, from the corner of his eye, saw the Mayor's door swing open, the General step from the house. Immediately the gunmen came alert; one hurried toward him to escort him to the car. Mendoza crushed his empty cigaret pack and said to Julio: "Get me another pack at the corner. Run."

The boy hesitated. A stinging slap across the face sent him off. The gunmen laughed. Bare feet padded on the walk as Julio fled. Mendoza heard them and gritted his teeth, then turned and saw the General ten feet from him, squat and ugly, his round face with its two small eyes set deep under his bulging forehead. The face was a brute's, the small eyes belonged to a reptile.

Casually, Mendoza lit his cigaret and held the match. In the burning sun its flame was barely visible, a pale innocuous flare that fell from his fingers into one of the jars as the General stooped awkwardly to enter his car. A terrible explosion shattered the scene and rocked the area for blocks around.

Deadly silence followed the blast. Then the Cathedral bell began to toll wildly above a medley of confused cries. Mendoza, the pulque-vendor, had fulfilled his trust.

Obscure transactions, even though they may effect massive changes in our lives, are rarely publicized, and for very good reason.

To Stop A Fire

IN A SECTION of the state as small and out-at-the-elbow as Pokochobee County, the elected officials at the courthouse, of necessity, work closely together, especially the county attorney and the sheriff.

So I wasn't too surprised, just irritated, when the phone rang late Friday night, waking me up. Many a time since I got the county attorney's job last year, Ed Carson, the sheriff, had rousted me out of bed in the middle of the night, usually to take a ride out into the backwoods to view the remains left after a knife fight or shooting scrape at one of the juke-joints.

Now, muttering curses, I fumbled in the dark for the phone. I told my sleeping wife, "I'm going to have this thing disconnected." But Martha snored on, uncaring.

Half-asleep myself, I growled into the phone, "Yar?"

"Is this Mr. Gates?" a voice asked. It was not a voice I recognized.

"Mmm," I agreed, and yawned. "Who's this?"

"My name is Gerald Waner. Sorry to disturb you so late, but it's necessary."

Waner! That woke me up in a hurry, and brought beads of sweat popping out on my face. "What can I do for you?" I responded.

"It's more what *I* can do for *you*, Mr. Gates." A chuckle. Then, "Be out to see you in half an hour."

"Wait a minute—"

But the line was dead. I jiggled the hook. When the operator answered, I said, "Daisy, where'd that call I just had come from?"

"From the lobby of the La Grande Hotel."

"Thanks." I hung up quickly.

I sat on the edge of the bed in the warm June night and lit a cigarette. I needed it. We—the sheriff, myself, and other interested people around the courthouse—had been expecting Mr. Gerald Waner.

But we hadn't expected him to arrive in the middle of the night. I didn't like any part of it. There was a good chance that Waner and his associates had committed a

Elijah Ellis

murder a couple of days before, over at Thomasville in the adjoining county.

Gathering up my clothes, I tiptoed out of the bedroom, pulled the door shut behind me. I went along the hall. I stopped long enough to look in on my two sleeping boys. Then I went on into the kitchen. I switched on the light and got dressed. It looked like a long night ahead, and I wasn't expecting to enjoy any of it.

After washing my face at the sink, I picked up the extension phone and called Ed Carson. When the sheriff came on I told him bluntly, "Waner's in town. Must have got in this evening."

Ed whistled softly. "So it's finally our turn, huh? What's the deal?"

"He's supposed to come out here to my place in the next half hour or so. Listen, have you heard any more about the killing over in Thomasville?"

"Nope. Nothing new. Just Frank Davis' body full of bullet holes. They found him lying beside the highway, like you already know. Hands tied behind his back. Real pro job."

I laughed without humor. "Yeah. Real professional. Listen, I'll call you back soon as I hear Waner's pitch."

"I'll be waiting. Meanwhile, I'll get things lined up—just in case."

I agreed reluctantly. "But let's hope it doesn't become necessary."

"You know it's up to us," Ed told me. "The other counties are depending on us to show Waner and his boys a good time. . . ."

We hung up. I lit a fresh cigarette, went through the house to the livingroom. I switched lights on in there and on the front porch.

I stood by the open front windows, looking through the rusty screens at the dark night.

There was nothing to do but wait for Waner to arrive.

As I said, we'd been expecting him. Reports had drifted in down at the courthouse, during the last couple of weeks, ugly and disturbing reports.

All concerning the doings of a Mr. Gerald Waner, who was making what he called a "business trip" through the State, accompanied by a collection of prize goons.

Waner had a mouthful of glowing promises, a pocket full of hard cash and, in the goons, the threat of force. What Waner wanted was simple: he wanted to buy the political structure of the entire State —county courthouse by county courthouse. Now, as Ed Carson had said on the phone, it was Pokochobee County's turn.

I thought about a letter that had arrived in my office that day, from the county attorney in the adjoining Thomas County. Old K. L. Johnson had written me: ". . . I can't remember when the people here have been as stirred up as they are about the murder of Officer Davis. Of course, the public knows nothing about Waner, which is just as well. I only wish Officer Davis hadn't found out what Waner is trying to do—at least not before the situation could be explained to him. I am morally certain that Waner is responsible for the killing, but there is not one iota of proof. . . . So the final burden of disposing of the matter must rest on you people over there. From Waner's cocksure attitude, I feel sure he suspects nothing. . . ."

I watched insects fluttering around the porch light.

I remembered something my father used to say: *The best way to stop a fire, is to jump on it with both feet—while it's still a spark.*

A car stopped on the graveled street in front of the house. Two men got out, came along the path to the front porch. I unhooked the screen door and opened it. "Mr. Waner?"

"Right."

The pair came up on the porch, brushed past me into the living-room. They didn't wait for invitations.

One was a short, tough-looking guy who asked me, "Who's here beside you?"

"My family. All asleep."

"I'll look around."

"No you won't," I said.

Quickly, the other man, Waner himself, stepped in front of his friend and said, "Don't be silly, Tom." To me he said, "You'll have to pardon our lack of manners, Mr. Gates. We've done a lot of traveling today and had car trouble to boot. That's why we're so late calling on you."

Waner was a tall, solidly-built man with an earnest, friendly face, and a shock of white hair like spun glass. He made me think of a big-time salesman, the kind who sells yachts and country estates.

It figured, of course.

The other character had "gorilla" written all over him.

I motioned them to chairs, and when we were seated Waner looked me over, chuckled, and said, "I'd expected to find an older man. It's amazing that a young fellow like you should already be such a power in state politics. Why, in the last few days my group has visited fourteen counties, and in all of them the officials have told us the same thing, 'See Lon Gates. What he says goes in this part of the state.' So . . . here I am."

I tried to look flattered.

Waner went on, "It seems that you are the key man in this section of the state. If we can persuade you to join the organization we represent, the whole southern tier of counties will fall in line. You're a big man, Mr. Gates."

I'm big alright. Six feet tall by two-hundred pounds. But that's the only way I'm big. Now I glanced at my watch. Waner took the hint.

"We can have a full discussion tomorrow," he said. "Get into details. For tonight, I'll give you just a brief rundown. Alright?"

"Umm," I said.

"As you know, there is a regrouping going on in your State. Old, corrupt political machines are being booted out to make way for new men with new, progressive ideas—men like yourself. This is a poor state. One of the poorest in the nation. But it doesn't have to be that way. No indeed."

Waner looked at me expectantly. His white hair glistened in the lamplight. His companion, Tom, or whatever his name was, just sat in his chair looking at nothing.

"What is this—er—organization you mentioned?" I asked.

"Businessmen," Warner said in a reverent tone. "Big businessmen. From all over the country. All banded together for mutual progress."

I yawned, watching Waner closely through half-shut eyes. "Uh huh. In other words, the syndicate."

Waner's bushy eyebrows climbed. "Why, ah. . . ."

"How much?" I said. "For me."

He obviously hadn't expected it to be quite so easy. His mouth curved in a pleased smile. He re-

laxed, leaned back and lit a cigar.

But the other one, Tom, got up and prowled the room. He paid special attention to the few pictures on the walls, the lamp bases, and so on.

I told him sardonically, "The place isn't bugged. I doubt if there's a tape-recorder in this whole country."

Tom turned, scowled down at me. "Wise guy."

Waner waved him back to a chair.

"Okay, let's talk business," I said impatiently. "As I understand the situation from reports I've had, the national syndicate is ready to move on this state. Open it up. The works—gambling, dope, prostitution, everything. All under the protection of the syndicate's own privately owned politicians. And you, Mr. Waner, are here on, shall we say, a buying trip. So, how much is in it for me?"

Waner laughed outright. "No wonder the people in the other counties kept telling me to come to you. You're a businessman, Mr. Gates. Well, I'm not authorized to set exact figures, but I can promise you a basic minimum of a thousand dollars a month. As a starter. No ceiling on what you can take in, as time passes, and the wheels really start to turn."

I pulled at my lower lip, and pretended to give it thought. I said, "I'll think about it. But listen—why'd you knock off that deputy-sheriff over in Thomasville? Frank Davis."

I didn't get the strong reaction I expected. The goon tensed a bit, but Waner didn't turn a hair. He inhaled from his cigar, blew a couple of neat smoke-rings, and murmured, "I don't know what you're talking about. But let's pose a hypothetical question. Let's suppose that for the good of many, it was necessary to sacrifice one man, one who couldn't or wouldn't understand that the old days of political graft and corruption are over."

I shrugged. "You mean you killed Davis to let people know you weren't fooling."

Waner managed to look shocked. "Why, Mr. Gates! I didn't kill anyone. Perish the thought."

"Ah, let's quit horsing around," the man called Tom said. "I'm tired and sleepy."

"A thousand a month isn't enough," I said.

"Oh, that's your's, personally. And, as I said, it's just a starter."

I pretended to think some more. But there was no point in stalling. I knew what I wanted to know. That the syndicate was in fact trying to move in, as we'd thought. And that Waner and his boys had murdered Frank Davis.

I stood up. "You and your gang of thieves stay out of this state," I said. "I'll tell you just once. Get out. Go home and tell your bosses to look elsewhere for easy pickings. But stay out of this state."

This time I'd really surprised Waner. The phoney gloss peeled off, exposing the vicious punk underneath. His voice got shrill as he yammered at me, "Listen, we need you. You're the key to this whole section, and you're coming in. The easy way, or the hard way—"

I aimed a thumb at the door. "Out."

Waner jumped from his chair. He was shaking with rage. "Listen, you. I could snap my fingers and Tom would go kill your wife, your family, and never lose a minute's sleep over it. Don't fool around here. You're way out of your depth."

"So are you, punk," I told him.

He paid no attention. "Listen, the syndicate owns half the country. Now it's time for this two-bit state to fall in line. You think you can stop us? Country-boy, you better grow up. I tell you what. Me and my boys will be here till about noon tomorrow. At the hotel downtown. You come see me there before noon. And you better come with the right answers. Or your wife is going to have a serious accident before this time tomorrow night, and I can't promise—"

I started for him. He skipped back, yelling, "Tom!"

The goon came out of his chair in an easy rush. I got in one or two punches. That was all. He was a professional at brutality, and he did a workman-like job on me. He chopped me down like a woodsman felling a tree.

I landed flat on my face, my nose and mouth streaming blood over the rug. A big foot clamped down on the back of my neck. Dimly I heard Waner say, "That's enough. I think he gets the idea. Don't you, country-boy?"

I tried to curse, but blood choked me, and pain was moving in to flood the numb void of my body. I coughed weakly.

"Okay," Waner said. "I'll expect you by tomorrow noon."

He and his goon left. Painfully I turned my head, watching them go. They didn't say "Goodby."

As soon as the screen-door banged shut, I heaved myself up, and by holding on to chair-backs, walls, whatever I could find, managed to stagger through the house to the kitchen. I got Ed Carson on the phone. I said, "Go." And hung up.

The noise had finally awakened my wife, though the two boys slept on undisturbed. I heard Martha calling from the bedroom. I didn't

want her getting up, so I hurried to the closed bedroom door, opened it enough to say, "Go back to sleep, honey. I've got to go out for awhile. A case."

Martha grumbled, "Will you be long? Where're you going?"

"To put out a fire," I said, and eased the door shut.

Back in the kitchen, I washed up, then found a bottle of bourbon in the cabinet over the sink and had a long drink. The whisky burned like fury on my split lips but, once it hit my stomach, I felt better, well enough to go out on the back porch. There I keyed open the little store-room, went inside and opened my old GI footlocker. From it I took a mothball-smelling bundle of black cloth and my old .45.

Then I went on out to the garage, got my car, and left.

To get my mind off my aches and pains as I drove along the bumpy streets, I thought about Pokochobee County. It's buried deep in the mountainous, sparsely-populated southern part of the state. A real backwater. We have radio, even television, and every Friday the weekly paper comes out, whether there's any news to put in it or not.

But the important thing about Pokochobee County, just now, was that we could seal it off from the rest of the world as effectively as if it were on the moon. Which is why, of course, Gerald Waner and his crowd had been passed along to us.

Now I turned my car onto one of the county-seat's two paved streets, and drove through the tiny business district. It's a collection of crumbling brick buildings, housing shabby stores and shops with fly-specked display windows. There are large gaps here and there, where buildings have burned down, or simply fallen in from old age, and never been replaced. It's an old town, an old county. But we like it.

I pulled into the driveway of Jim Kimmon's service station. It was closed. So was everything else in town. Jim himself would be with the others, over on the deep-shadowed courthouse lawn, under the oak trees around the ancient courthouse.

There were cars parked all along the block between where I sat and the courthouse. I could make out men headed that way on foot, one by one, and in small groups.

All were dressed as I would be in a minute—black robes topped by black, conical hoods. I got out of the car, put on robe and hood, and walked toward the courthouse.

There I found perhaps twenty-five men, standing around in silence. One of them beckoned to me. It was Ed Carson. I joined him. "Ready to go?" he muttered.

"Yeah. Let's get it over with."

We went along the deserted, dark street to the La Grande Hotel. The men fell in behind Ed and me. At the hotel Ed said, "Alright, six of you come with us. The rest wait here."

We entered the lobby. The night-clerk was fast asleep on a couch near the desk. I shook him awake. He opened his eyes, turned white, and his teeth started to chatter.

"Take it easy, Charley," I reassured him. "All we want to know is the room number of a Mr. Gerald Waner."

A little color came back into the nightman's face. "Oh. I see. Yeah. Well, Waner's in room 25 along with another guy. Three more men are with his party. They're in the adjoining room, number 26."

I nodded. "Okay. Go back to sleep."

I turned to Ed. "That's five men altogether. Let's get them."

We trooped up the old, creaking staircase to the second floor, found the two rooms we wanted. Ed had brought along the clerk's pass-key. He used it first on room 25, then 26. He and I went into Waner's room, while two of the other men took care of the goons in 26.

We herded the five of them together in the dimly-lit corridor. They raised a brief row. But our costumes, and our guns aimed at their bellies quieted them in a hurry. Only Waner had anything to say after that.

His silky white hair was a tousled mess, and his eyes swollen with sleep. But he could still talk. "Listen, what the hell is this? What are you, a bunch of thieves? We haven't got enough cash among us to make it worth your while. Take off now. Go rob a bank or something. You don't know who you're fooling with, hear? Take off, while you're able."

I had been examining the faces of the five men. I found the one I wanted. A young kid, years younger than any of the others, and lacking their patina of coarse, sneering confidence. Likely enough this was the kid's first "job" with the syndicate.

From the way he was trembling, I had an idea it'd be his last, if he had anything to say about it. I decided to give him a chance. "You," I said, pointing at him. "Step out."

He did. He started a half-hearted protest. Carson backhanded him and he shut up. The other goons began to look worried. Even Waner.

"Get the rest of this trash out of here," I said. "I'll be down directly. Alright?"

Waner began to jabber, but the muzzle of Carson's pistol jammed between Waner's ribs put a sudden stop to that. A couple of goons whimpered. They didn't know what was happening, but they didn't like it. Where they came from, they were the ones who scared people, instead of the other way around.

Carson and our men herded them off down the hall and on down the stairs. When they were gone, I turned to the kid. Now that we were alone he got back a little confidence.

"Man, you don't know what you're doing," he told me. "If you knew who we were—"

"I do know," I said. "All about you."

He hesitated. He looked pretty silly, standing there in his shorts and tee-shirt, shifting from one bare foot to the other. There was little of the big, bad hood about him.

"I want you to take a message back to your bosses," I said. "Get it straight, and tell them just what I tell you. Tell them not to send any more Gerald Waners down here. Tell them to keep out of this state."

The kid's mouth dropped open. He shook his head dazedly. "I don't understand."

"The syndicate will. Alright, get dressed. You have thirty minutes to be out of this town, and on your way out of the state. And don't come back."

"Bu—but what about Waner, and the others?"

"This is pretty wild country around here. It's easy for four strangers to get lost in the hills, and never be found again. That's all. Goodby."

I left him standing there. I hurried downstairs, across the lobby, out of the hotel. There was a line of cars in the street, motors idling. I got into the first one and shut the door firmly behind me.

We moved out, slowly, through the dark deserted streets, like a midnight funeral procession. That's just what we were.

It is difficult to imagine, after all these centuries of killing and conflict, that there might exist an entirely neglected, if not totally new, murder weapon. What havoc should it be universally adopted!

THE PUDGY WOMAN straightened the small black hat which sat like a sparrow on the nest of her freshly blued hair and approached Desk Sergeant Bevelow. She waited, anxiously turning her purse in her pale fingers, until the sergeant looked up from his report, and then she said: "My name is Mrs. Frances Turchin. I live at 6310 East Howard Street, Staten Island. My husband is killing me."

"My wife is killing me," Sergeant Bevelow responded pleasantly. "Are you lodging a complaint, Mrs. . . . ah . . ."

"Turchin. Mrs. Frances Turchin. My husband's name is Bernard W., 6310 East Howard Street, Staten Island. . . . Aren't you writing any of this down?"

"Not until you lodge a formal complaint, no, ma'am. The city doesn't like us to waste paper. Now

you say your husband has tried to kill you?"

"No. I said he *is* killing me. Right this minute while I'm talking to you he's killing me. Don't you understand?"

"No, ma'am," said Sergeant Bevelow. "I don't believe I do. Your husband has made an attempt on your life, is that right?"

"No, no, no," said Mrs. Turchin, kneading her purse. "He hasn't done anything but keep on saying that he's going to kill me, he's going to kill me, he's going to kill me. A hundred times a day for the last three weeks. In person, over the telephone, at home, in the car. Every chance he gets. Friday night we were at the movies and right in the best part he turns to me and says 'I'm going to kill you, Frances'. It ruined the whole picture for me."

"Has he ever made these threats in the company of other persons?" asked Sergeant Bevelow.

"Of course. I told you he says it every chance he gets. It doesn't matter if somebody is around or not. Two weeks ago, my sister was over for dinner and right in the middle when she's talking about her neighbor's cancer, he says 'Excuse me a minute, Velma,' and turns to me and says, 'I'm going to kill you, Frances' and then he laughs and tells my sister to go on with her story." Mrs. Turchin rubbed her fingers together nervously. "You don't believe me," she said, "you can call him up right now. He'll tell you himself. Ulster-9-2704. He'll tell you. He's very proud of it. He says it's the easiest way to kill a person anyone ever thought of. Call him, he'll tell you and then he'll laugh. Oh, that laugh! It's like a private joke that only he knows. If I hear that laugh again, I think I'll go out of my mind."

"You're certain that your husband is serious about this and he's not just making a joke?" said Sergeant Bevelow.

"If he says he's serious, he's serious. And with this he says he's serious. Go call him, you'll find out for yourself. Ulster-9-2704."

"Has he said how he plans to kill you, ma'am?"

"Of course. Certainly. He says probably I'll get run over by a car. If not, he says, I'll fall down some stairs and break my neck; we live on the third floor. Or if not that, then maybe I'll take too many sleeping pills. I take sleeping pills," she explained. "I don't know how many I've taken since he started with this crazy thing. Maybe too many already. And still I can't sleep. A couple of times, I doze off and he pokes me and wakes me up and says 'I'm going to kill you, Frances'. Then *he* goes back to sleep and I lie there all night worrying. *That's* how he's killing me."

"You mean you think he's worrying you to death?" Sergeant Bevelow said.

"That's it *exactly*," said Mrs. Turchin. "He's killing me with worry. So one of these days I'm going to be worrying so much I'm going to step in front of a car or fall down three flights of stairs or . . . oh, what's the use? It's just like he planned. The other night he said to me that he gives me a week more at the most. A week and by then, I'll be dead. And you know something?"

"What, ma'am?"

"I believe him. I b*elieve* him." Her fingers squeezed at her purse. "Even today on the way over here, I was worrying about it so much, I didn't see the bus I was waiting for. I was standing right out in the street. If some nice girl hadn't pulled me back, he would have killed me right then."

"Your husband," said Sergeant Bevelow.

"Of course, my husband," said Mrs. Turchin. "Who are we talking about?" She touched her hat which had been on straight, thus making it crooked. "Thank God I haven't got a heart condition or he would have finished me a long time ago. Even so, I'm jumping every time I hear a sound. And he says he gives me a week at the most. I'll be *lucky* if I live a week. So, what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know what we can do about it, ma'am. If you'd like to swear out a complaint against your husband, we can—"

"What kind of complaint? I told you he's killing me. Isn't that enough of a complaint? By the time I start with complaints and papers and subpoenas, I'll be dead already. I don't want to swear out any complaints. I want you to speak to him and tell him to stop killing me."

"I suppose I could do that if you'd like, ma'am. But first would you mind explaining *why* you think your husband is trying to kill you?"

"Because I won't divorce him," said Mrs. Turchin firmly. "That's all. Just because I won't divorce him. Is that a reason to kill a person?"

"I've known some who thought it was," said the sergeant.

"But he doesn't want to divorce *me*," said Mrs. Turchin. "Oh no. For that, he's too chivalrous. That, he says, would make him look bad in front of his family and his friends. *I've* got to do the divorcing myself or else he'll kill me. Well, he can kill first," she said decisively. "Because I'll never divorce him.

Imagine. At my age, where would I find another husband?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Sergeant Bevelow.

"So," said Mrs. Turchin. "Ulster-9-2704."

"Did your husband say why he wants you to divorce him, ma'am? I mean, perhaps this is something that should be settled by a marriage counsellor instead of the police."

"He says there are a thousand and one reasons. And all of them are crazy. You want me to give you some of his crazy reasons?"

"If you don't mind, ma'am."

"I don't mind. They're all crazy reasons, you'll see for yourself. Crazy reason number one: Because I don't cook well enough. We've been married twenty-three years and suddenly he decides I don't cook well enough, so either I divorce him or he's killing me. You're married, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Sergeant Bevelow.

"Is this your wife?" Mrs. Turchin asked of the framed picture on the sergeant's desk.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very sweet looking woman. Does she cook well?"

"About average I guess, ma'am."

"You see? Nobody's perfect. Crazy reason number two: Because I'm not as beautiful as I was when he married me. Is that a crazy reason or not? How long have you been married, if I may ask?"

"Fourteen years next May, ma'am."

"And is your wife as beautiful as when you married her? Be honest, not polite now."

"No. I don't guess you could say she is."

"So!" said Mrs. Turchin with a curt nod. "Crazy reason number three: Because he says he's got nothing else to talk to me about. We've been married twenty-three years and he says he's all talked out as far as I'm concerned and he doesn't care to listen to anything else I have to say either. How is *that* for a crazy reason? Don't you have times when you don't have anything to say to your wife?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And that's a reason for divorce or killing? Does he think I've got so much to say to *him?* I've been married as long as he has, you know. Then, crazy reason number four: Because I clutter up the bathroom with my things. So what woman doesn't clutter up the bathroom with her things? I've got cosmetics, cleansers, shampoo. I keep as much as I can on my dresser. What can I do with the rest? Put it in the closet? I need it every day. Where does your wife keep her cosmetics?"

"In the bathroom, ma'am."

"There you are," said Mrs. Turchin triumphantly. "Crazy reason number five—"

"Excuse me," said Sergeant Bevelow. "But I think I understand the situation now. If you'd like, I'll call your husband and have a talk with him."

"Oh, I'm so glad. Maybe you can talk some sense into him. Ulster-9-2704. Bernard W. Turchin. You want me to wait while you talk to him?"

"No, ma'am. I don't think that will be necessary. I'll just ask him to come down here at his first opportunity and we'll have a little chat then."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Turchin. "Thank you. I really don't know what I would have done . . . just today when I was coming over here I was standing in the street thinking about it and . . . oh, but I told you about that, didn't I?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You see? You see the way he's made me? A week at the most he says he gives me. I'll be lucky if I get home all right."

"Would you like me to have an officer drive you, ma'am?"

"No, no, don't bother. I'll be all right. Just talking to you has made me feel much better. If only he'll stop that killing me, killing me, killing me, every minute. . . . Well, thank you again. You've got the number now? It's Ulster-9-2704."

"Ulster-9-2704," said Sergeant Bevelow.

"That's right," said Mrs. Turchin "Well, thank you again."

"Quite all right, ma'am."

Sergeant Bevelow watched until the woman had walked through the door. Twice in that time he saw her straighten the small black hat which sat like a sparrow on the nest of her freshly blued hair. He seriously doubted if she felt much better for having spoken to him. She still looked as if she might distractedly step in front of a car or fall down a flight of stairs. Not today perhaps, but probably soon. Very possibly within the week.

Sergeant Bevelow looked at the report on his desk, tapping it thoughtfully with the eraser end of his pencil. Then he picked up the telephone receiver and dialed Ulster-9-2704.

"Mr. Bernard Turchin?" he said when a voice answered. . . . "This is Desk Sergeant Stanley Bevelow of the Fourth Precinct. I wonder if it would be possible for you to stop down here sometime today? . . . No it's nothing official," Sergeant Bevelow said and glancing over at the picture of his wife, "it's purely a *personal* matter. In fact I'd appreciate it if you could make it after I get off duty. . . . Oh, about six would be fine, fine. . . ."

It has been said that, when you sell a man a book, you sell him a whole new life. Logically then, it must be necessary to deprive him of the old one.

VENDETTA

WALDO RAINES saw the man from his vantage behind the short counter. He had a commanding view of the street through a plate glass window, and the man had halfway down the aisle before stopping again. His actions were quick now. Sure. He took down a thick volume and blocked Waldo's view with his body. Seconds later, the volume was back in its place on the shelf and the man was hesitated outside that window. Now, though, the man was coming through the front door and Waldo felt his heart flutter with recognition, felt the anticipation leap alive and pulse through his limbs, for the man was as incongruous to Waldo's small bookshop as a prostitute to a church pew.

The man paused for a few seconds just inside the door, tipped a black hat back on a head much too large for his body, and critically inventoried everything except Waldo from eyes that were like shiny marbles.

Waldo didn't move.

The man did.

He turned into an aisle of eight foot high bookshelves and went continuing down the aisle. He went around the bookstall and out the street door.

When Waldo removed the five thousand dollars in worn bills from the hollowed interior of the special volume he laughed softly. It was to be a good day. Any day Harrison James, juice man, underworld loan shark, laid out five thousand bills it was a good day.

"Father?"

Waldo stuffed the fold of bills into the coat pocket of a baggy tweed suit quickly and turned on his daughter.

Had she observed his movements?

She came to him, a tall, lean girl of twenty-three with a thick mass of black hair worn long, and a hint of sensuality in a protruding upper lip, a girl who looked like the unexpected would always startle, sometimes upset her a little.

"Father, the new shipment of books has arrived."

Waldo's smile spread as he promptly discarded the thought that she might have seen Harrison James' offering. "Can you handle it, my dear?"

"Certainly."

"I have to go out for an hour or so. Shouldn't be longer than that."

"All right."

Myra's incurious acceptance triggered a familiar warmth in him and he reached out and patted her shoulder as they turned down the aisle together. Father and daughter. Theirs was an unspoken bond, secret and deep, an esoteric friendship born on an unforgettable day sixteen years previous, the day he had become a widower and Myra had become the only woman in their house.

Waldo felt good when he left his shop that February afternoon and there was a smile on his savant face as he walked unhurriedly to the end of the block and cut into the parking lot. The day was clear, bright and brittle. He liked the cold. And he took a few seconds to draw the clean air deep into his lungs appreciatively before he

moved between two cars and stepped into the cleared center of the lot. The parked vehicles before him gleamed in the sunshine. Outwardly, he appeared at ease with the world, but this was a casualness that belied the pounding of the blood through his veins. For Waldo Raines, a small, unobtrusive sham of fifty-one years, was predatory by nature and now he could smell a kill.

The blue sedan was about a hundred feet away, and he could see through the rear window as he moved with almost delicate steps across the macadam surface. Sitting behind the steering wheel, Harrison James lifted a half-smoked cigarette to his mouth jerkily and coughed when Waldo opened the door and plopped into the front seat beside him.

Their exchange of pleasantries was an exchange of names and then Waldo asked bluntly, "Who?"

Harrison James flicked the end of a hawk nose with a forefinger. "Sonny Blue."

Waldo's smile became fixed. Harrison James' appearance had always made him think of a galliwasp. And now he was sure of something else. The man had the mind of a lizard, too.

Waldo removed the five thousand dollars from his pocket and extended it.

"What's the matter?" Harrison James asked quarrelsomely.

"Do you have to ask?"

"Tobiah? You afraid of him?"

"Are you?"

"It ain't Tobiah. It's Sonny Blue."

"There's a difference?"

The two men measured each other with their eyes for several seconds before Harrison James suddenly banged a fist against the steering wheel. "All right, Waldo," he rasped. "How much?"

"Double," Waldo said without hesitation. "Ten thousand."

"It's at six o'clock this afternoon, man! All set up! I can't get another five before . . ."

Waldo's movement to leave the sedan stopped the words. "Okay, okay," Harrison James said vehemently. "I'll see what I can do."

"Where?" Waldo asked with a confident smile spreading across his face.

Harrison James rattled off an address and Waldo got out of the sedan. He was laughing quietly. There wasn't any doubt in his mind. Harrison James would dig up another five thousand dollars in time.

He did.

Thursday afternoon went slowly for Waldo. His hands were busy with the new shipment of books but his thoughts were far from the automatic indexing and he didn't even pay any particular attention when Harrison James came into the shop again and took down the special volume.

Waldo removed the additional five thousand dollars from the book absently.

Sonny Blue. Tobiah. You could hear stories about those two if you wanted to listen. And he had listened. Tobiah Andresco: underworld kingpin, the city's biggest live mobster. Sonny Blue: young, maybe Myra's age. Tobiah's son? There was speculation, even though all of the records compiled on Tobiah Andresco failed to include a marriage or a blood beneficiary. You could guess, of course; somewhere along the line Tobiah had sired an offspring. Sure. Guess. It was your prerogative. But what did you *know?* Only that Tobiah Andresco and Sonny Blue were as close as any father-son relationship in existence might remotely hope to be.

"Aren't you going to rest, father?"

Myra's words chased the thoughts from Waldo's mind and brought a gentle smile to his face. "Is it that time already, my dear?"

"Four-thirty."

"All right. Yes, I think I will take a few winks. Are you going out this evening? With Johnny?"

"Not until nine."

"I like Johnny."

His daughter's grin was genuinely warm. "So do I, father."

Waldo nodded his approval of Johnny Simcox as he retired to the small office, his private sanctuary, at the rear of the bookshop. Johnny Simcox had a sense of direction, a sense of value. He would be a good husband to Myra. And she, of course, would be a good wife to him.

Waldo closed the office door behind him and locked it.

Seconds later, he was a flurry of calculated and methodical motion. He took one of the records from a secreted slot under the ancient oak desk and put it on the player. The records were his prizes; they had required hours to make. Music filled the office. In moments there would be the sound of himself singing off key, then humming, then whistling, then the music recorded from a myriad of radio programs again. It would continue for three hours if necessary. Today it would not be necessary. He would complete his task in just slightly over two hours.

Lifting the tilted head rest of the worn leather couch against the far wall, he removed the self-designed copy of the Holy Bible, put on his coat and hat and stepped out the

back door of the office into the alley.

Fifteen minutes later, the Bible locked securely under his arm, he was on the subway and going across town.

He arrived at the swanky East Side address Harrison James had given him at exactly three minutes to six. Entering the lobby of the apartment building, he rode a whispering self-service elevator up to the fourth floor and found the door he wanted. The corridor was empty. He placed a thumb against the door bell. Sweat prickled his body. His teeth came down on his lower lip. His palms were wet. But he felt incredibly alive as he adjusted the Bible in his hands. He pointed the carved-out open end of the book toward the door. His finger went into the slot on the bottom cover.

The door opened. And for just an instant an intense young man of medium construction, and nattily attired in a soft gray suit, appeared in the opening.

Then Waldo squeezed the trigger of the silenced .38 inside the Holy Bible.

Pffft.

Sonny Blue jerked up on his toes and seemed to hang in the door opening, his face caught in incredible surprise. Blood gushed from his heart through the hole in his chest, spattering the wall.

It was twenty minutes before seven o'clock in the evening when Waldo stepped through the alley door and into his office again. The record was playing. He heard himself humming a catchy little tune and he smiled. There was plenty of time, another full forty-five minutes of playing time if he had needed it.

He sat at his desk, cleaned the .38, and returned the Holy Bible to its slot under the head rest of the couch. Then he went to a tiny sink and washed his hands and face thoroughly. Finally he removed the record, secreted it, and walked into the bookshop.

The paunchy uniformed policeman at the bookshelf to his right produced an instant of anxiety before he realized that Bert Parker, beat patrolman, was only browsing.

Waldo had a pleasant smile for the patrolman and for Myra as she came to him. Myra's eyes glistened with fondness. "Have a good rest, father?"

"Excellent."

"Beats all how some people get away with things these days," Bert Parker said from the bookshelf.

"That right?" Waldo asked, disguising the animalistic caution that was suddenly a bright flame inside him, bright but concealed.

"Yeah," Bert Parker said. "I'd like to see me sneak in some sack time while I'm on the job!"

His grin was wide.

Friday morning sparkled in its own crisp brilliance and there was a bouncy spring in Waldo's step. He arrived at the bookshop at exactly ten o'clock, the same hour he had arrived every morning for the past twenty-four years. Taking the key from his pocket, he paused to smile benignly on the street and then he inserted the key in the door lock.

The wave of apprehension didn't strike him until he was inside the shop and he heard himself whistling the gay tune. He became rooted, tight as a tympani, his eyes fixed on the closed door of his small office. The whistling sound came from behind that door.

Had he forgotten to put away the record the previous afternoon?

No!

He turned back to the street door soundlessly.

"Waldo?"

Panic swept through him like a blizzard wind.

"Are you leaving, Waldo? I wanted to see you."

The voice was quiescent but the words knifed into him. He felt like someone was repeatedly puncturing his body with a poniard, yet he was drawn around by an invisible force until he was looking on the mountainous man filling the open doorway of his office. Behind the man, the music from the record was louder.

Tobiah Andresco was expensively immaculate, the image of a man who had just stepped from a fashion advertisement. He probably was around sixty, but he looked an indolent forty. He stood there smiling carefully and looking very much at ease. Yet Waldo knew him for what he was, a megalomaniac with a mind as keen as a saber's edge. And there was fear in Waldo now, a deep-seated fear that filled him with trepidation.

How had Tobiah entered the shop? It wasn't important, really. The important thing was how did Tobiah know? The corridor had been empty. No one had seen Sonny Blue open the apartment door. No one had seen the look of incredulous surprise that had spread across his face as the bullet went into his heart. So how did Tobiah know . . .

"Coming in, Waldo?"

Tobiah Andresco stepped back out of the doorway and waited with the same patience of his constant companion, the large black labrador at his side.

Waldo was confused and badly shaken. His thoughts were jum-

bled. He didn't remember going into the office, moving past the man who smelled subtly of pomade, but suddenly he was there, sitting rigidly on the edge of the worn couch while Tobiah seated himself behind the scarred oak desk and dropped his hand almost carelessly, it seemed, to the head of the black laborador.

"You shouldn't have, Waldo," he said reproachfully. "You shouldn't have hit Sonny. You know what the boy meant to me."

"Sonny? Hit?" Waldo attempted to make the words come out garnished with surprise, but his voice broke and he knew the attempt was sour. "Not me, Tobiah. You know I wouldn't—"

"There isn't another hit man in town who has the guts, friend. And it had your trademark. The quick kill. Open a door. Boom."

"I—I hadn't heard . . ."

"Don't lie to me, Waldo."

"So help me, I never . . . Hey, you wanna ask a beat cop? Bert Parker, the beat cop, or there's my daughter, Myra. Myra will be here soon. They know, Tobiah . . . they know I was never outside my shop all day—"

"*How* do they know, Waldo? This?"

He smiled down on the record coldly. And Waldo knew fresh panic. His heart was beating so hard he thought it might jump out of his chest. Or maybe he was going to have a coronary. Things like that happened. You could read about it any day in a newspaper. People got excited, the heart couldn't take the pace and . . .

"The record is clever, Waldo. Very clever. I've been playing this one since eight-thirty this morning. That's almost two hours now. And there's more to come. Make it three hours total. Very good. Plenty of time for a man to go to almost any point in the city and return."

"Look, Tobiah, so help me—"

"You know what I want, Waldo?"

Does a traitor standing blindfolded before a firing squad know what's coming next?

"Revenge," Tobiah said flatly. "A favor. A hit."

"A . . . hit?"

Harrison James? Waldo thought quickly. Eye for an eye?

"I set it up. You're the executioner. No questions. No cash. No quibbling. No—"

"Sure, Tobiah! Anything!"

"Now you're getting off the dime, friend. I like that much better."

Waldo began to rally. "For you, Tobiah, a favor. You name it. Harrison James. Anyone. But it doesn't mean I hit your boy. I want you to understand that. I want you to —"

"I understand just one thing, Waldo. You be available."

By the fifth day after Tobiah Andresco's visit to his shop, Waldo was his old self again. Composed and alert. Safe and secure. No longer afraid. And he liked himself much better that way. There was peace of mind and a feeling of being on top of things once again.

He whistled a soft, tuneless sound as he moved around the bookshop.

The phone rang at five o'clock in the afternoon.

Tobiah said, "Tonight, Waldo. Eight-thirty." He gave an address.

"Check," Waldo said perfunctorily.

But the hour couldn't come fast enough, and he was restless with an inner excitement biting at him. At seven-thirty, Myra kissed his cheek and smiled down on him. "Johnny's waiting."

"Johnny is always waiting, isn't he?" Waldo said approvingly.

"Every night," Myra grinned.

Waldo watched her leave the flat over the bookshop. He gave her twenty minutes to meet Johnny Simcox and get out of the neighborhood. Then he took the Holy Bible from the couch in his office and headed for the address Tobiah had given him.

Soon his debt to the underworld kingpin would be paid.

The turn-of-the-century apartment building loomed large and lumpy in the black night. There seemed to be a light in every window. Waldo took in those lights speculatively for a few moments before turning inside. Flipping the collar of his coat down, he climbed the worn steps to the second floor. The door he wanted was across the corridor at the top of the steps. Behind that door, he would find Harrison James. It wasn't important how Tobiah had lured the loan shark to this death trap.

Waldo inventoried the lighted corridor. It was empty. He rapped vigorously on the door and lifted the Bible. He would make this one double fast and get out.

The door opened partially, but the person inside remained in shadow.

He triggered the silenced .38.

Pfft.

The girl screamed and fell back into the apartment.

And Waldo let out an ear-splitting, treble howl.

Tobiah Andresco had his vendetta.

For dead at Waldo's feet, the hole in her angular face oozing blood, was his daughter, Myra. Across the room, Johnny Simcox stared at him with horror in his eyes.

When a devastating blizzard is approaching, highways are safe for neither man nor beast. Unfortunately for all parties concerned, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them.

WE HAD no feeling of apprehension, David and I, as we slowed to pick up the hitchhiker on that lonely North Dakota road. Even if we had had a presentiment of evil we would have stopped for him just the same, for the last weather report from our radio, before it ceased to function, was ominous. A severe blizzard moving east from the Rockies had hit the western part of the state and was headed, although deliberately at the moment, our way. Anybody caught on foot on that barren prairie would have no chance whatever of survival.

The boy climbed in and demanded, "Where you going?"

"Winnipeg," David answered.

He sat back, offering no comment as to whether that was satisfactory to him.

David waited expectantly for a moment, then asked, "And you?"

There was a slight pause. "Winnipeg." And silence was resumed.

I turned a little in the seat to look at him. He was crushed back into the corner behind David, blue and cold, his hands tucked into the sleeves of his tight-fitting leather jacket in order to hug in what warmth he had left in him. Random snowflakes clung to his too sleek, too artfully cut hair. He was slight in build, his small-boned face marked by a long, stubborn jaw line and small, restless, light blue eyes. It was an unwholesome face, and set in a look of exhaustion past bearing.

"Was that your car we passed in the ditch ten miles back?" I asked him.

He shot me a surprisingly vicious look that told me it was none of my business, and then gave a grunt which I took to be affirmative.

David asked incredulously, "Are you going to leave it there while you go to Winnipeg?"

"Sure!" the boy exclaimed angrily. "It's got a broken axle."

We were silent then. I was fairly sure that the car did not have a broken axle. On spotting it in the ditch David had stopped to see whether someone needed help. And when he found no one there, had looked over the car to ascertain whether there had been an accident. The key was hanging from the ignition, and he had turned it and stepped on the starter. The motor did not respond. And the gas gauge registered empty.

I was about to ask the boy whether he knew that he had forgotten to take his key, in fact had got as far as "Did—" when David spoke quickly, interrupting me. "There's a blanket on the ledge behind you. You might put it over your knees."

I was puzzled that David had stopped me from saying what it must have been obvious I was about to say. I looked at him in surprise, but nothing seemed to be amiss. Except—yes, there was a slight movement in his jaw muscle that told me that he was biting hard on his back teeth—a sure sign of annoyance, or of anger.

We rode along silently, and made no effort to pursue what would doubtless prove to be an unprofit-

able conversation with our guest. And presently, on hearing a subdued snort, I looked back and saw that he had fallen into a sleep of fatigue, his mouth hanging open, his chin rolling on his chest.

There was nothing to see but the desolate, endless plains, a very occasional bleak farmhouse, and the brooding sky. The snow did not appear to be coming any faster, and it looked as though we would get through to Winnipeg before the storm caught us.

No one was on the road but ourselves.

Though it was only four o'clock in the afternoon, the leaden sky closed in a little more, and David turned on the headlights. The sudden beam revealed a railroad crossarm, quite near, and David braked a little, looked right and left, and picked up again. But the crossing was in disrepair, and we banged and bucked across the tracks with a considerable jolt.

The young man lurched out of his sleep shouting, "What's the matter with you! Can't you drive? I'd kill a man for less than that."

Without turning my head I felt David stiffen, and my own pulse began to pound. When you've been married for a number of years, things need less and less to be put into words; I centered in to what was, and probably had been for quite some time, in his mind.

The morning paper, delivered with our coffee at the hotel, had carried screaming headlines about the particularly brutal murder of a service station attendant. The garage boy had identified the single gunman from pictures, so that the police knew who it was they were looking for. The man had fled in a stolen car, with a considerable amount of stolen money, and had not, so far, been apprehended. The article had ended, "The bandit is about twenty-two, has light hair, blue eyes, and is dressed in grey trousers and a black leather jacket."

I said to myself in dismay, "But that was in *South* Dakota. We're in North Dakota." With a chill on my spine I realized that we too had been in South Dakota in the morning. Moreover the car in the ditch had carried a South Dakota license plate. Anybody in a car could have covered the distance with ease.

"Sorry," David said easily, even though a little late. And then, "But that sounds a rather severe penalty for giving a boy a jolt."

The young man said nothing, and subsided into resentful silence. After a while his head drooped, and he was asleep again.

I looked back three times to be sure his sleep was real before I turned to David, put my hand on his knee, and gave him a look of inquiry. He leaned over to look at the young man in the rear-view mirror, then pursed his lips in gesture of "Sh!", nodded his head and squeezed my hand.

That was all I wanted to know. He was aware of everything and he had a plan.

I sat back and sighed. The poor young man! He didn't know what he was in for. Though David is a round-faced, mild-appearing middle-aged man, a little too soft and too corpulent to have muscles to match those the youth could display, and though his hair is greying and his eyes are gentle, and though he may look altogether like a benevolent school-master, he has other and sterner qualities which are not so readily apparent.

As we drove along in silence I tried to turn my diamond ring under my glove, so that the stone would not make a bulge. It was impossible.

Then I began to notice that every time we passed one of the infrequent, isolated farmhouses, David slowed the car almost imperceptibly and looked toward it thoughtfully. After each scrutiny he gradually picked up speed again.

When it was almost too dark to see, another farmhouse loomed out of the dusk on our left and David slowed, observed it critically, and turned quickly to enter the yard.

The wary young man woke immediately, lurched forward, and leaned between us over the back of our seat. "What's the idea? Why you stopping?"

David halted the car a little away from the house, turned off the motor, and swung 'round to face him.

"Boy," he said, "it strikes me you are a bit jumpy. I don't know whether your car has a radio, or whether you listened to it, but there is a blizzard brewing west of here. If it is coming fast, we take shelter; if not, we go on to Winnipeg. I'm going in here to find out what the weather reports are." He opened the door and stepped out.

The boy still sat forward, suspicious, poised lightly for instant motion. He blurted, "You got a radio. Whyn't you listen to that?"

With a gesture of exasperated severity David leaned in and turned on the radio knob. We waited for a moment, the boy listening intently. Nothing happened.

"Does that make it clear?" David asked sharply.

"Yeah." And a look of cunning satisfaction came into his eyes. I suppose he thought that if we didn't know about the weather, we were ignorant of other news as well.

"And if you don't like the way

I conduct things," David was going on, "you can step out of my car and be on your way."

He didn't move.

I watched David as he went to the door and knocked, his hat in his hand. A matronly farm wife appeared. The young man put down his window in order to hear.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but our car radio doesn't work. Do you have a report on the state of the blizzard? We're hoping to get to Winnipeg."

Since the changing weather is a matter of life and death in a North Dakota winter, the woman did what anybody there would do. She unhooked the storm door and swung it open, invited David in, and said she would turn on the radio to get the last report.

My heart beat wildly at the thought that David would leave me in the car alone with this creature. Then my glance dropped to the ignition, and I saw that there was no key. I would not permit myself to turn toward the young man, but I had a prickly sensation at the back of my neck that made me suspect that his hard little blue eyes were focused on the same spot. Not a word passed between the two of us until David emerged, thanking the farmer's wife.

When he was at the bottom of the porch steps she called after him, "Have you had your dinner yet? There won't be anything fit to eat between here and Winnipeg."

David hesitated. "Well, no, we haven't. But if we roll right along we'll be in Winnipeg before too late."

The woman shook her head. "Nine o'clock, if the storm doesn't veer suddenly and catch you. In this country we never go anywhere in blizzard weather without a full gas tank and a full stomach. Bring your family in, and I'll give you a ham sandwich and a glass of milk to tide you over." She looked toward the car and beckoned, smiling. "Come in," she called. "The storm is not moving fast. I'll make you some coffee."

David turned to me questioningly.

I remembered that we had been looking, admittedly with a minimum of expectancy, for a place to get a snack at the time we picked up our passenger. I knew that David was hungry.

I called back, "Thank you," and opened my door.

"Come along," I said to the boy. "A little food will do us all good."

He hesitated, obviously tortured between suspicion and a gnawing stomach.

"Come on," I repeated. "And put your window up to keep the car warm while we're inside."

He sat for a moment more. Then he put up the window and came.

As we were almost at the steps the farmer himself came around the corner of the house. He was a heavy man, grey-haired and past middle age. He wore a parka, high, thick boots, and a fur cap with the ear flaps turned down.

"Lars," his wife said, still holding open the screen door, "these people are going on to Winnipeg, and I've invited them in for a sandwich."

The farmer stepped forward, slipped off his right glove and stretched out his hand. "Hansen," he said heartily. "We're pleased to have you." Then to his wife, "Go along, Clara, and start the coffee. I'll take care of them." She went.

"We're the O'Neills," David said. "You're more than kind."

"We get to talk to so few strangers in these parts, it's a pleasure. They go by at seventy miles an hour and all we see of them is their tail lights. I've finished feeding the cows and my chores are done, so I can enjoy you. Come in, come in."

As we went up the steps Mr. Hansen put his arm over the boy's shoulder. "Well, young O'Neill," he said, "I've got two sons about your age."

David and I were walking just behind them, and I put out my hand, about to correct Mr. Hansen, but David quickly took my arm and shook his head.

Mr. Hansen was going on cordially, "One son's in the air force and the other's in college. Fine boys, but neither one of them is going to make a farmer. You're not planning to be a farmer yourself, are you?"

"No."

"No, I suppose not."

Mr. Hansen ushered us in, asked the boy and me to be seated and said, "There's some magazines on that table if you want them.

The boy silently took a proffered magazine and sat with it unopened on his knee.

"And now, Mr. O'Neill," Mr. Hansen went on, "you please come over here. You're a city man, and I want to get your opinion on all this extra wheat we're growing in North Dakota. And then I want to tell you how honest and independent farmers feel about what's happening to us." And he seated David in one of two facing overstuffed chairs placed very close to the big front window, and eased himself into the other.

The boy was restless and wary. He got up and moved about the room, noticing everything, and then sat down on the edge of a chair near the front door.

My chair was close to the hall

door, opposite the men, and I listened to their conversation while I kept the boy in the corner of my eye.

After fifteen minutes or so the boy began to fidget. He got up, rotated a world globe on the table, looked at the two men who were absorbed in conversation, went back to his chair and sat again. I too thought that the woman was taking a great deal of time.

When the conversation paused for a moment I said to Mr. Hansen, "Perhaps I could help Mrs. Hansen in the kitchen?"

"Yes, yes," he boomed, looking up. "She'd be glad to have you. Through the door behind you. You'll see the kitchen on the right."

So I rose and went into the small hall, and from there into the kitchen. I realized that everything could be heard between the two rooms, but nothing at all could be seen.

"This is nice of you," Mrs. Hansen said. "I'll put you right to work. Would you slice a little more ham? This is the best knife."

But she handed me no knife, and the sandwiches were already prepared, stacked on a huge platter on the sink. Milk was in the glasses, coffee was percolating on the electric stove, and Mrs. Hansen was taking dishes out of the cupboard and putting them back again with a clatter.

"When you've finished with that maybe you'd get cream for the coffee out of the refrigerator. I'm nearly ready."

She was shaking her head at me while she talked, pointing a dabbing forefinger into the living room and then at the telephone that was hanging on the kitchen wall.

Ah! So David had called the police.

I nodded, understanding, and helped her make kitchen noises, and asked her where they got vegetables and fruits in the long winters when the ground was frozen.

Then presently Mr. Hansen's big voice was made bigger to reach the kitchen. "What's taking you so long out there, Clara? This boy's famished." And in a slightly lower tone, "Calm down, son. It'll be along."

"Coming," Mrs. Hansen called. "It's ready." She threw out her hands. Nothing for it but to take it in.

We put the glasses on a tray and I went in with them. Mrs. Hansen followed with the sandwiches and a stack of small plates. The men accepted their food, and with only a pause for a "Thank you" went on with their conversation. Mrs. Hansen and I sat near the kitchen door, tried to include the boy in our talk, but with no success. He gulped four sandwiches before we had done with our first.

Suddenly he said, "Let's go." It was an explosive, violent sound, and we all looked at him, startled.

"Oh my, no," Mrs. Hansen said pleasantly, and she put her half-eaten sandwich on her plate, got up and started toward the kitchen. "I've got fresh coffee for you."

I went to help her, and we took as long with that as we dared.

When we returned to the living room the draperies had been drawn shut. Mrs. Hansen said in surprise, "Lars, why did you pull the curtains?"

Her husband looked at them, and back at her. "I didn't shut them, Clara. I didn't notice they were shut." And he got up and pulled the cord and opened them again.

He said, half apologetically, "You've no idea how lonesome it is out here. My wife likes to see the lights of the cars go by in the evenings. Even if people never stop, she knows they are there."

With the agility of a cat the boy sprang to the window and gave the cord a violent yank. "I shut the curtains," he said nastily, "and I want them shut." He sauntered back, sat once more, and picked up his coffee.

Mr. Hansen, unbelieving, gaped at the boy. "All right, boy," he said evenly. "We aim to make our guests happy." Then he turned to let his eyes ask for some explanation from David.

David examined his hands and tried to extend the time a little more. "What was I saying? Oh, yes — How often do you get into Winnipeg, Mr. Hansen?"

I noticed that the curtains were still swaying from the violence of their motion, and that the hem of one of them had adhered to the coarse frieze of the upholstery of David's chair, leaving a small triangle of window exposed.

"Winnipeg?" Mr. Hansen repeated vaguely. "Not often."

Then abruptly the vagueness was gone, and he looked appraisingly at David. "By the way, Mr. O'Neill, I haven't asked you what your profession is?" There was an edge of coldness, even of suspicion in his voice.

David hesitated, and I held my breath. To reply just now would do none of us any good.

"Come along," Mr. Hansen insisted, and hostility was only barely below the surface. "What do you two fine city fellows do for a living?"

"Why, Mr. Hansen—"

But he didn't have to say it, for the boy was on his feet.

"Let's go," he said in a hard voice. "Now."

Thinking it might lull the boy's suspicions if one of us seemed to be on his side I said, "It *is* getting late, David. Don't you think we had better be on our way?"

But as I looked at him I saw through the gap in the curtains a car's headlights turn into the driveway and then blink off. David was looking at me, and must have seen my eyes widen and have noted the direction of their gaze. He glanced down, and then cautiously sideways, directly at the gap in the curtain.

"David!"

He looked up quickly. The boy was standing before him, a steady gun in his hand.

"What is this!" Mr. Hansen shouted, and started to get to his feet.

"Sit down, pop," the boy said, and moved the gun.

"Yes, Hansen, sit down," David repeated mildly. And as Mr. Hansen did so the gun moved smoothly until it was a scant foot from David's face again.

"Give me your car keys," the boy said tightly, his lips pulled hard and straight.

And quietly David said, "All right. But you would have been safer entering Canada with us."

"I know that. But I'm not about to wait for you." For a second he looked startled at what David had said and what he himself had answered, and then a look of murderous hatred crossed his face. "O. K., smart guy, just give me the keys—or else." I thought how easy the "or else" would be, except that we were four and he was one.

David leaned over toward the window, his right arm on the arm of the chair, and reached with his left hand into his pants pocket. As he brought out the car keys he swung his window-side elbow over the top of the chair, and took the curtain with it.

That was all they needed out there. The shot spun the gun from the boy's hand and sent it into a far corner. There was one noisy, frightening moment of shattering glass. Then as the boy started after the gun, David thrust out his leg and tripped him, and in a split second was on top of him.

I am absolutely sure that Mr. Hansen had not quite made up his mind who it was that should be subdued, for he waited for a distinct moment before he moved. Then he joined the heap on the floor, and threw his body across the thrashing legs of the boy.

He was a very tough young man.

But nobody had the gun! I slid swiftly from my chair.

"I'll get it," said a quiet voice, and a huge man in highway patrol uniform came through the hall door behind me, crossed over to the gun and picked it up.

Mrs. Hansen, at the same moment, went to the front door and opened it, and a second patrol officer came in, his gun still in his hand. "Evening, Mrs. Hansen," he said.

They handcuffed the boy as David and Mr. Hansen got to their feet.

"Is it the guy we thought it was?" asked the officer who had come through the back door.

"Yes, it is," said the other. Then he turned to David.

"You're O'Neill, the one that called?"

"Yes."

"Was it you pulled the curtain back?"

"That's right."

"Good. That did it. Up to then, all I could see was a bunch of legs and the face of the lady across the room."

Mr. Hansen had not so much as nodded to the officers. His eyes were glued in loathing on the young man's face. "Who is this person?" he demanded.

"A murderer, Mr. Hansen," one of the officers said. "Wanted in South Dakota.

"*That* murder?" Mr. Hansen slowly turned to face the officer.

"Yes."

Then he transferred his gaze to David. "He never was your son?"

"I'm sorry. I really didn't have a chance to explain."

Mr. Hansen rejected this with an angry pass of his hand.

Mrs. Hansen said, "You were in the barn, Lars. We had to call the police quickly."

His brows shot up in incredulity.

"*You* knew?" he demanded. "This was *your* idea?"

"Yes, it was. Mr. O'Neill wanted to drive on and let the police overtake them. But that way there would certainly have been shooting."

Mr. Hansen almost shouted, "I suppose there wasn't any shooting here! Why didn't you let me handle this, Clara?"

She shook her head. "No. This way was better."

Mr. Hansen said, "By the way, O'Neill, what *is* your profession?"

David looked up wearily. "Me? I'm a judge, Hansen, a judge in juvenile court!"

One of the troopers said, "Let's go." They both nodded to us, and led the boy out. He continued to struggle hopelessly.

David sank into a chair, his hands over his face, and from behind his hands his voice came out muffled, clouded.

"I chose your house because it wasn't until we got here that I was sure I could tell the difference between the telephone wires and the electric service wires leading in from the poles on the road. I was positive that you had a telephone. How can I ever apologize for bringing such a thing into your home? You've been put out—terrified—endangered. You've got a broken window and there's a blizzard coming. And a hole in the wall where the bullet hit."

Mr. Hansen put a weathered hand on David's shoulder. He said softly, "Don't apologize. I can nail a canvas over the window for tonight. It's like this, Mr. O'Neill. Clara and I, we're human too."

Dear Fans:

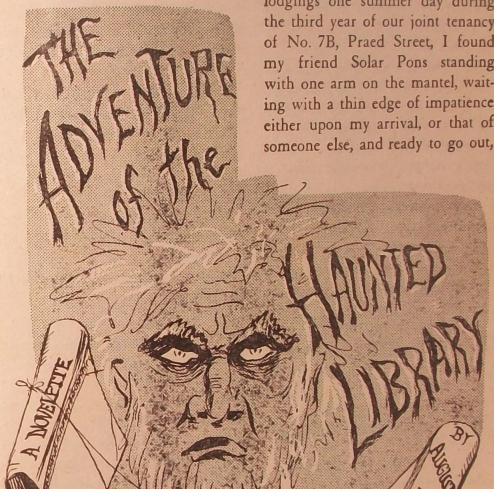
My desk is so weighed down with mail, requesting information about the Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club, I hope you won't mind if I reply in an open letter. Here are the particulars:

Membership dues are fifty cents which covers mailing costs and handling. (Please send coins or money orders, no stamps.) For this you will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, which will be issued four times a year. You can't imagine how rewarding it is to hear from so many loyal readers, and active, and incoming Fan Club members. I want to thank all of you for your enthusiastic interest.

Most sincerely,
Pat Hitchcock
Sherman Oaks, California

P. O. Box 5425

In this tale of the supernatural, Solar Pons may follow the shadows of imagination, or he may find substance in the clues of logical deduction.



WHEN I opened the door of our lodgings one summer day during the third year of our joint tenancy of No. 7B, Praed Street, I found my friend Solar Pons standing with one arm on the mantel, waiting with a thin edge of impatience either upon my arrival, or that of someone else, and ready to go out,

for his deerstalker lay close by.

"You're just in time, Parker," he said, "—if the inclination moves you—to join me in another of my little inquiries. This time, evidently into the supernatural."

"The supernatural!" I exclaimed, depositing my bag.

"So it would seem." He pointed to a letter thrown carelessly upon the table.

I picked it up and was immediately aware of the fine quality of the paper and the embossed name: Mrs. Margaret Ashcroft. Her communication was brief.

"Dear Mr. Pons,

I should be extremely obliged if you could see your way clear to call upon me some time later today or tomorrow, at your convenience, to investigate a troublesome matter which hardly seems to be within the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Police. I do believe the library is haunted. Mr. Carnacki says it is not, but I can hardly doubt the evidence of my own senses."

Her signature was followed by a Sydenham address.

"I've sent for a cab," said Pons.

"Who is Mr. Carnacki?" I asked.

"A self-styled psychic investigator. He lives in Chelsea, and has had some considerable success, I am told."

"A charlatan!"

"If he were, he would hardly have turned down our client. What do you make of it, Parker? You know my methods."

I studied the letter which I still held, while Pons waited to hear how much I had learned from his spontaneous and frequent lectures in ratiocination. "If the quality of the paper is any indication, the lady is not without means," I said.

"Capital!"

"Unless she is an heiress, she is probably of middle age or over."

"Go on," urged Pons, smiling.

"She is upset because, though she begins well, she rapidly becomes very unclear."

"And provocative," said Pons. "Who could resist a ghost in a library, eh?"

"But what do you make of it?" I pressed him.

"Well, much the same as you," he said generously. "But I rather think the lady is not a young heiress. She would hardly be living in Sydenham, if she were. No, I think we shall find that she recently acquired a house there and has not been in residence very long. Something is wrong with the library."

"Pons, you don't seriously think it's haunted?"

"Do you believe in ghosts, Parker?"

"Certainly not!"

"Do I detect the slightest hesitation in your answer?" He chuckled. "Ought we not to say, rather, we believe there are certain phenomena which science as yet has not correctly explained or interpreted?" He raised his head suddenly, listening. "I believe that is our cab drawing to the curb."

A moment later, the sound of a horn from below verified Pons' deduction.

Pons clapped his deerstalker to his head and we were off.

Our client's house was built of brick, two and a half storeys in height, with dormers on the gable floor. It was large and spreading, and built on a knoll, partly into the slope of the earth, though it seemed at first glance to crown the rise there. It was plainly of late Victorian construction, and, while it was not shabby, it just escaped looking quite genteel. Adjacent houses were not quite far enough away from it to give the lawn and garden the kind of spaciousness required to set the house off to its best advantage in a neighborhood which was slowly declining from its former status.

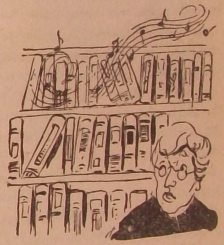
Our client received us in the library. Mrs. Ashcroft was a slender, diminutive woman with flashing blue eyes and whitening hair. She wore an air of fixed determination which her smile at sight of Pons did not diminish.

"Mr. Pons, I was confident that you would come," she greeted us.

She acknowledged Pons' introduction of me courteously, and went on, "This is the haunted room."

"Let us just hear your account of what has happened from the beginning, Mrs. Ashcroft," suggested Pons.

"Very well." She sat for a moment trying to decide where to begin her narrative. "I suppose, Mr. Pons, it began about a month ago. Mrs. Jenkins, a housekeeper I had hired, was cleaning late in the library when she heard someone singing. It seemed to come, she said, 'from the books'. Something



about a 'dead man'. It faded away. Two nights later she woke after a dream and went downstairs to get a sedative from the medicine cabinet. She heard something in the library. She thought perhaps I was indisposed, and went to the library. But

the library, of course, was dark. However, there was a shaft of moonlight in the room—it was bright outside, and therefore a kind of illumination was in the library, too—and in that shaft, Mr. Pons, Mrs. Jenkins believed she saw the bearded face of an old man that seemed to glare fiercely at her. It was only for a moment. Then Mrs. Jenkins found the switch and turned up the light. Of course, there was no one in the library but herself. It was enough for her; she was so sure that she had seen a ghost, that next morning, after all the windows and doors were found locked and bolted, she gave notice. I was not entirely sorry to see them go—her husband worked as caretaker of the grounds—because I suspected Jenkins of taking food from the cellars and the refrigerator for their married daughter. That is not an uncommon problem with servants in England, I am told."

"I should have thought you a native, Mrs. Ashcroft," said Pons. "You've been in the Colonies?"

"Kenya, yes. But I was born here. It was for reasons of sentiment that I took this house. I should have taken a better location. But I was little more than a street waif in Sydenham as a child, and somehow the houses here represented the epitome of splendor. When the agent notified me that this one was to be let, I couldn't resist taking it. But the tables turned—the houses have come down in the world and I have come up, and there are so many things I miss—the hawkers and the carts, for which cars are no substitute, the rumble of the underground since the Nunhead-Crystal Palace Line has been discontinued, and all in all, I fear my sentiments have led me to make an ill-advised choice. The ghost, of course, is only the crowning touch."

"You believe in him then, Mrs. Ashcroft?"

"I've seen him, Mr. Pons." She spoke as matter-of-factly as if she were speaking of some casual natural phenomenon. "It was a week ago. I wasn't entirely satisfied that Mrs. Jenkins had not seen something. It could have been an hallucination. If she had started awake from a dream and fancied she saw something in their room why, yes, I could easily have believed it a transitory hallucination, which might occur commonly enough after a dream. But Mrs. Jenkins had been awake enough to walk downstairs, take a sedative, and start back up when she heard something in the library. So the dream had had time enough in which to wear off. I am myself not easily frightened. My late husband and I lived in border country in Kenya, and some of the Kikuyu are unfriendly.

"Mr. Pons, I examined the library carefully. As you see, shelving covers most of the walls. I had very few personal books to add—the rest were here. I bought the house fully furnished, as the former owner had died and there were no near heirs. That is, there was a brother, I understand, but he was in Rhodesia, and had no intention of returning to England. He put the house up for sale, and my agents, Messrs. Harwell and Chamberlin, in Lordship Lane, secured it for me. The books are therefore the property of the former owner, a Mr. Howard Brensham, who appears to have been very widely read, for there are collections ranging from early British poetry to crime and detective fiction. But that is hardly pertinent. My own books occupy scarcely two shelves over there—all but a few are jacketed, as you see, Mr. Pons. Well, my examination of the library indicated that the position of these books as I had placed them had been altered. It seemed to me that they had been handled, perhaps even read. They are not of any great consequence—recent novels, some work by M. Proust and M. Mauriac in French editions, an account of Kenya, and the like. It was possible that one of the servants had become interested in them; I did not inquire. Nevertheless, I became very sensitive and alert about the library. One night last week—Thursday, I believe—while I lay reading, late, in my room, I distinctly heard a book or some such object fall in this room.

"I got out of bed, took my flashlight, and crept down the stairs in the dark. Mr. Pons, I sensed someone's or something's moving about

below. I could feel the disturbance of the air at the foot of the stairs where something had passed. I went directly to the library and from the threshold of that door over there I turned my flashlight into the room and put on its light. Mr. Pons, I saw a horrifying thing. I saw the face of an old man, matted with beard, with wild unkempt hair raying outward from

his head; it glared fiercely, menacingly at me. I admit that I faltered and fell back; the flashlight almost fell from my hands. Nevertheless, I summoned enough courage to snap on the overhead light. Mr. Pons—there was no one in the room beside myself. I stood in the doorway. No one had passed me. Yet, I swear it, I had seen precisely the same apparition that Mrs. Jenkins had described! It was there for one second—in the next it was gone—as if the very books had swallowed it up.

"Mr. Pons, I am not an imaginative woman, and I am not given to hallucinations. I saw what I had seen; there was no question of that. I went around at once to make certain that the windows and doors were locked; all were; nothing had been tampered with. I had seen something, and everything about it suggested a supernatural apparition. I applied to Mr. Harwell. He told me that Mr. Brensham had never made any reference to anything out of the ordinary about the house. He had personally known Mr. Brensham's old uncle, Captain Jason Brensham, from whom he had inherited the house, and the Captain had never once complained of the house. He admitted that it did not seem to be a matter for the regular police, and mentioned Mr. Carnacki as well as yourself. I'm sure you know Mr. Carnacki, whose forte is psychic investigation. He came—and as nearly as I can describe it, he *felt* the library, and assured me that there were no supernatural forces at work here. So I applied to you, Mr. Pons, and I do hope you will lay the ghost for me."

Pons smiled almost benignly, which lent his handsome, feral face a briefly gargoylesque expression. "My modest powers, I fear, do not permit me to feel the presence of the supernatural, but I must admit to some interest in your little problem," he said thoughtfully. "Let me ask you, on the occasion on which you saw the apparition—last Thursday—were you aware of anyone's breathing?"

"No, Mr. Pons. I don't believe ghosts are held to breathe."

"Ah, Mrs. Ashcroft, in such matters I must defer to your judgment—you appear to have seen a ghost; I have not seen one." His eyes danced. "Let us concentrate for a moment on its disappearance. Was it accompanied by any sound?"

Our client sat for a long moment in deep thought. "I believe it was, Mr. Pons," she said at last. "Now that I think of it."

"Can you describe it?"

"As best I can recall, it was something like the sound a book dropped on the carpet might make.

"But there was no book on the floor when you turned the light on?"

"I do not remember that there was."

"Will you show me approximately where the spectre stood when you saw it?"

She got up with alacrity, crossed to her right, and stood next to the shelving there. She was in a position almost directly across from the entrance to the library from the adjacent room; a light flashed on from the threshold would almost certainly strike the shelving there.

"You see, Mr. Pons—there isn't even a window in this wall through which someone could have escaped if it were unlocked."

"Yes, yes," said Pons with an absent air. "Some ghosts vanish without sound, we are told, and some in a thunderclap. And this one with the sound of a book dropped upon the carpet!" He sat for a few moments, eyes closed, his long, tapering fingers tented before him, touching his chin occasionally. He opened his eyes again and asked, "Has anything in the house—other than your books—been disturbed, Mrs. Ashcroft?"

"If you mean my jewelry or the silver—no, Mr. Pons."

"A ghost with a taste for literature! There are indeed all things under the sun. The library has, of course, been cleaned since the visitation?"

"Every Saturday, Mr. Pons."

"Today is Thursday—a week since your experience. Has anything taken place since then, Mrs. Ashcroft?"

"Nothing, Mr. Pons."

"If you will excuse me," he said, coming to his feet, "I would like to examine the room."

Thereupon he began that process of intensive examination which never ceased to amaze and amuse me. He took the position that our client had just left to return to her chair, and stood, I guessed, fixing directions. He gazed at the high windows along the south wall; I concluded that he was estimating the angle of a shaft of moonlight and deducing that the ghost, as seen by Mrs. Jenkins, had been standing at or near the same place when it was observed. Having satisfied himself, he gave his attention to the floor, first squatting there, then coming to his knees and crawling about. Now and then he picked something off the carpet and put it into one of the tiny envelopes he habitually carried. He crept all along the east wall, went around the north and circled the room in this fashion, while our client watched him with singular interest, saying nothing and making no attempt to conceal her as-

tonishment. He finished at last, and got to his feet once more, rubbing his hands together.

"Pray tell me, Mrs. Ashcroft, can you supply a length of thread of a kind that is not too tensile, that will break readily?"

"What color, Mr. Pons?"

"Trust a lady to think of that!" he said, smiling. "Color is of no object, but if you offer a choice, I prefer black."

"I believe so. Wait here."

Our client rose and left the library.

"Are you expecting to catch a ghost with thread, Pons?" I asked.

"Say rather I expect to test a phenomenon."

"That is one of the simplest devices I have ever known you to use."

"Is it not?" he agreed, nodding. "I submit, however, that the simple is always preferable to the complex."

Mrs. Ashcroft returned, holding out a spool of black thread. "Will this do, Mr. Pons?"

Pons took it, unwound a little of thread, and pulled it apart readily. "Capitall" he answered. "This is adequately soft."

He walked swiftly over to the north wall, took a book off the third shelf, which was at slightly over two feet from the floor, and tied the thread around it. Then he restored the book to its place, setting it down carefully. After he restored the book to its place, he walked away, unwinding the spool, until he reached the south wall, where he tautened the thread and tied the end around a book there. He now had an almost invisible thread that reached from north to south across the library at a distance of about six feet from the east wall, and within the line of the windows.

He returned the spool of thread to our client. "Now, then, can we be assured that no one will enter the library for a day or two? Perhaps the Saturday cleaning can be dispensed with?"

"Of course it can, Mr. Pons," said Mrs. Ashcroft, clearly mystified.

"Very well, Mrs. Ashcroft. I trust you will notify me at once if the thread is broken—or if any other untoward event occurs. In the meantime, there are a few little inquiries I want to make."

Our client bade us farewell with considerably more perplexity than she had displayed in her recital of the curious events which had befallen her.

Once outside, Pons looked at his watch. "I fancy we may just have time to catch Mr. Harwell at his office, which is just down Sydenham Hill and so within walking distance." He gazed at me, his eyes twinkling. "Coming, Parker?"

I fell into step at his side, and for a few moments we walked in silence, Pons striding along with his long arms swinging loosely at his sides, his keen eye darting here and there, as if in perpetual and merciless search of facts with which to substantiate his deductions.

I broke the silence between us. "Pons, you surely don't believe in Mrs. Ashcroft's ghost?"

"What is a ghost?" he replied. "Something seen. Not necessarily supernatural. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I said. "It may be hallucination, illusion, some natural phenomenon misinterpreted."

"So the question is not about the reality of ghosts, but, did our client see a ghost or did she not? She believes she did. We are willing to believe that she saw something. Now, it was either a ghost or it was not a ghost."

"Pure logic."

"Let us fall back upon it. Ghost or no ghost, what is its motivation?"

"I thought that plain as a pikestaff," I said dryly. "The purpose is to frighten Mrs. Ashcroft away from the house."

"I submit few such matters are plain as a pikestaff. Why?"

"Someone wishes to gain possession of Mrs. Ashcroft's house."

"Anyone wishing to do so could surely have bought it from the agents before Mrs. Ashcroft did. But, let us for the moment assume that you are correct. How then did he get in?"

"That remains to be determined."

"Quite right. And we shall determine it. But one other little matter perplexes me in relation to your theory. That is this—if someone were bent upon frightening Mrs. Ashcroft from the house, does it not seem to you singular that we have no evidence that he initiated any of those little scenes where he was observed?"

"I should say it was deuced clever of him."

"It does not seem strange to you that if someone intended to frighten our client from the house, he should permit himself to be seen only by accident? And that after but the briefest of appearances, he should vanish before the full effectiveness of the apparition could be felt?"

"When you put it that way, of course, it is a little far-fetched."

"I fear we must abandon your theory, Parker, sound as it is in every other respect."

He stopped suddenly. "I believe this is the address we want. Ah, yes—here we are. Harwell & Chamberlain, 221B."

We mounted the stairs of the ancient but durable building and found ourselves presently in mid-nineteenth century quarters. A clerk came forward at our entrance.

"Good day, gentlemen. Can we be of service?"

"I am interested in seeing Mr. Roderic Harwell," said Pons.

"I'm sorry, sir, but Mr. Harwell has just left the office for the rest of the day. Would you care to make an appointment?"

"No, thank you. My business is of some considerable urgency, and I shall have to follow him home."

The clerk hesitated momentarily, then said, "I should not think that necessary, sir. You could find him around the corner at the Green Horse. He likes to spend an hour or so at the pub with an old friend or two before going home. Look for a short, ruddy gentleman, with bushy white sideburns."

Pons thanked him again, and we made our way back down the stairs and out to the street. In only a few minutes we were entering the Green Horse. Despite the crowd in the pub, Pons' quick eyes immediately found the object of our search, sitting at a round table near one wall, in desultory conversation with another gentleman of similar age, close to sixty, wearing, unless I were sadly mistaken, the air of one practicing my own profession.

We made our way to the table.

"Mr. Roderic Harwell?" asked Pons.

"That infernal clerk has given me away again!" cried Harwell, but with such a jovial smile that it was clear he did not mind. "What can I do for you?"

"Sir, you were kind enough to recommend me to Mrs. Margaret Ashcroft."

"Ah, it's Solar Pons, is it? I thought you looked familiar. Sit down, sit down."

His companion hastily rose and excused himself.

"Pray do not leave, Doctor," said Pons. "This matter is not of such a nature that you need to disturb your meeting."

Harwell introduced us all around. His companion was Dr. Horace Weston, an old friend he was in the habit of meeting at the Green Horse at the end of the day. We sat between them.

"Now, then," said Harwell when we had made ourselves comfortable. "What'll you have to drink? Some ale? Bitters?"

"Nothing at all, if you please," said Pons.

"As you like. You've been to see Mrs. Ashcroft and heard her story?"

"We have just come from there."

"Well, Mr. Pons, I never knew of

anything wrong with the house," said Harwell. "We sold some land in the country for Captain Brensham when he began selling off his property so that he could live as he was accustomed to live. He was a bibliophile of a sort—books about the sea were his specialty—and he lived well. But a recluse in his last years. He timed his life right—died just about the time his funds ran out."

"And Howard Brensham?" asked Pons.

"Different sort of fellow altogether. Quiet, too, but you'd find him in the pubs, and at the cinema sometimes watching a stage show. He gambled a little, but carefully. I gather he surprised his uncle by turning out well. He had done a turn in Borstal as a boy. And I suppose he was just as surprised when his uncle asked him to live with him his last years and left everything to him, including the generous insurance he carried."

"I wasn't sure, from what Mrs. Ashcroft said, when Howard Brensham died."

Harwell flashed a glance at his companion. "About seven weeks ago or so, eh?" To Pons, he added, "Dr. Weston was called."

"He had a cerebral thrombosis on the street, Mr. Pons," explained Dr. Weston. "Died in three hours. Very fast. Only forty-seven, and no previous history. But then, Captain Brensham died of a heart attack."

"Ah, you attended the Captain, too?"

"Well, not exactly. I had attended him for some bronchial ailments. He took good care of his voice. He liked to sing. But when he had his heart attack and died I was in France on holiday. I had a young *locum* in and he was called."

"Mrs. Ashcroft's ghost sang," said Harwell thoughtfully. "Something about a 'dead man'."

"I would not be surprised if it were an old sea chantey," said Pons.

"You don't mean you think it may actually be the Captain's ghost, Mr. Pons?"

"Say, rather, we may be meant to think it is," answered Pons. "How old was he when he died?"

"Sixty-eight or sixty-seven—something like that," said Dr. Weston.

"How long ago?"

"Oh, only two years."

"His nephew hadn't lived with him very long, then, before the old man died?"

"No. Only a year or so," said Harwell. His sudden grin gave him a Dickensian look. "But it was long enough to give him at least one of his uncle's enthusiasms—the sea. He's kept up all the Captain's newspapers and magazines, and was still buying books about the sea when

he died. Like his uncle, he read very little else. I suppose a turn he had done as a seaman bent him that way. But they were a sea-faring family. The Captain's father had been a seaman, too, and Richard—the brother in Rhodesia who inherited the property and sold it through us to Mrs. Ashcroft—had served six years in the India trade."

Pons sat for a few minutes in thoughtful silence. Then he said, "The property has little value."

Harwell looked suddenly unhappy. "Mr. Pons, we tried to dissuade Mrs. Ashcroft. But these Colonials have sentimental impulses no one can curb. Home to Mrs. Ashcroft meant not London, not England, but Sydenham. What could we do? The house was the best we could obtain for her in Sydenham. But it's in a declining neighborhood, and no matter how she refurbishes it, its value is bound to go down."

Pons came abruptly to his feet. "Thank you, Mr. Harwell. And you, Dr. Weston."

We bade them good-bye and went out to find a cab.

Back in our quarters, Pons ignored the supper Mrs. Johnson had laid for us, and went directly to the corner where he kept his chemical apparatus. There he emptied his pockets of the envelope he had filled in Mrs. Ashcroft's library, tossed his deerstalker to the top of the bookcase nearby, and began to subject his findings to chemical analysis. I ate supper by myself, knowing that it would be fruitless to urge Pons to join me. After supper I had a patient to look in on. I doubt that Pons heard me leave the room.

On my return in mid-evening, Pons was just finishing.

"Ah, Parker," he greeted me, "I see by the sour expression you're wearing you've been out calling on your crochety Mr. Barnes."

"While you, I suppose, have been tracking down the identity of Mrs. Ashcroft's ghost?"

"I have turned up indisputable evidence that her visitant is from the nethermost regions," he said triumphantly, and laid before me a tiny fragment of cinder. "Do you suppose we dare conclude that coal is burned in Hell?"

I gazed at him in open-mouthed astonishment. His eyes were dancing merrily. He was expecting an outburst of protest from me. I choked it back deliberately; I was becoming familiar indeed with all the little games he played. I said, "Have you determined his identity and his motive?"

"Oh, there's not much mystery in that," he said almost contemptuously. "It's the background in which I am interested."

"Not much mystery in it!" I cried.

"No, no," he answered testily. "The trappings may be a trifle bizarre, but don't let them blind you to the facts, all the essentials of which have been laid before us."

I sat down, determined to expose his trickery. "Pons, it is either a ghost or it is not a ghost."

"I can see no way of disputing that position."

"Then it is not a ghost."

"On what grounds do you say so?"

"Because there is no such thing as a ghost."

"Proof?"

"Proof to the contrary?"

"The premise is yours, not mine. But let us accept it for the nonce. Pray go on."

"Therefore it is a sentient being."

"Ah, that is certainly being cagey," he said, smiling provocatively. "Have you decided what his motive might be?"

"To frighten Mrs. Ashcroft from the house."

"Why? We've been told it's not worth much and will decline in value with every year to come."

"Very well, then. To get his hands on something valuable concealed in the house. Mrs. Ashcroft took it furnished— as it was, you'll remember."

"I remember it very well. I am also aware that the house stood empty for some weeks and anyone who wanted to lay hands on something in it would have had far more opportunity to do so then than he would after tenancy was resumed."

I threw up my hands. "I give up."

"Come, come, Parker. You are looking too deep. Think on it soberly for a while and the facts will rearrange themselves so as to make for but one, and only one, correct solution."

So saying, he turned to the telephone and rang up Inspector Jamison at his home to request him to make a discreet application for exhumation of the remains of Captain Jason Brensham and the examination of those remains by Bernard Spilsbury.

"Would you mind telling me what all that has to do with our client?" I asked, when he had finished.

"I submit it is too fine a coincidence to dismiss that a heavily insured old man should conveniently die after he has made a will leaving everything to the nephew he has asked to come live with him," said Pons. "There we have a concrete motive, with nothing ephemereal about it."

"But what's to be gained by an exhumation now? If what you suspect is true, the murderer is al-

ready dead, beyond punishment."

Pons smiled enigmatically. "Ah, Parker, I am not so much a seeker after punishment as a seeker after truth. I want the facts. I mean to have them. I shall be spending considerable time tomorrow at the British Museum in search of them."

"Well, you'll find ghosts of another kind there," I said dryly.

"Old maps and newspapers abound with them," he answered agreeably, but said no word in that annoyingly typical fashion of his about what he sought.

I would not ask, only to be told again, "Facts!"

When I walked into our quarters early in the evening of the following Monday, I found Pons standing at the windows, his face aglow with eager anticipation.

"I was afraid you might not get here in time to help lay Mrs. Ashcroft's ghost," he said, without turning.

"But you weren't watching for me," I said, "or you wouldn't still be standing there."

"Ah, I am delighted to note such growth in your deductive faculty," he replied. "I'm waiting for Jamison and Constable Mecker. We may need their help tonight if we are to trap this elusive apparition. Mrs. Ashcroft has sent word that the string across the library was broken last night. —Ah, here they come now."

He turned. "You've had supper, Parker?"

"I dined at the Diogenes Club."

"Come then. The game's afoot."

He led the way down the stairs and out into Praed Street, where a police car had just drawn up to the curb. The door of the car sprang open at our approach, and Constable Mecker got out. He was a fresh-faced young man whose work Pons had come to regard as very promising, and he greeted us with anticipatory pleasure, stepping aside so that we could enter the car. Inspector Seymour Jamison, a bluff, square-faced man wearing a clipped moustache, occupied the far corner of the seat.

Inspector Jamison spared no words in formal greeting. "How in the devil did you get on to Captain Brensham's poisoning?" he asked gruffly.

"Spilsbury found poison, then?"

"Arsenic. A massive dose. Brensham couldn't have lived much over twelve hours after taking it. How did you know?"

"I had only a very strong assumption," said Pons.

The car was rolling forward now through streets hazed with a light mist and beginning to glow with the yellow lights of the shops, blunting the harsh realities of daylight and lending to London a kind of enchantment I loved. Mecker was at the wheel, which he handled with great skill in the often crowded streets.

Inspector Jamison was persistent. "I hope you haven't got us out on a wild goose chase," he went on. "I have some doubts about following your lead in such matters, Pons."

"When I've misled you, they'll be justified. Not until then. Now, another matter—if related. You'll recall a disappearance in Dulwich two years ago? Elderly man named Ian Narth?"

Jamison sat for a few moments in silence. Then he said. "Man of seventy. Retired seaman. Indigent. No family. Last seen on a tube train near the Crystal Palace. Vanished without trace. Presumed drowned in the Thames and carried out to sea."

"I believe I can find him for you, Jamison."

Jamison snorted. "Now, then, Pons—give it to me short. What's all this about?"

Pons summed up the story of our client's haunted library, while Jamison sat in thoughtful silence.

"Laying ghosts is hardly in my line," he said when Pons had finished.

"Can you find your way to the Sydenham entrance of the abandoned old Nunhead-Crystal Palace High Level Railway Line?" asked Pons.

"Of course."

"If not, I have a map with me. Two, in fact. If you and Mecker will conceal yourself near that entrance, ready to arrest anyone coming out of it, we'll meet you there in from two to three hours' time."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Pons," growled Jamison.

"I share that hope, Jamison." He turned to Mecker and gave him Mrs. Ashcroft's address. "Parker and I will leave you there, Jamison. You'll have plenty of time to reach the tunnel entrance before we begin our exploration at the other end."

"It's murder then, Pons?"

"I should hardly think that anyone would willingly take so much arsenic unless he meant to commit suicide. No such intention was manifest in Captain Brensham's life—indeed, quite the contrary. He loved the life he led, and would not willingly have given it up."

"You're postulating that Ian Narth knew Captain Brensham and his nephew?"

"I am convinced inquiry will prove that to be the case."

Mecker let us out of the police car before Mrs Ashcroft's house, which loomed with an almost forbiddingly sinister air into the gathering darkness. Light shone wanly

from but one window; curtains were drawn over the rest of them at the front of the house, and the entire dwelling seemed to be waiting upon its foredoomed decay.

Mrs. Ashcroft herself answered our ring.

"Oh, Mr. Pons!" she cried at sight of us. "You *did* get my message."

"Indeed, I did, Mrs. Ashcroft. Dr. Parker and I have now come to make an attempt to lay your ghost."

Mrs. Ashcroft paled a little and stepped back to permit us entrance.

"You'll want to see the broken thread, Mr. Pons," she said after she had closed the door.

"If you please."

She swept past us and led us to the library, where she turned up all the lights. The black thread could be seen lying on the carpet, broken through about midway, and away from the east wall.

"Nothing has been disturbed, Mrs. Ashcroft?"

"Nothing. No one has come into this room but me—at my striet order. Except, of course, whoever broke the thread." She shuddered. "It appears to have been broken by something coming out of the wall!"

"Does it not?" agreed Pons.

"No ghost could break that thread," I said.

"There are such phenomena as *poltergeists* which are said to make all kinds of mischief, including the breaking of dishes," said Pons dryly. "If we had that to deal with, the mere breaking of a thread would offer it no problem. You heard nothing, Mrs. Ashcroft?"

"Nothing."

"No rattling of chains, no hollow groans?"

"Nothing, Mr. Pons."

"And not even the sound of a book falling?"

"Such a sound an old house might make at any time, I suppose, Mr. Pons."

He cocked his head suddenly; a glint came into his eyes. "And not, I suppose, a sound like that? Do you hear it?"

"Oh, Mr. Pons," cried Mrs. Ashcroft in a low voice. "That is the sound Mrs. Jenkins heard."

It was the sound of someone singing—singing boisterously. It seemed to come as from a great distance, out of the very books on the walls.

"Fifteen men on a dead man's chest," murmured Pons. "I can barely make out the words. Captain Brensham's collection of sea lore is shelved along this wall, too! A coincidence."

"Mr. Pons! What is it?" asked our client.

"Pray do not disturb yourself, Mrs. Ashcroft. That is hardly a voice from the other side. It has too much body. But we are delaying unnecessarily. Allow me."

So saying, he crossed to the book shelves, at the approximate place where she had reported seeing the apparition that haunted the library. He lifted a dozen books off a shelf and put them to one side. Then he knocked upon the wall behind. It gave back a muffled, hollow sound. He nodded in satisfaction, and then gave the entire section of shelving the closest scrutiny.

Presently he found what he sought—after having removed half the books from the shelving there—a small lever concealed behind a row of books. He depressed it. Instantly there was a soft thud—like the sound a book might make when it struck the carpet—and the section sagged forward, opening into the room like a door ajar. Mrs. Ashcroft gasped sharply.

"What on earth is that, Mr. Pons?"

"Unless I am very much mistaken, it is a passage to the abandoned right-of-way of the Nunhead-Crystal Palace Line—and the temporary refuge of your library ghost."

He pulled the shelving further into the room, exposing a gaping aperture which led into the high bank behind that wall of the house, and down into the earth beneath. Out of the aperture came a voice which was certainly that of an inebriated man, raucously singing. The voice echoed and reverberated as in a cavern below.

"Pray excuse us, Mrs. Ashcroft," said Pons. "Come, Parker."

Pons took a flashlight from his pocket and, crouching, crept into the tunnel. I followed him. The earth was shored up for a little way beyond the opening, then the walls were bare, and here and there I found them narrow for me, though Pons, being slender, managed to slip through with less difficulty. The aperture was not high enough for some distance to enable one to do more than crawl, and it was a descending passage almost from the opening in Mrs. Ashcroft's library.

Ahead of us, the singing had stopped suddenly.

"Hist!" warned Pons abruptly.

There was a sound of hurried movement up ahead.

"I fear he has heard us," Pons whispered.

He moved forward again, and abruptly stood up. I crowded out to join him. We stood on the right-of-way of the abandoned Nunhead-Crystal Palace Line. The rails were still in place, and the railbed was clearly the source of the cinder Pons had produced for my edification. Far ahead of us on the line someone was running.

"No matter," said Pons. "There is only one way for him to go. He could hardly risk going out to where the main line passes. He must go out by way of the Sydenham entrance."

We pressed forward, and soon the light revealed a niche hollowed out of the wall. It contained bedding, a half eaten loaf of bread, candles, a lantern, books. Outside the opening were dozens of empty wine and brandy bottles.

Pons examined the bedding.

"Just as I thought," he said, straightening up. "This has not been here very long—certainly not longer than two months."

"The time since the younger Brensham's death," I cried.

"You advance, Parker, indeed!"

"Then he and Narth were in it together!"

"Of necessity," said Pons. "Come."

He ran rapidly down the line, I after him.

Up ahead there was a sudden burst of shouting. "Aha!" cried Pons. "They have him!"

After minutes of hard running, we burst out of the tunnel at the entrance where Inspector Jamison and Constable Mecker waited—the constable manacled to a wild-looking old man, whose fierce glare was indeed alarming. Greying hair stood out from his head, and his unkempt beard completed a frame of hair around a grimy face out of which blazed two eyes fiery with rage.

"He gave us quite a struggle, Pons," said Jamison, still breathing heavily.

"Capital! Capital!" cried Pons, rubbing his hands together delightedly. "Gentlemen, let me introduce you to as wily an old scoundrel as we've had the pleasure of meeting in a long time. Captain Jason Brensham, swindler of insurance companies and, I regret to say, murderer."

"Narth!" exclaimed Jamison.

"Ah, Jamison, you had your hands on him. But I fear you lost him when you gave him to Spilsbury."

"The problem was elementary enough," said Pons, as he filled his pipe with the abominable shag he habitually smoked, and leaned up against the mantel in our quarters later that night. "Mrs. Ashcroft told us everything essential to its solution, and Harwell only confirmed it. The unsolved question was the identity of the victim, and the files of the metropolitan papers gave me a presumptive answer to that in the disappearance of Ian Narth, a man of similar build and age to Captain Brensham.

"Of course, it was manifest at the outset that this motiveless spectre was chancing discovery for survival. It was not Jenkins but the Captain who was raiding the food and liquor stocks at his house. The cave, of course, was never intended as a permanent hiding place, but only as a refuge to seek when strangers came to the house, or whenever his nephew had some of his friends in. He lived in the house; he had always been reclusive, and he changed his way of life but little. His nephew, you will recall Harwell's telling us, continued to subscribe to his magazines and buy the books he wanted, apparently for himself, but obviously for his uncle. The bedding and supplies were obviously moved into the tunnel after the younger Brensham's death.

"The manner and place of the ghost's appearance suggested the opening in the wall. The cinder in the carpet cried aloud of the abandoned Nunhead-Crystal Place Line which the maps I studied in the British Museum confirmed ran almost under the house. The Captain actually had more freedom than most dead men, for he could wander out along the line by night, if he wished.

"Harwell clearly set forth the motive. The Captain had sold off everything he had to enable him to continue his way of living. He needed money. His insurance policies promised to supply it. He and his nephew together hatched up the plot. Narth was picked as victim, probably out of a circle of acquaintances because, as newspaper descriptions made clear, he had a certain resemblance to the Captain and was, like him, a retired seaman with somewhat parallel tastes.

"They waited until the auspicious occasion when Dr. Weston, who knew the Captain too well to be taken in, was off on a prolonged holiday, lured Narth to the house, killed him with a lethal dose of arsenic, after which they cleaned up the place to eliminate all external trace of poison and its effects, and called in Dr. Weston's *locum* to witness the dying man's last minutes. The Captain was by this time in his cave, and the young doctor took Howard Brensham's word for the symptoms and signed the death certificate, after which the Brenshams had ample funds on which to live as the Captain liked."

"And how close they came to getting away with it!" I cried.

"Indeed! Howard Brensham's unforeseen death—ironically, of a genuine heart attack—was the little detail they had never dreamed of. On similar turns of fate empires have fallen!"

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