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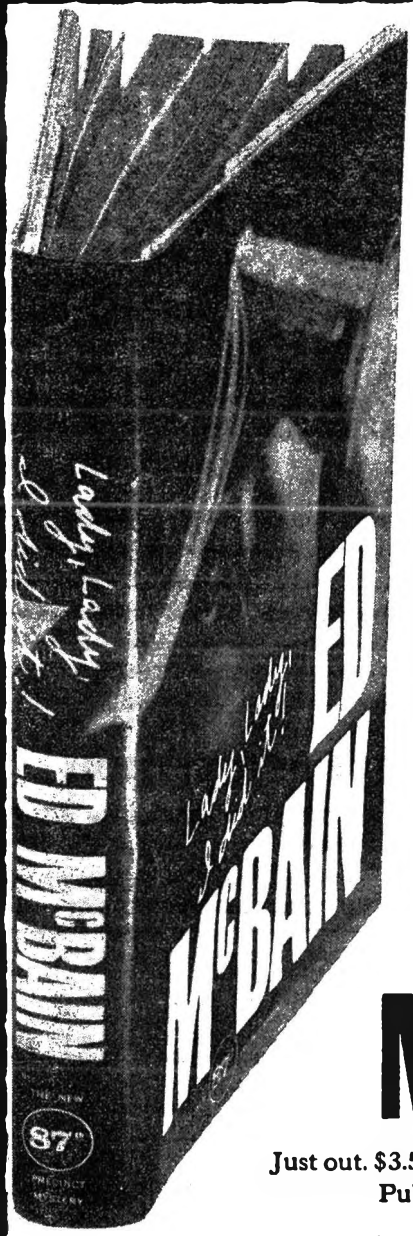

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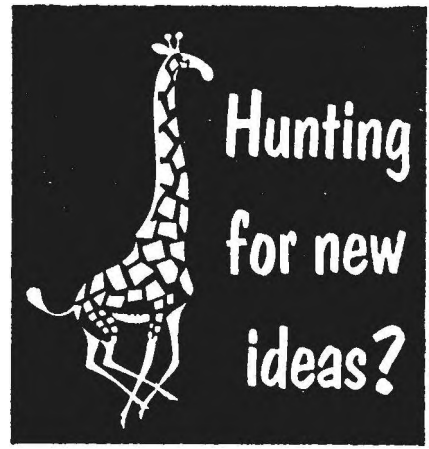

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AUTHOR:	**CORNELL WOOLRICH**
TITLE:	***Money Talks***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*The master of everyday terror and suspense, of the melodramatic thriller, in an admittedly lighter vein . . . Coney Island, Atlantic City —no place is safe when the light-fingered Al is on the prowl . . .*

THE DETECTIVE CAUGHT AL AFTER about a three-block run. That is, it would have been a three-block run if it had been properly sectioned off into blocks. In that case he wouldn't have caught him at all, for the detective was a good deal heavier, had a sizable paunch to push ahead of him, and Al was running for his life. Or at least his freedom, a possible ten-to-twenty years of it, and that can make a man really run.

But there were no separate blocks —it was a straightaway, an ocean pier, as a matter of fact. Al was sealed in, couldn't get off on either side. Along the first stretch, if he jumped over the rail to the sand below he'd stand out like a black dot on a white die-cube—the beach was that bright under a seven-eighths moon. And with Al down there, the detective could have used a gun on him—there were no bathers around any more. Farther out, if he jumped over the rail, he had a choice between getting away dead-drowned or being rescued with a handcuff. He couldn't swim a splash.

It was a cul-de-sac, and a beauty. The detective couldn't have done better if he'd blueprinted the whole thing ahead of time.

So he caught him.

His hand came down on Al like a ton of bricks and they both staggered to a stop. For a minute they

were both too winded to say anything. They just stood there breathing a gale between them. But the detective wasn't too bushed to shift his hold from Al's shoulder, which wasn't too secure a place, to a double lock at the back of the coat collar and the cuff of one sleeve.

By this time people had formed a ring around them, the two of them posing in a tableau, in what was obviously a still life of a just-enacted arrest. Neither one of them cared about that—the detective because it was part of his profession to make arrests in public, Al because he was caught now, stuck, on the wrong side of the law, and these people couldn't help him. He knew they couldn't, and also he knew they wouldn't even if they could.

Al managed to speak first. "What's it for, copper? I'm not out of bounds down here."

"You're out of bounds any place you lift a bundle of dough."

Al's voice shrilled to a squeak. "For Pete's sake, I didn't do no such thing!"

"Then wha'd you run for?"

"I have a record, and you know it. I don't stand a prayer."

"You gave yourself away by running this time. D'you bust out running every time a patrolman starts over to check on you?"

"Not when I see them just walking towards me. But you were already running after me when I turned and looked. I just lost my head, is all."

"You lost your immunity, is all," the detective told him. "C'mon back and we'll take it up with her."

They started back along the pier, trailing a cloud of buzzing spectators like a wedge-shaped swarm of bees coming to a point behind a pair of leaders. Al was too experienced an arrestee to waste his breath making any further pleas. If they were going to listen at all, they'd listen from the original stopping position. Once they started moving you off with them, the time for listening was over. Al knew that as well as he knews his own name.

The concessionnaire was a very large woman. Large-size women seem to make better concessionnaires—they stand out more against their usually garish backgrounds. She was blonde to the point of silveriness, shrewdly made up to take a few years off at the top, and tough as a 25-cent steak. Her pitch was a refreshment stand—hamburgers, frozen custard, soft drinks, hot dogs—*So fresh they bite you,* one little sign said.

She scowled angrily at Al as the detective brought him to a halt up against her counter.

"Got him, did you?" she said.

"Got me for what?" Al rasped. "What're you talking about, lady?"

"I'm talking about the day's receipts, wise guy. Is it on him?" she demanded of the detective.

"That's what we're coming to right now. Wait'll I get a little help here."

A boardwalk patrolman joined them and took over Al's bodily custody, freeing the detective for the search. A second policeman came up and moved the close-packed crowd back. It required a stiff-arming of chests and a shoving between shoulder blades to get them to budge at all. It was like kneading dough, because as the policeman pushed them away in one place, they closed in again in another. Many climbed up on the boardwalk railing to get a better look.

The detective went through Al's pockets as though his hands were a pair of miniature vacuum cleaners. He deposited everything on the concession counter. Al's worldly goods did not amount to much. Monetarily they consisted of seven quarters, four dimes, three nickels, four pennies, and two subway tokens, all from the right-hand trouser pocket. He carried no billfold.

The detective then searched Al in places where there were no pockets. He ran probing fingers along the hem of his coat, up and down the linings of his sleeves (from the outside), felt along his ribs, and across the chest below his undershirt. He even made Al unlace his shoes and step out of them briefly, then get back into them again.

"What 'dje do with it?" he demanded finally.

"I never took it to begin with," Al insisted.

The detective turned to the woman. "Did you *see* him grab it?"

"I didn't really catch him in the act, no—"

'Then wadaya accusing me for?" Al protested hotly before she could even finish.

"Because who else could it have been? You were at my stand just the minute before."

"Any other customers besides him?"

"Only a man and his two kids. But they had already left."

"A man taking his youngsters on an outing doesn't go in for lifting," said the detective with good psychological insight, "if only because he can't make a getaway. How much did it come to?"

"Two seventy-five."

"You mean two hundred and seventy-five dollars?"

"That's what I'm talking about," she said crisply. "Y'don't think I'd blow my stack like this over two bucks, do you?"

One of the boardwalk patrolman whistled. "You make that much in one day? I'd better change jobs with you, lady."

"Don't forget this is a three-day take—it's a holiday week-end."

"What I can't figure," said the second beach cop, "is how could he take it out of the till without your spotting him, when the cash register's over there on the opposite side, over by you."

"He didn't take it out of the till, I did," said the woman testily, as though angry at her own carelessness. "I've been in this business

twenty years and I never pulled a boner like that before in my life. But there's a first time for everything, they say. See, I just finished stacking it to take home. I was due to go off, and my husband was coming on in another quarter hour or so. I don't like to leave so much money in the drawer until we close down—we stay open until one in the morning, and it gets kind of lonely along here at that hour. So I snapped a rubber band around the bills. I had the drawer out, and I put the dough down for just a second, like this. I had a batch of franks on and they started to smoke up. So I took a step over to flip them, then took a step back. It was gone, and he was gone. Add it up for yourself."

"Well, it's not on him now," the detective had to admit. "I've been all over him with a fine-tooth comb."

"Look," said the woman sharply, giving the cash drawer a quick ride out, then in again. "There's my proof. You never yet saw a cash register drawer with only a few singles and some silver in it, did you? Where's all my fives and tens? You know we break plenty of them during the day."

"I'm not doubting you, lady. I'm only saying—"

"Well, he ditched it on the run, then."

"Did you see him throw anything away?" one of the boardwalk police asked Al's original captor.

"No, I was watching for that. I kept my eyes on his hands the whole time. He never moved them. All he moved was his feet."

The two of them retraced the course of the flight, searching for the bundle every step of the way, while the third one remained at the stand, holding onto Al. They were still empty-handed when they came back.

"Of course it's gone," assented the woman, annoyed. "Somebody picked it up by now. How long do you think it's going to lie there, anyway?"

"Nope, he never threw it," the detective insisted. He gave Al a vicious shaking up. "Wha'd you do with it?"

"To do something with anything, you got to have it first," Al protested, through teeth that would have rattled if they hadn't been his own.

"That's great," said the woman bitterly. "George all the way. So whether you pull him in or not, I'm still out the dough. I stand here all day on my feet, and all I've got to show for it is a lot of salt air."

"You're covered, ain't you, lady?" said one of the patrolmen knowingly.

"My insurance ain't paying me back dollar for dollar," she snapped at him.

"Well, in *you* come," the detective told Al grimly, "whether we've found it or not."

Al trotted along beside him but with his head slightly bowed, as if to say, This is my kind of luck.

Al's wife's sister was married to Joe Timmons, a doctor more or less. Al had never been able to figure out whether this made them brothers-in-law or not. But anyway Joe was Rose's brother-in-law there. could be no argument about that, and since the two of them, he and Al, got along fairly well, Al was willing to let it go at that.

Actually, Joe was a genuine enough doctor. He had attended Medical School and received his degree, but too much tinkering with bottles, of the kind that did not contain medicine, had given his status an aspect that was cloudy if not downright shady.

He was the sort of doctor who, at an earlier stage of medical progress, would have had a dingy office two flights up in some old tenement; in today's world Joe had a dingy office just one flight up in a remodeled tenement, and kept three small ads of questionable ethics running in the far-back reaches of a number of spongy-papered magazines.

Joe Timmons came to see Al in his place of detention, and Al was so downcast, so preoccupied with his own troubles, that he didn't even realize the visit was purely voluntary.

"Hullo, Joe, they get you too?" Al said dolefully without even looking up.

"What's the matter with you?" said Joe impatiently.

"What're you crying for?" Al had glanced up and seen Joe's tear-smogged eyes. "I've took it before, I'll have to take it again, that's all."

"Stop it, will you?" said Joe, more irritable than ever. "You know this is the ragweed season for me."

"Oh," said Al, remembering.

"Something's got to be done about you," Joe pronounced with out further ado. "We were talking it over last night around the table, the three of us, over some cans of beer. Now if you go away this time you're going to be away a long time, and you know it, Al. Rose is going to just naturally pine away—she's really gone on you and no fooling. If Rose is unhappy, then Flo gets depressed. And if Flo gets depressed, then I have a miserable home life myself. So it's a losing game all around. Anyway, I promised the two girls I'd see what I could do for you."

"Since when are you a lawyer?" asked Al dejectedly.

"A lawyer ain't going to do you any good, Al. This is going to be three times and out for you. You're on parole and it's mandatory, it's on the books."

"But if they never found the money on me to this day, how can they make it stick?"

"That don't help much, it's still open and shut. The woman claims the money was taken. It's her word against yours. You've got a record, she hasn't. You were standing right there a minute before the money disappeared. You ran like hell. It's all stacked against you, Al. The nat-

ural supposition is going to be that you threw it away, even if the copper admits he didn't see you. They can't prove that you took it, but that ain't good enough for you. It's got to be proved that you *couldn't* have taken it."

He thought for a while.

"How much was on you when they nabbed you?"

"About seven or eight quarters, and a few nickels and pennies."

"How come no paper money?"

"I busted my last couple of bucks just before that at a shooting gallery. Then I remembered it wouldn't look too good if I was spotted practising at a place like that, even though I've never carried a live weapon in my life. So I drifted on my way with all this unused change still in my pocket.

Joe cogitated. "Something could be made out of that. We can't afford to throw anything away, no matter how little it is."

"So what can you make out of it?" said the realistic Al. "Only that I was low in cash. And they'll say that's all the more reason why I took the money."

Joe sneezed stingingly at this point.

"Somebody been sending roses to somebody in here?" he demanded indignantly. He raised his handkerchief toward his nose. "You may go up for ten, twenty years but at least you ain't got my allergy," he remarked wistfully.

"Thanks," said Al morosely.

Joe's handkerchief was still upended, without having reached his nose. It stayed there.

"I've got it!" he said. "I've got your out!"

He never did blow his nose.

"Now we'll make a deal, first of all. How much was it and where'd you put it?"

"Oh, no, you don't!" said Al firmly. "That's what they've been trying to get out of me the whole time. Wouldn't that be great, if I turned around now and—"

"But Al, I'm family," protested Joe, shocked. "I'm not a cop or a stoolie. Look, I'm sticking my neck out for you. You can't expect a favor even from a relative without making it worth his while. That's the way the world is." He waited a moment, while Al remained stubbornly silent. Then Joe said, "All right, then. Let's put it this way. How much do they *claim* you took?"

"The jane tabbed it at two seventy-five. I had no time to count it myself," said Al incautiously.

"Then here's how it goes," expounded Joe. "Two hundred to me, for getting you off, and you keep the seventy-five."

Al gouged the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. "Splitting it right down the middle, is what I call it," he intoned somberly.

Joe stood up, affronted, and made as if to leave. Then he turned his head and addressed Al over one shoulder. "Which is better," he said,

"to have seventy-five smackers you can call your own, free and clear, out in the fresh air and sunshine, or to *know* where there's two hundred and seventy-five waiting—with a six-foot-thick concrete wall in between? You figure it out."

Al did, and finally gave in, with a resigned, upward flip of the hand. "It's the best I can do," he admitted glumly. "I haven't had any other offers today."

Joe reseated himself and leaned forward confidentially. "All right, where is it?" he said. "And keep it low."

Al dropped his voice. Now that the deal was made, he seemed relieved to get it off his chest. "It's still right there on the counter—' he began.

In spite of his recent injunction, Joe's own voice rose almost to a yelp of outrage. "Come on, who're you trying to kid?"

"Will you listen to me, or don't you want to hear?"

Joe wanted to hear.

"She has three big glass tanks there. One's a pale color—that's the pineapple. One's medium color—that's the orange. One is almost black—that's the grape. It's in that—the grape. The lids are chromium, but they're liftable. I tipped it up and shot it in there."

Joe squeezed his eyes tight. "And you expect it to still be in there?" he groaned.

"Sure, it's still in there. Not only that, I bet it'll be in there all the rest of the week. I cased the stand for nearly an hour, from a boardwalk bench opposite. I kept score. For every five customers for orange, there's only three for pineapple and only one for grape. It moves slow. I don't know why she stocks the stuff. Those tanks last. The next two days were slow days—Tuesday and Wednesday after the holiday weekend. And it was raining, to top it off. You know what that does to business on a boardwalk."

"It's paper, it'll be floating at the top."

"So what? She draws the stuff off from a spigot at the bottom. Something makes them bubble, I couldn't figure what. That alone would keep it from settling to the bottom."

Joe digested all this for a while. "I've got it," he said at last, giving a fingersnap. "A fishhook. Or better still, a bent safety pin."

"Sure," said Al. "Make like you're lighting a cigarette, set fire to the whole book of matches at once. She can't prove it wasn't an accident. Throw it away from you, like anyone would—but so it lands on the floor *inside* the stand, over the other way to distract her attention. She'll be busy bending over and stamping it out. Then just tip the lid like I did."

"As soon as I have it, I'll go to work on you," Joe promised. He got up to leave. "I'll let you know," he said.

He came back to see Al only once

more after that. He didn't stay long and he didn't say much—just three words.

"I got it."

Al saluted with two fingers from the edge of his eyebrow, and Joe gave him a knowing bat of the eyelashes as he turned and went out again.

Al's hearing was held in the judge's chambers. There was no jury trial since Al's previous and uncompleted sentence still hung over him like an axe, ready to fall and hit him in the back of the neck if the judge so decided. If Al was found guilty, X number of years resumed right where they had left off, plus; if found not guilty, Al was out on parole again.

The judge was a benevolent-looking man, the clerk was unbiased, but the arresting officer was neither. Also present were the concessionnaire, Al's wife Rose, and a physician who had treated the accused and wished to give expert testimony bearing on the matter at hand.

The concessionnaire having restated her complaint, the arresting officer having given an account of the accused's flight from the scene before he even knew what he was charged with, the physician now stepped forward and asked the judge's permission to submit certain medical facts which he felt to be of great importance to the case. The judge granted permission.

The expert witness identified himself as Dr. Joseph Randolph Timmons, and he presented a figure of such impeccable distinction, with his scholarly eyeglasses, dignified bearing, and air of professional erudition, that alongside him both the clerk of the court and the arresting officer appeared shoddy, rundown, and of little account.

Dr. Timmons asked only a single preliminary question of the arresting officer.

"When you caught up with the accused man, did he stand quietly, or did he fidget and wriggle around a good deal while you were holding him?"

"He stood perfectly still, never moved a hair," said the detective after a moment's thought.

Dr. Timmons then proceeded: "I am not here to vouch for my patient's character or honesty. I know nothing whatever about that. If I'd heard he was being accused of taking jewelry, silverware, furs, anything of that sort, I would not have come forward. But hearing what the charge was in this case, I felt it was my duty as a physician to bring certain facts to light.

"The patient first came to me in May of this year, complaining of an intermittent rash and itching. It would come and go, but it was causing him great trouble. At nights, for instance, when he was at home in bed, it never seemed to bother him. It was only at certain times during the day that it would sud-

denly show up, then gradually die down again. Sometimes it came on three or four times during the course of a single day, then again only once or twice.

"He told me that whenever he left a barber shop he had it, and whenever he went to a motion-picture show. But when he went into a bar to have a glass of beer, he didn't have it. Yet when he went into the same bar and had a couple of ryes, he did have it.

"He never had it on buses, but once getting out of a taxi he had it. If he bought a single package of cigarettes he didn't have it, but if he bought a whole carton at a time he did have it, before he even began to smoke them. A mysterious and interesting case, you will admit.

"I have here a record of his visits, taken from my office appointment book. If your Honor would care to examine it.

"'A. Bunker, Monday, ten A.M.—' read the judge aloud, rapidly shuffling through a number of loose-leaf pages the doctor had handed him. "'A. Bunker, Friday, three P.M.—' He seems to have visited you at the rate of twice a week."

"He did, your Honor, all through June, July, and the greater part of August. He told me right at the start he couldn't afford to come to see me that often, but since the case fascinated me, and the poor fellow was badly in need of help, I told him not to worry about it—to pay me whatever he could as we went along."

The judge cast an admiring glance at the man before him. "There should be more practitioners like you, Dr. Timmons."

"Not all of us are money grabbers," said the doctor modestly. "Well, to go on with this man's case history. A quick test showed that the condition was not dermatological. In lay language that means that it was not a skin infection. I hadn't thought it was because it came and went, instead of being constant. Therefore there was only one other thing it could be. It had to be an allergy.

"But just knowing it was an allergy, wasn't enough. It had to be identified, isolated, its cause discovered, or the patient couldn't be helped. I tested him on a number of foods first, and got negative results. Then I tested him on fabrics, such as are worn on the body—wool, cotton, dacron. Again negative. I even tested him on lint, such as is commonly found in the linings of most pockets. Nothing there either."

He broke off to ask, "I'm not being too technical for your Honor, am I?"

The judge was sitting engrossed, his hands supporting the sides of his face. He said, "I don't know when I've heard a more interesting exposition than the one you've been giving, Doctor. Go on, by all means. This is almost like a medical detective story!"

"These exhaustive tests," resumed the magnetic medic, "might have continued indefinitely, might still be going on today and for many months to come, if it hadn't been for one of those little accidental breaks which pop up when least expected and give an investigator a short cut to the answer. As I've said, I was lenient in collecting payment for the treatments. After several visits for which he'd paid me nothing, the patient one day said he'd like to make a small payment on account. I agreed, of course, and he handed me a five-dollar bill. I'd already noticed he was somewhat improved on that particular day. The ailment had not disappeared by any means, but it was in one of its occasional periods of remission.

"I thought it only fair to dash off a receipt for the fee. When I happened to look up a moment later, I was amazed to see what had occurred."

Like the good showman he was, the doctor paused artfully.

"But rather than describe it in dry words, I'm going to let you see for yourselves just what happened."

He turned to Al. "Please remove your jacket, Mr. Bunker."

Al complied, but with a somewhat apprehensive look on his face. He handed the jacket over to the doctor, who in turn handed it to the clerk, who draped it neatly over the edge of his table-top desk.

"Now, roll up the sleeves of your shirt," was the doctor's next instruction. "As high as they'll go—all the way up to your shoulders."

Al again obeyed, but with more and more of a troubled expression, like someone who knows he is in for an uncomfortable experience. In this instance the doctor speeded up the process by helping him, in the course of which his own hands, unavoidably, glanced lightly upward along Al's forearms.

The doctor turned to the others. "I want you to look at his hands and arms before we go any further. Hold out your arms, Mr. Bunker."

Al stiffly extended his arms straight out before him at chest level, in grotesque resemblance to a high-diver about to launch off into space. His arms were no different from other arms of the male variety—hairy on one side, smooth and heavily veined on the other, but otherwise unblemished.

"Now I'd like a piece of paper currency from one of you, if I may. An ordinary banknote. I'm asking you to furnish it, instead of using one of my own, so there can be no question of the genuineness of this test.

Like three men at a table when the waiter brings the check, each reacted according to his personal characteristics. The arresting officer made no move toward his pockets at all. The clerk, who was on small salary, managed to outfumble the judge, even in spite of the latter's encumbering robes. The majesty of the law produced a wallet that

seemed to contain nothing less than bills in double digits.

"Will a ten be all right?" asked the judge.

"Quite all right," assured the doctor. "It isn't the denomination that's the chief factor."

He turned back to Al with the ten dollars.

"Now take this in your hands, Mr. Bunker."

Al drew back, like a child who is about to be given castor oil.

"Now come on," said the doctor with a touch of impatience. "I'm trying to help you, not harm you."

Al pinched one corner of the bill between his thumb and forefinger, as though he were holding onto a fluttering moth by one wing.

"Don't just hold it between two fingers—put all your fingers on it at once," insisted the doctor. Then when Al had done so, the doctor urged, "Now pass it over into your other hand."

A few portentous seconds ticked by, as though the doctor were taking a pulse count.

"That'll do. You've held it long enough."

Al released it with a long-drawn sigh that could be heard throughout the judge's chamber.

There was a breathless wait.

For several moments nothing happened. Then Al dug his fingernails into the back of one hand and raked it. Then the other. Then the back of one arm. Then the inside. Angry red blotches, almost the size of strawberries, began to appear.

By now Al was almost like a sufferer from St. Vitus's Dance. His feet stood still, but up above he writhed as though he'd been bitten by five hundred mosquitoes. He couldn't get at all the places that needed scratching. He didn't have enough fingernails.

"This poor devil," said the doctor with dramatic effect, "is allergic to paper money. Whether it is something in the paper itself, or some dye in the ink used in the engraving, I can't say. But I can say this: he can no more touch paper money, his own or somebody else's, without having this happen to him, than I can fly out of that window.

"You will remember from the detective's own testimony that this man had only coins on him at the time he was arrested. That was the result of instructions I myself gave him—a prescription, as a matter of fact, as much as if I had given him pills or capsules. His wife breaks a dollar or two every day—bills, you understand—and hands him the change when he leaves the house. That way he can make whatever small purchases are required without falling into the lamentable condition you see him in now."

Al's forehead was a ripple of parallel ridges. He wasn't making believe either. No actor could have simulated the wish, the yearning, the compulsion to scratch that so obviously possessed Al.

"And finally," concluded the doc-

tor, "I only wish to point out that *had* my patient actually taken the money he is accused of stealing, he could not have run as he did and then later stood perfectly still while being searched. He would have been squirming uncontrollably, scratching himself all over, as you see him doing right now. The arresting officer admitted nothing of the sort took place."

The judge cleared his throat.

"It seems fair enough to assume, in view of what we have all witnessed with our own eyes, that the money could not possibly have been taken by the accused. It must have been taken by some other, unknown person, who somehow made good his escape in the crowd."

He addressed Al in an almost fatherly manner.

"You can thank Dr. Timmons for getting you out of what might have been very serious trouble. But you brought all this on yourself, Albert. Next time, don't run from a parole officer when you see him coming towards you. These men are your friends, not your enemies. They are only trying to help you.

"Yes, sir," said Al meekly. He looked at his friend the detective, and his friend the detective looked at him. It was a most undecipherable look—as a cat looks at its friend, the mouse, and a mouse looks at its friend, the cat.

"Charges dismissed," said the judge, with self-satisfaction.

Outside Joe walked a few steps with Al, toward where Rose was waiting. Joe had one arm slung over Al's shoulder, giving him sound medical advice. "And from now on, see that you keep your hot little mitts off any stray money that happens to be floating around. This is a trick that will work only once."

"For Pete's sake, what'd you do to me?" Al demanded.

Joe murmured, "A solution of itching powder, mixed with something to delay the action a few minutes, so I'd have time for my spiel."

"How come it didn't get you?"

"Skin-colored plastic gloves. I soaked them in it. You can't tell unless you look close—they have the nails painted on, and I wore my ring on the outside. Dunk yourself in a hot tub when you get home," he added. "It ought to wear off in about half an hour."

Al and Rose went walking off arm in arm, like the devoted man and wife they were.

"Mr. Bunker!" an urgent voice suddenly called out behind them.

Rose nudged Al sharply. "Better turn around and see what he wants. It'll look funny if you don't."

"Ung-ung," said Al in a calamitous undertone. He turned slowly.

It was the clerk of the court, panting, and with an inscrutable look on his face—a look impossible to describe unless you actually saw it.

"Would you mind—his Honor—I'm glad I caught up with you—you forgot to return his Honor's ten dollars."

first publication in America

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**NICHOLAS BLAKE**
TITLE:	***Conscience Money***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Nigel Strangeways
LOCALE:	England
TIME:	Christmas-time
COMMENTS:	*How Prendergast was arrested for murder at Christmas-time, and of the eight damning pieces of circumstantial evidence that the police had against him . . .*

THERE WERE FIVE OF US IN THE room that afternoon, listening to the carol service from King's College Chapel.

Nigel Strangeways, as usual, had his ear right up against the radio; he liked his music hot and strong.

Prendergast, the nice little man he had brought along with him, was sitting bolt upright in an armchair; he looked worried and attentive, like a clerk being interviewed for a job; one expected to see the bowler hat and the pair of shabby kid gloves on his knee.

Hailes, Aston, and myself made up the party.

The last refrain of *The Holly and the Ivy* died away, with that long, beautifully controlled diminuendo in which the King's College choir excels.

Nigel turned the knob, and the room was silent for a few moments. Then Hailes launched forth: "Yes, it's all very fine. But it's artificial. Nowadays there's nothing at Christmas but the professional sort of stuff we've been listening to and those dismal gangs of brats who go around caterwauling *Good King Wenceslas* out of tune, all December. All the joy, the spontaneity, is gone. Now in the good old days—"

"In the good old days you had a gang of drunks going around, blaring out *Good King Wenceslas* equally out of tune, no doubt."

Aston can never resist pulling the leg of Hailes's hobby horse. Soon they were at it, hammer and tongs, and the air got quite heated.

Nigel interposed, changing the subject tactfully: "You ought to tell them about that Christmas-time you were arrested for murder, Joe."

We all gazed at the little man with interest.

Mr. Prendergast fidgeted, looked bashful, sulky, and deeply gratified in turn, like a boy asked to recite in a Victorian drawing-room. Then, rather breathlessly, he began.

"It was the orange, really. I mean, if it hadn't been for the orange I shouldn't be here to tell the tale. The orange—and Mr. Strangeways, of course."

"Five years ago it was. About the middle of December. I'd lost my job; and the wife and kiddies—well, you know how it is. So I decided to go down to Cheltenham and make a last appeal to my aunt, Eliza Metcalfe.

"She'd never answered my letters—my mother married beneath her, she thought, and she'd said none of us should ever cross her threshold. A very hard woman was Eliza Metcalfe, gentlemen . . ."

Eliza Metcalfe! Now I remembered. *RICH RECLUSE FOUND MURDERED.* A man had been arrested, and——

"So I thought, well, perhaps if I go to see her myself, she might lend me enough to tide us over. So I took a ticket to Cheltenham—cleaned me out, it did—and went to her house.

"I can see her now, with her lace mittens and ivory stick—an old-fashioned lady, you know, but hard as nails.

"She pitched into me, too. My word! What did I mean by forcing my way into her house? My mother'd been no better than a you-know-what. She'd see the pack of us dead before she gave us any help.

"Well, I was desperate; and I told her so. And after a while she sort of relented. 'Young man,' she said, a bit gruffly, 'it's against my principles to lend money. I'll give you £10. And don't let me see your face again.'

"I reckon she felt a bit guilty, you know; it was like conscience money. At any rate she went into the next room, and I heard her rummaging about.

"When she returned she was sucking her finger; she'd pricked it on a needle in the drawer where the money was kept, I suppose. There was a stain of blood on one of the pound notes she handed me. Nearly did for me, that bloodstain."

Mr. Prendergast paused, a look of consternation creeping into his eyes as he remembered that dreadful night five years ago.

"What about the orange?" said Aston gently.

"I'm coming to that. Well, gentlemen, I dare say £10 doesn't mean much to any of you. But when you're on your uppers it's as good as a million.

"I walked out of the house and had a cup of coffee at a stall; the chap who kept the stall noticed I was all excited—'agitated' was the word the police used afterwards.

"You see, I was thinking that the kiddies would be able to have their Christmas presents after all.

"That was just 10:30 p.m. A lovely night, stars and frost twinkling, and that ten quid in my pocket.

"So I thought I'd take a bit of a walk. I'd no idea where I was going. In the end I found myself walking up a long hill right out of the town—the Cirencester road, they told me it was later.

"I was so elated I didn't particularly notice anyone I passed or what roads I took; and believe it or not, I'd been walking for three-quarters of an hour before I realized I'd left my stick behind at Aunt Liz's.

"It was a nice stick—an ashplant with a silver band and my initials on it; my wife had given it to me for my birthday. So I thought I'd call in at Aunt Liz's and pick it up before I found a place to sleep.

"Well, I'd got to the end of the street where her house was—and that's when I saw it, in the street, in the lamplight. The orange."

"A nice, big, juicy orange," said Nigel dreamily.

"Now, I'm an inquisitive chap, and I couldn't help asking myself whoever could it be that went about so late at night dropping oranges. I could have sworn it wasn't there when I'd come along this street before. I bent down to pick it up.

"Funny, you know, for a moment I thought it might be some sort of practical joke, like leaving red-hot pennies on the pavement."

Mr. Prendergast blushed and giggled. Somehow it made us all feel very warm-hearted toward him.

"I bent down to pick it up, and just then it struck a quarter to twelve."

"And what happened?" asked Hailes excitedly.

"Nothing. Not at the moment. I put the orange in my pocket—I noticed there were tooth-marks in the skin—and went along to Aunt Liz's.

"There were lights in the windows still. I thought I'd best go round to the back and ask the maid to give me my stick. I didn't want to go up against Aunt Liz again that night.

"So I went quietly down the side-passage—and walked straight into a policeman. 'What's your business here?' he said. 'I'm Miss Metcalfe's nephew.' I said.

"He took me inside. I was told my aunt had been found murdered. It knocked me over, I can tell you. I remember saying, in a dazed sort of way, 'I came back to get my stick.'

"And at that very moment the

maid came in. 'Why, that's the gentleman who was here two hours ago —him I was telling you about,' she said. Two days later, I was arrested."

Mr. Prendergast paused.

"You'd better ask Mr. Strangeways to tell you the rest of the story," he said at last.

"I became interested in the case through Inspector Blount, a friend of mine," Nigel began crisply. "The case against Joe Prendergast was based on the following pieces of circumstantial evidence:

"(1) The maid overheard a scene between him and her mistress, in the course of which he exclaimed, 'I'm desperate. I'd do anything to get it!'

"(2) After this they lowered their voices, and the maid, losing interest, slipped out to post some letters, met her young man, and did not return till nearly eleven o'clock.

"(3) On her return, the maid found Miss Metcalfe in the hall, her head battered in.

"(4) The drawers in Miss Metcalfe's bedroom had been rifled; there were eight £5 notes and ten £1 notes missing.

"(5) The £1 notes were discovered in Joe's pocketbook; there was blood on one of them—of the same blood group as the deceased's.

"(6) The bundle of £5 notes was found later hidden in a hedge beside the Cirencester road.

"(7) The coffee-stall owner recognized the prisoner as the man who had come to his stall in a 'highly agitated' condition on the night of the crime.

"(8) The prisoner had endeavored to get into the back garden and in this garden the police found his walking stick, bloodstained, with strands of the deceased's hair clinging to it.

"The theory was, of course, that Miss Metcalfe had refused Joe any assistance, that he had struck her down, stolen the money, and in his panic flung away the stick as he left the house; that he had then gone for a walk to steady his nerves, realized that the £5 notes were traceable, and hidden them in the hedge, and returned for his stick—the most damning evidence.

"Well, it seemed a watertight case. But there were things in it that puzzled me. I got permission to interview Joe, and he convinced me that his version was the right one.

"But it wasn't till he told me about the orange that I saw any hope of proving it.

"I'll put it to you like this: Who would throw away a perfectly good orange in which he had set his teeth, late at night, in the middle of December?"

We racked our brains. A number of theories were evolved, some flippant, all more or less fantastic.

I imagined a murderer, creeping out of Miss Metalfe's house with an orange he had stolen, starting to eat it, then flinging it down in revulsion.

"But he wouldn't do murder for an orange unless he was starving," said Nigel patiently, "and if he was starving, he wouldn't throw it away. No, the whole point is that he'd had a surfeit of oranges."

"A murderer who'd had a surfeit of oranges?" I repeated, gazing owlishly at Nigel.

"No, you ass. Not a murderer, a carol singer—one of Hailes's 'caterwauling brats.'"

Gradually it dawned on us. So simple. So obvious.

"Yes," said Nigel, "those boys who go round singing carols—people don't like sending them away empty; they give them an apple or an orange. You see, if Joe was right in saying that orange hadn't been there when he left the house there was a fair chance that some carol singers had been down the street after he'd left.

"There was just a chance that they'd called at Miss Metcalfe's house, and, as the maid was out, she'd have to go to the door. Which would prove that she'd been alive *after* Joe had left her.

"Of course, he might have come back later and killed her. But at least it gave us a loophole. Well, to cut a long story short, I found the two boys.

"After the murder had come out, they'd been afraid to tell anyone they had been to Miss Metcalfe's house. But they had, and she'd come to the door and given them a proper ticking-off; and that was at half-past ten, when Joe was at the coffee stall.

"They'd been given oranges at the next house, but they were so stuffed with dessert already that they couldn't eat one of the oranges and threw it away after one of them had set his teeth in it.

"This made the police think again. They got the right man in the end—a burglar. He'd got into Metcalfe's house over the back garden wall just after the carol singers left. He was surprised by the old lady in the hall and hit out at her with the first object that came to his hand—the walking stick.

"Then he started rifling the drawers, but he was in such a state by then that he couldn't go through with it properly; he just seized the bundle of notes and fled out by the back door again, throwing the stick away in the garden.

"He found that the notes were £5 ones and traceable, so he hid them away. Then he jumped a lorry that was going to Swindon . . . And that's how Joe saved his life by picking up an orange."

"Well," said Hailes, "I hope this will be a lesson to our lawyer friend about the dangers of circumstantial evidence."

But Aston, as usual, had the last word.

"And a lesson to our medieval friend," he replied, "that there's something to be said for his 'dismal gang of brats who go around caterwauling *Good King Wenceslas.*"

THE CASE BOOK OF THE 52nd PRECINCT

Clancy and the Paper Clue

by ROBERT L. PIKE

9:00 P.M. Lieutenant Clancy of the 52nd Precinct was standing back of the desk sergeant, checking the assignment list over the sergeant's shoulder, when Patrolman Martin pushed his way through the precinct doors, dragging a small man behind him. The patrolman's coat was ripped, and his face was bleeding from a bad gash that had torn open one cheek. He unlocked the handcuffs that held him to the smaller man, and flung the other onto the bench beside the desk.

"Tried to mug me!" Martin growled.

Clancy came round the desk quickly. "What happened?" he asked.

"Three of them. Jumped me over by the park. I was on the other side of the street when I saw them. They looked like they was arguing, and then they started swinging. I crossed over and started to break it up, and they jumped me!"

"Nobody around?"

"Not a soul!" The patrolman looked down at his ripped coat forlornly. "Not a single, solitary soul!"

Clancy turned to the silent figure hunched on the bench.

"What's the idea, buster?" The small man looked through him disdainfully.

Kaproski had come out of the squad room and was watching. "Lieutenant," he said. "Want I should open him up?"

"No." Clancy turned to Martin. "Did they get anything?"

"My gun." Martin flicked his coat back to show the empty holster. His voice was bitter. "Those lice slugged me, and when I went down, they pulled open my coat and snaked the gun out. I thought they was going to plug me, but they ran off into the park." He looked at the calm figure on the bench and his face hardened. "All except Little Orphan Annie here. I kept hold of him!"

He put his hand up to his slashed cheek, stared at the blood that came away, then wiped his hand on his torn coat.

"What did they look like?"

Martin frowned. "It was pretty dark. Hard to see good. They were all little guys, like this one. They had jackets on, I remember—dark ones. No neckties, collar outside. And hats."

"They say anything?"

The patrolman shook his head. "That's the funny thing. They didn't say a word, not one of them, during the whole thing."

Clancy turned back to the prisoner. "All right," he said brusquely.

"Open up. What was the big idea?"

There was complete silence, even disinterest.

"You know what slugging a cop can get you?"

Still no answer.

Kaproski started forward, but Clancy waved him back, still gazing at the little man before him. He appeared to be about thirty, dressed as Martin had described the others, with a face as expressionless as the wall behind him.

"Okay," Clancy said finally. "Frisk him and toss him into a cell. We'll get the story of his life later." He leaned over, fingering the lapel of the prisoner. "Give him a nightgown—I want to see these clothes of his. Book him as John Doe."

He turned to Martin. "Better get that cheek fixed," he said. "You've got a nasty cut. What did they slug you with?"

"A chunk of wood." Martin touched his cheek again, gingerly. "They like to knocked my eye out."

"Just three the size of this half pint?" Kaproski snorted. "You must be getting old."

Martin eyed him coldly. "They played rough."

"Yeah," Clancy said. "Well, go down and have Doc take a look at that cheek."

He turned and went into his office.

9:15 P.M. Kaproski came in and dumped a pile of clothing on the desk. He also laid a small folded wad of money in front of Clancy and then stood back, rubbing the knuckles of one hand.

"Tough little monkey," he said admiringly. "Old Silent Sam himself."

Clancy looked up sharply. "I told you to lay off him," he said. "You know I don't go for that."

"Aw," Kaproski said, embarrassed. "I only give him a little tap for luck. I bet his mother hit him harder the first time she caught him swiping pennies off her dresser."

Clancy shook his head in disapproval, staring at Kaproski until the other's eyes dropped. Then he turned to the pile of clothes and the folded wad of money.

"Where are the rest of his things?" he asked.

"That's the works," Kaproski said, happy to have the subject changed. "Everything he had. Not even a handkerchief, or any loose change. Nothing. His pockets were empty, except for this dough in his watchpocket."

Clancy frowned thoughtfully. He went through the clothing carefully, checking for labels. All had been removed. "Let's see his shoes," he said. They picked up the small, hand-stitched pair of shoes and studied them. The linings had been neatly sliced away, removing the size and the code number. There was no brand name to be seen.

"Professional," Clancy said. He went back over the clothes, rechecking the pockets, but they revealed

nothing. He studied the jacket, holding it before him, his eyes narrowing. Then, with a shrug, he pushed the pile of clothes to one side and unfolded the wad of money.

A slip of paper fell to the floor, and Clancy bent down and picked it up. He laid it to one side while he counted the bills: there were four five-dollar bills, and four ones, all crisp and crinkling-new. He turned back to the slip that had been folded up with the money.

It was a narrow strip of white paper and scribbled across it were some figures written in ink. They read: 9/14/60—300/11.20/26.78.

Clancy stared at the slip for several minutes, his eyes half closed. Kaproski was looking over his shoulder.

"What's those numbers, Lieutenant?"

"The first is today's date," Clancy said.

"Yeah. But what's that 300 and the rest of it?"

Clancy shook his head. "No idea. I wish I knew."

Kaproski cleared his throat. "Lieutenant, I can open him up, if you want."

Clancy looked at him stonily. "I doubt it. This is no punk from around the corner."

He thought about it a while, then sighed. "Kaproski. Lock all this junk up. Make out a receipt for the money. I'll keep this slip."

"Okay, Lieutenant." Kaproski's voice was tinged with disappointment. He picked up the pile of clothing and went out. Clancy sat down and reached for the telephone.

"Hello? This is Clancy at the 52nd. Let me talk to the Captain."

The Captain's heavy voice came on the wire. "Clancy? What's new? How's it going?"

"All right, I guess. Listen, Captain, we had an odd thing down here tonight. Three fellows mugged a uniformed cop on his beat. Took his gun away. Two of them got away, but the cop, Martin, nabbed the third. We've got him here in a cell but he won't talk. Not a word. Not a sound, even—not even to tell us to go to hell."

"A cop, eh? And they have his gun?" The Captain sounded worried. "That's not good, these days."

"I know. And this boy has foreign clothes, too. Four inside pockets in his jacket, two watchpockets in his pants. That's why I'm calling."

"That's not good. What does he say for himself?"

"I'm telling you, he hasn't made a sound. Kaproski even went around with him, against my orders, but still not a peep out of him—Kaproski couldn't get him to squeak."

There was a pause at the other end of the line. "What do you think, Clancy?"

"I don't know. Look, Captain. Is Garcia there?"

"He's here, but we're short as

hell, Clancy. Everybody's assigned to the United Nations. I can't spare a soul."

"I know. Stanton is over there, and four of our patrolmen. We're all short. But if you could just spare me Garcia for maybe only a couple of hours . . ."

There was another pause at the other end. "What's on your mind, Clancy?"

Clancy took a deep breath and started talking . . .

9:55 P.M. It took Kaproski and a uniformed policeman, both working hard, to hustle the big fighting, cursing, squirming, dark-complexioned man into a cell. Clancy stood by, watching intently.

"Lock him up and throw away the key," he said. "We'll let the judge take care of tough boy in the morning."

The big tough man spat at them. Kaproski's heavy hand slapped him across the face, knocking him back against the cell bars. The dark man snarled, turned, and tried to kick Kaproski in the groin. The heavy hand descended again.

"Inside, big mouth!" Kaproski said. He pushed him clear across the cell and slammed the door behind him. The man bounced off the wall and came tearing back to the bars, screaming at the top of his voice.

"I'll be out of here in an hour!" he yelled. "You lousy, stinking cops can't hold me!"

"We can try," Clancy said grimly.

Kaproski turned back toward the cell, but Clancy took his arm and pulled him away. As they went out the corridor door, the dark man behind them was still screaming curses.

The silent little man in the next cell watched with no emotion.

11:05 P.M. The tunkey unlocked the cell door and swung it wide. "Outside, big guy," he said. "One of your crooked pals sprung you."

The dark man walked past the turnkey triumphantly. "I told you guys you couldn't hold me," he said with a sneer.

"Oh, I don't know," the turnkey said philosophically. "We'll see you again. All you hard guys always come back."

The man swaggered down the corridor, out the door, and turned into the first office on his right. Clancy was sitting behind his desk. Kaproski was leaning against one corner of the desk, smiling broadly. The dark man slumped into a chair.

"Kaproski," he said. "I can lick you. Come the next Policeman's matches, I want you for my own."

Kaproski grinned.

"Well," Clancy said impatiently. "Any luck?"

Garcia shook his head. "Nothing. Not a murmur. I tried to get palsy, but he couldn't have cared less."

"Not a word?"

"Nothing. He didn't even look at me."

"What I was afraid of," Clancy said, frowning. "He's a professional, all right."

"I would say, extremely professional."

Clancy shook his head worriedly. "I don't like it. Not these days." He sighed. "Well, thanks anyway, Garcia. You better get back. The Captain said two hours only."

Garcia arose. "Sorry, Lieutenant."

"How it goes," Clancy said. He took up the slip of paper and began studying it again. The others filed out.

12:05 A.M. "Hello, Captain? This is Clancy again."

"Hello, Clancy. Garcia told me. Tough luck."

"Yeah. Captain, what time does tonight's session of the U.N. finish?"

"God knows, Clancy. It's still going on, as far as I know. Ought to end anytime now, I suppose. Why?"

Clancy disregarded the question. "Captain," he said, "are any of the big wheels at the U.N. housed up around the 52nd?"

"I'd have to check and call you back, Clancy. We have the list upstairs. I'd ask you to hold the line, but we're trying to keep the phone as free as possible." His voice became curious, "What's on your mind?"

"I'm not sure yet, Captain. Let me know who is housed in our precinct, will you?"

"Right. I'll call you back." The phone went dead.

Clancy called out to the desk. "Sergeant!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you have tonight's paper?"

"Yes, sir." The sergeant came in with a newspaper folded to the sports section and laid it on the desk. Clancy nodded his thanks and started turning the pages. He found the listing he wanted and began to study it.

The phone rang urgently. Clancy pushed the paper aside and picked up the instrument. "Clancy here."

"Clancy? This is the Captain. I've got that list. There are six delegates to the U.N. staying in your area. The ones from Belgium, Cuba, Uruguay, Israel, Argentina, and Bolivia—all in your precinct. You want their addresses?"

"Captain!" There was an undercurrent of excitement in Clancy's voice. "I know you're short of men, but can you let me have a squad car with a crew for just a couple of hours?"

"You don't want those addresses?"

"Only one. Captain, how about that squad car?"

There was a pause. "You think there is going to be an attempt at an assassination?"

"Yes, I do."

The Captain's voice was weary with worry. "You know, the U.N. session closed about fifteen minutes ago. We just got word."

"All the more reason for hurry, then," Clancy said impatiently. "How about that squad car?"

"Who do you figure? The Cuban delegate?" The worry in the Captain's voice mingled with doubt. "He's got a pretty big bodyguard. Pretty sharp too."

"Not the Cuban. The Uruguayan."

"The *Uruguayan*?"

"I'll explain later," Clancy said. "Right now I've got to get men over to his place before he gets home. What's his address?"

"Just a second," the Captain said. "He's staying with a friend at 45 West 85th Street." There was another pause, but briefer. "I'll have a squad car there in twenty minutes."

"Better have them meet me on the corner of 85th and Central Park South."

"Right."

"Thanks, Captain."

Clancy hung up and hurried out to the desk. "Get Kaproski, and every available man we have," he said to the desk sergeant. "We're going hunting!"

1:00 A.M. They brought the two, men in and booked each of them as John Doe. Clancy went into his office and found the Captain sitting there, waiting for him.

"I figured it was important enough to come over myself," he said. "Did you get them?"

"We got them." Clancy's voice was filled with satisfaction.

"You sure you're right?"

"I'm sure," Clancy said flatly. His eyes gleamed. "One of them had Martin's gun on him."

Kaproski shoved his head in the door. "Hey, Lieutenant. What do we book these characters for?"

"Spitting on the sidewalk." Clancy shrugged. "We'll let the State Department worry about that tomorrow." Kaproski withdrew, grinning.

"How did you figure it?" the Captain asked.

"Well," Clancy said, sitting down. "First, those funny clothes with all the pockets—that's foreign. And then the business of no labels. And knocking over a cop, just to get his gun. It began to add up, especially with all of the people here at the U.N.

"Then, too, he had all new bills in his pocket. Strictly bank stuff, like they issue over the teller's counter. And this slip." He took it out of his pocket and slid it before the Captain. "It had today's date on it. And that 300/11.20/26.78."

The Captain fingered the slip. "I don't get this."

Clancy shrugged. "Only thing I could figure it was a money exchange slip. And the only place they do that is at an airport." He picked up a pencil and began twiddling it.

"So I figured they came in on today's plane, planning on doing a quick rub-out and catching another plane out of here as soon as pos-

sible. Hid their passports and papers, and their return tickets, somewhere safe, and left the airport without any identification on them. They needed a gun—they couldn't bring one in, because of this U.N. thing in town and the Customs going through everyone with a fine-tooth comb. And if you don't know a better place, where's the easiest place to find a gun? Simply take it from someone who's got one. Like a cop."

Kaproski came in, grinning, and sat down on one corner of the desk. "Man!" he said. "Did those three jabber away like mad when we put them all in together!"

"I still don't get that money-exchange stuff," the Captain said. "Or how you figured they were after the Uruguayan delegate."

"Well," Clancy said, "if it was a money-exchange slip it meant he brought in 300 of their own currency, traded it at an exchange rate of 11.20 to the dollar, and walked out with $26.78. The arithmetic worked out, and he had twenty-four brand-new dollars on him. Probably spent the rest for cab fare, or a sandwich."

"I simply looked through the exchange listings in today's paper, and the only one that was 11.20 to the dollar was the Uruguayan peso."

"Of course," the Captain pointed out, "they could have come here with Uruguayan pesos intending to knock off the Chinese Ambassador, too."

"Sure," Clancy agreed. "But what are you going to do? You have to start some place."

"Well," said the Captain, "it's all over now, and you rate a commendation for figuring it out. And I intend to see that you get it." He sighed and heaved himself to his feet. "Personally," he added, "I'll be glad when this U.N. thing is over, and all we have to worry about are our own hoods!"

"Me, too," Kaproski said in firm agreement. He rubbed his knuckles. "Them guys I can make talk!"

EDITORS' NOTE: *Don't miss the third investigation from The Case Book of the 52nd Precinct—"Clancy and the Shoeshine Boy"—coming soon!*

Raymond Chandler's own title for the story you are about to read was "The Pencil." The story was first published in a London newspaper as "Marlowe Takes On the Syndicate." It first appeared in the United States as "Wrong Pigeon." But we have decided to change the title again—to "Philip Marlowe's Last Case." Our reason? Well, this was not only the last story Raymond Chandler wrote about Philip Marlowe, it was also the last story Raymond Chandler wrote before his death . . . Readers of EQMM know how happy we are to publish an author's "first story"; perhaps readers will understand how sad we are to publish an author's last story—especially the last story of a writer who has contributed as importantly to the mystery genre as the late Raymond Chandler . . .

PHILIP MARLOWE'S LAST CASE

by RAYMOND CHANDLER

HE WAS A SLIGHTLY FAT MAN with a dishonest smile that pulled the corners of his mouth out half an inch leaving the thick lips tight and his eyes bleak. For a fattish man he had a slow walk. Most fat men are brisk and light on their feet. He wore a gray herringbone suit and a handpainted tie with part of a diving girl visible on it. His shirt was clean, which comforted me, and his brown loafers, as wrong as the tie for his suit, shone from a recent polishing.

He sidled past me as I held the door between the waiting room and my thinking parlor. Once inside, he took a quick look around. I'd have placed him as a mobster, second grade, if I had been asked. For once I was right. If he carried a gun, it was inside his pants. His coat was too tight to hide the bulge of an underarm holster.

He sat down carefully and I sat opposite and we looked at each other. His face had a sort of foxy eagerness. He was sweating a little. The expression on my face was meant to be interested but not clubby. I reached for a pipe and the leather humidor in which I kept my Pearce's tobacco. I pushed the cigarettes at him.

"I don't smoke." He had a rusty voice. I didn't like it any more than I liked his clothes, or his face. While I filled the pipe he reached inside his

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coat, prowled in a pocket, came out with a bill, glanced at it, and dropped it across the desk in front of me. It was a nice bill and clean and new. One thousand dollars.

"Ever save a guy's life?"

"Once in a while, maybe."

"Save mine."

"What goes?"

"I heard you leveled with the customers, Marlowe."

"That's why I stay poor."

"I still got two friends. You make it three and you'll be out of the red. You got five grand coming if you pry me loose."

"From what?"

"You're talkative as hell this morning. Don't you pipe who I am?"

"Nope."

"Never been east, huh?"

"Sure—but I wasn't in your set."

"What set would that be?"

I was getting tired of it. "Stop being so damn cagey or pick up your grand and be missing."

"I'm Ikky Rossen. I'll be missing but good unless you can figure some out. Guess."

"I've already guessed. You tell me and tell me quick. I don't have all day to watch you feeding me with an eye-dropper."

"I ran out on the Outfit. The high boys don't go for that. To them it means you got info you figure you can peddle, or you got independent ideas, or you lost your moxie. Me, I lost my moxie. I had it up to here." He touched his Adam's apple with the forefinger of a stretched hand. "I done bad things. I scared and hurt guys. I never killed nobody. That's nothing to the Outfit. I'm out of line. So they pick up the pencil and they draw a line. I got the word. The operators are on the way. I made a bad mistake. I tried to hole up in Vegas. I figured they'd never expect me to lie up in their own joint. They outfigured me. What I did's been done before, but I didn't know it. When I took the plane to L.A. there must have been somebody on it. They know where I live."

"Move."

"No good now. I'm covered."

I knew he was right.

"Why haven't they taken care of you already?"

"They don't do it that way. Always specialists. Don't you know how it works?"

"More or less. A guy with a nice hardware store in Buffalo. A guy with a small dairy in K.C. Always a good front. They report back to New York or somewhere. When they mount the plane west or wherever they're going, they have guns in their brief cases. They're quiet and well-dressed and they don't sit together. They could be a couple of lawyers or income tax sharpies —anything at all that's well-mannered and inconspicuous. All sorts of people carry brief cases. Including women."

"Correct as hell. And when they land they'll be steered to me, but not

from the airfield. They got ways. If I go to the cops, somebody will know about me. They could have a couple Mafia boys right on the City Council for all I know. The cops will give me twenty-fours to leave town. No use. Mexico? Worse than here. Canada? Better but still no good. Connections there too."

"Australia?"

"Can't get a passport. I been here twenty-five years—illegal. They can't deport me unless they can prove a crime on me. The Outfit would see they didn't. Suppose I got tossed into the freezer. I'm out on a writ in twenty-four hours. And my nice friends got a car waiting to take me home—only not home."

I had my pipe lit and going well. I frowned down at the one-grand note. I could use it very nicely. My checking account could kiss the sidewalk without stooping.

"Let's stop horsing," I said. "Suppose—just suppose—I could figure an out for you. What's your next move?"

"I know a place—if I could get there without bein' tailed. I'd leave my car here and take a rent car. I'd turn it in just short of the county line and buy a secondhand job. Halfway to where I'm going I trade it on a new last-year's model, a leftover—this is just the right time of year. Good discount, new models out soon. Not to save money—less show off. Where I'd go is a good-sized place but still pretty clean."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Wichita, last I heard. But it might have changed."

He scowled at me. "Get smart, Marlowe, but not too damn smart."

"I'll get as smart as I want to. Don't try to make rules for me. If I take this on, there aren't any rules. I take it for this grand and the rest if I bring it off. Don't cross me. I might leak information. If I get knocked off, put just one red rose on my grave. I don't like cut flowers. I like to see them growing. But I could take one, because you're such a sweet character. When's the plane in?"

"Sometime today. It's nine hours from New York. Probably come in about 5:30 p.m."

"Might come by San Diego and switch or by San Francisco and switch. A lot of planes from both places. I need a helper."

"Damn you, Marlowe—"

"Hold it. I know a girl. Daughter of a Chief of Police who got broken for honesty. She wouldn't leak under torture."

"You got no right to risk her," Ikky said angrily.

I was so astonished my jaw hung halfway to my waist. I closed it slowly and swallowed.

"Good God, the man's got a heart."

"Women ain't built for the rough stuff," he said grudgingly.

I picked up the thousand-dollar note and snapped it. "Sorry. No receipt," I said. "I can't have my name

in your pocket. And there won't be any rough stuff if I'm lucky. They'd have me outclassed. There's only one way to work it. Now give me your address and all the dope you can think of—names, descriptions of any operators you have ever seen in the flesh."

He did. He was a pretty good observer. Trouble was, the Outfit would know what he had seen. The operators would be strangers to him.

He got up silently and put his hand out. I had to shake it, but what he had said about women made it easier. He hand was moist. Mine would have been in his spot. He nodded and went out silently.

It was a quiet street in Bay City, if there are any quiet streets in this beatnik generation when you can't get through a meal without some male or female stomach-singer belching out a kind of love that is as old-fashioned as a bustle or some Hammond organ jazzing it up in the customer's soup.

The little one-story house was as neat as a fresh pinafore. The front lawn was cut lovingly and very green. The smooth composition driveway was free of grease spots from standing cars, and the hedge that bordered it looked as though the barber came every day.

The white door had a knocker with a tiger's head, a go-to-hell window, and a dingus that let someone inside talk to someone outside without even opening the little window.

I'd have given a mortgage on my left leg to live in a house like that. I didn't think I ever would.

The bell chimed inside and after a while she opened the door in a pale-blue sports shirt and white shorts that were short enough to be friendly. She had gray-blue eyes, dark red hair, and fine bones in her face. There was usually a trace of bitterness in the gray-blue eyes. She couldn't forget that her father's life had been destroyed by the crooked power of a gambling-ship mobster, that her mother had died too.

She was able to suppress the bitterness when she wrote nonsense about young love for the shiny magazines, but this wasn't her life. She didn't really have a life. She had an existence without much pain and enough money to make it safe. But in a tight spot she was as cool and resourceful as a good cop. Her name was Anne Riordan.

She stood to one side and I passed her pretty close. But I have rules too. She shut the door and parked herself on a sofa and went through the cigarette routine, and here was one doll who had the strength to light her own cigarette.

I stood looking around. There were a few changes, not many.

"I need your help," I said.

"The only time I ever see you."

"I've got a client who is an ex-hood used to be a troubleshooter for the Outfit, the Syndicate, the big mob, or whatever name you want to

use for it. You know damn well it exists and is as rich as Midas. You can't beat it because not enough people want to, especially the million-a-year lawyers who work for it."

"My God, are you running for office somewhere? I never heard you sound so pure."

She moved her legs around, not provocatively—she wasn't the type—but it made it difficult for me to think straight just the same.

"Stop moving your legs around," I said. "Or put a pair of slacks on."

"Damn you, Marlowe. Can't you think of anything else?"

"I'll try. I like to think that I know at least one pretty and charming female who doesn't have round heels." I swallowed and went on. "The man's name is Ikky Rossen." He's not beautiful and he's not anything that I like—except one thing. He got mad when I said I needed a girl helper. He said women were not made for the rough stuff. That's why I took the job. To a real mobster, a woman means no more than a sack of flour. They use women in the usual way, but if it's advisable to get rid of them they do it without a second thought."

"So far you've told me a whole lot of nothing. Perhaps you need a cup of coffee or a drink."

"You're sweet but I don't in the morning—except sometimes, and this isn't one of them. Coffee later. Ikky has been penciled."

"Now what's that?"

"You have a list. You draw a line through a name with a pencil. The guy is as good as dead. The Outfit has reasons. They don't do it just for kicks any more. They don't get any kick. It's just bookkeeping to them."

"What on earth can I do? I might even have said, what can *you* do?"

"I can try. What you can do is help me spot their plane and see where they go—the operators assigned to the job."

"Yes, but how can you do anything?"

"I said I could try. If they took a night plane they are already here. If they took a morning plane they can't be here before five or so. Plenty of time to get set. You know what they look like?"

"Oh, sure. I meet killers every day. I have them in for whiskey sours and caviar on hot toast." She grinned. While she was grinning I took four long steps across the tan-figured rug and lifted her and put a kiss on her mouth. She didn't fight me but she didn't go all trembly either. I went back and sat down.

"They'll look like anybody who's in a quiet well-run business or profession. They'll have quiet clothes and they'll be polite—when they want to be. They'll have brief cases with guns in them that have changed hands so often they can't possibly be traced. When and if they do the job, they'll drop the guns. They'll probably use revolvers, but they could use automatics. They

won't use silencers because silencers can jam a gun and the weight makes it hard to shoot accurately. They won't sit together on the plane, but once off of it they may pretend to know each other and simply not have noticed during the flight. They may shake hands with appropriate smiles and walk away and get in the same taxi. I think they'll go to a hotel first. But very soon they will move into something from which they can watch Ikky's movements and get used to his schedule. They won't be in any hurry unless Ikky makes a move. That would tip them off that Ikky has been tipped off. He has a couple of friends left—he says."

"Will they shoot him from this room or apartment across the street —assuming there is one?"

"No. They'll shoot him from three feet away. They'll walk up behind and say 'Hello, Ikky.' He'll either freeze or turn. They'll fill him with lead, drop the guns, and hop into the car they have waiting. Then they'll follow the crash car off the scene."

"Who'll drive the crash car?"

"Some well-fixed and blameless citizen who hasn't been rapped. He'll drive his own car. He'll clear the way, even if he has to accidentally on purpose crash somebody, even a police car. He'll be so damn sorry he'll cry all the way down his monogrammed shirt. And the killers will be long gone."

"Good heavens," Anne said. "How can you stand your life? If you did bring it off, they'll send operators after you."

"I don't think so. They don't kill a legit. The blame will go to the operators. Remember, these top mobsters are businessmen. They want lots and lots of money. They only get really tough when they figure they have to get rid of somebody, and they don't crave that. There's always a chance of a slip-up. Not much of a chance. No gang killing has ever been solved here or anywhere else except two or three times. The top mobster is awful big and awful tough. When he gets too big, too tough—pencil."

She shuddered a little. "I think I need a drink myself."

I grinned at her. "You're right in the atmosphere, darling. I'll weaken."

She brought a couple of Scotch highballs. When we were drinking them I said, "If you spot them or think you spot them, follow to where they go—if you can do it safely. Not otherwise. If it's a hotel —and ten to one it will be—check in and keep calling me until you get me."

She knew my office number and I was still on Yucca Avenue. She knew that too.

"You're the damndest guy," she said. "Women do anything you want them to. How come I'm still a virgin at twenty-eight?"

"We need a few like you. Why don't you get married?"

"To what? Some cynical chaser who has nothing left? I don't know any really nice men—except you. I'm no pushover for white teeth and a gaudy smile."

I went over and pulled her to her feet. I kissed her long and hard. "I'm honest," I almost whispered. "That's something. But I'm too shop-soiled for a girl like you. I've thought of you, I've wanted you, but that sweet clear look in your eyes tells me to lay off."

"Take me," she said softly. "I have dreams too."

"I couldn't. I've had too many women to deserve one like you. We have to save a man's life. I'm going."

She stood up and watched me leave with a grave face.

The women you get and the women you don't get—they live in different worlds. I don't sneer at either world. I live in both myself.

At Los Angeles International Airport you can't get close to the planes unless you're leaving on one. You see them land, if you happen to be in the right place, but you have to wait at a barrier to get a look at the passengers. The airport buildings don't make it any easier. They are strung out from here to breakfast time, and you can get calluses walking from TWA to American.

I copied an arrival schedule off the boards and prowled around like a dog that has forgotten where he put his bone. Planes came in, planes took off, porters carried luggage, passengers sweated and scurried, children whined, the loudspeaker overrode all the other noises.

I passed Anne a number of times. She took no notice of me.

At 5:45 they must have come. Anne disappeared. I gave it half an hour, just in case she had some other reason for fading. No. She was gone for good. I went out to my car and drove some long crowded miles to Hollywood and my office. I had a drink and sat. At 6:45 the phone rang.

"I think so," she said. "Beverly-Western Hotel. Room 410. I couldn't get any names. You know the clerks don't leave registration cards lying around these days. I didn't like to ask any questions. But I rode up in the elevator with them and spotted their room. I walked right on past them when the bellman put a key in their door, and went down to the mezzanine and then downstairs with a bunch of women from the tea room. I didn't bother to take a room."

"What were they like?"

"They came up the ramp together but I didn't hear them speak. Both had brief cases, both wore quiet suits, nothing flashy. White shirts, starched, one blue tie, one black striped with gray. Black shoes. A couple of businessmen from the East Coast. They could be publishers, lawyers, doctors, account executives—no, cut the last;

they weren't gaudy enough. You wouldn't look at them twice."

"Faces?"

"Both medium-brown hair, one a bit darker than the other. Smooth faces, rather expressionless. One had gray eyes, the one with the lighter hair had blue eyes. Their eyes were interesting. Very quick to move, very observant, watching everything near them. That might have been wrong. They should have been a bit preoccupied with what they came out for or interested in California. They seemed more occupied with faces. It's a good thing I spotted them and not you. You don't look like a cop, but you don't look like a man who is not a cop. You have marks on you."

"Phooey. I'm a damn good-looking heart wrecker."

"Their features were strictly assembly line. Each picked up a flight suitcase. One suitcase was gray with two red and white stripes up and down, about six or seven inches from the ends, the other a blue and white tartan. I didn't know there was such a tartan."

"There is, but I forget the name of it."

"I thought you knew everything."

"Just almost everything. Run along home now."

"Do I get a dinner and maybe a kiss?"

"Later, and if you're not careful you'll get more than you want."

"You'll take over and follow them?"

"If they're the right men, they'll follow me. I already took an apartment across the street from Ikky—that block on Poynter with six low-life apartment houses on the block. I'll bet the incidence of chippies is very high."

"It's high everywhere these days."

"So long, Anne. See you."

"When you need help."

She hung up. I hung up. She puzzles me. Too wise to be so nice. I guess all nice women are wise too.

I called Ikky. He was out. I had a drink from the office bottle, smoked for half an hour, and called again. This time I got him.

I told him the score up to then, and said I hoped Anne had picked the right men. I told him about the apartment I had taken.

"Do I get expenses?" I asked.

"Five grand ought to cover the lot."

"If I earn it and get it. I heard you had a quarter of a million," I said at a wild venture.

"Could be, pal, but how do I get at it? The high boys know where it is. It'll have to cool a long time."

I said that was all right. I had cooled a long time myself. Of course, I didn't expect to get the other four thousand, even if I brought the job off. Men like Ikky Rossen would steal their mother's gold teeth. There seemed to be a little good in him somewhere—but little was the operative word.

I spent the next half hour trying to think of a plan. I couldn't think

of one that looked promising. It was almost eight o'clock and I needed food. I didn't think the boys would move that night. Next morning they would drive past Ikky's place and scout the neighborhood.

I was ready to leave the office when the buzzer sounded from the door of my waiting room. I opened the communicating door. A small tight-looking man was standing in the middle of the floor rocking on his heels with his hands behind his back. He smiled at me, but he wasn't good at it. He walked toward me.

"You Philip Marlowe?"

"Who else? What can I do for you?"

He was close now. He brought his right hand around fast with a gun in it. He stuck the gun in my stomach.

"You can lay off Ikky Rossen," he said in a voice that matched his face, "or you can get your belly full of lead."

He was an amateur. If he had stayed four feet away, he might have had something. I reached up and took the cigarette out of my mouth and held it carelessly.

"What makes you think I know any Ikky Rossen?"

He laughed and pushed his gun into my stomach.

Wouldn't you like to know!" The cheap sneer, the empty triumph of that feeling of power when you hold a fat gun in a small hand.

"It would be fair to tell me."

As his mouth opened for another crack, I dropped the cigarette and swept a hand. I can be fast when I have to. There are boys that are faster, but they don't stick guns in your stomach.

I got my thumb behind the trigger and my hand over his. I kneed him in the groin. He bent over with a whimper. I twisted his arm to the right and I had his gun. I hooked a heel behind his heel and he was on the floor.

He lay there blinking with surprise and pain, his knees drawn up against his stomach. He rolled from side to side groaning. I reached down and grabbed his left hand and yanked him to his feet. I had six inches and forty pounds on him. They ought to have sent a bigger, better trained messenger.

"Let's go into my thinking parlor," I said. "We could have a chat and you could have a drink to pick you up. Next time don't get near enough to a prospect for him to get your gun hand. I'll just see if you have any more iron on you."

He hadn't. I pushed him through the door and into a chair. His breath wasn't quite so rasping. He grabbed out a handkerchief and mopped at his face.

"Next time," he said between his teeth. "Next time."

"Don't be an optimist. You don't look the part."

I poured him a drink of Scotch in a paper cup, set it down in front

of him. I broke his .38 and dumped the cartridges into the desk drawer. I clicked the chamber back and laid the gun down.

"You can have it when you leave —if you leave."

"That's a dirty way to fight," he said, still gasping.

"Sure. Shooting a man is so much cleaner. Now, how did you get here?"

"Nuts."

"Don't be a fool. I have friends. Not many, but some. I can get you for armed assault, and you know what would happen then. You'd be out on a writ or on bail and that's the last anyone would hear of you. The biggies don't go for failures. Now who sent you and how did you know where to come?"

"Ikky was covered," he said sullenly. "He's dumb. I trailed him here without no trouble at all. Why would he go see a private eye? People want to know."

"More."

"Go to hell."

"Come to think of it, I don't have to get you for armed assault. I can smash it out of you right here and now."

I got up from the chair and he put out a flat hand.

"If I get knocked about, a couple of real tough monkeys will drop around. If I don't report back, same thing. You ain't holding no real high cards. They just look high," he said.

"You haven't anything to tell. If this Ikky came to see me, you don't know why, nor whether I took him on. If he's a mobster, he's not my type of client."

"He come to get you to try and save his hide."

"Who from?"

"That'd be talking."

"Go right ahead. Your mouth seems to work fine. And tell the boys any time I front for a hood, that will be the day."

You have to lie a little once in a while in my business. I was lying a little. "What's Ikky done to get himself disliked? Or would that be talking?"

"You think you're a lot of man," he sneered, rubbing the place where I had kneed him. "In my league you wouldn't make pinch runner."

I laughed in his face. Then I grabbed his right wrist and twisted it behind his back. He began to squawk. I reached into his breast pocket with my left hand and hauled out a wallet. I let him go. He reached for his gun on the desk and I bisected his upper arm with a hard cut. He fell into the customer's chair and grunted.

"You can have your gun," I told him. "When I give it to you. Now be good or I'll have to bounce you just to amuse myself."

In the wallet I found a driver's license made out to Charles Hickon. It did me no good at all. Punks of his type always have slangy aliases. They probably called him Tiny, or Slim, or Marbles, or even

just "you." I tossed the wallet back to him. It fell to the floor. He couldn't even catch it.

"Hell," I said, "there must be an economy campaign on, if they send you to do more than pick up cigarette butts."

"Nuts."

"All right, mug. Beat it back to the laundry. Here's your gun."

He took it, made a business, of shoving it into his waistband, stood up, gave me as dirty a look as he had in stock, and strolled to the door, nonchalant as a hustler with a new mink stole.

He turned at the door and gave me the beady eye. "Stay clean, tinhorn. Tin bends easy."

With this blinding piece of repartee he opened the door and drifted out.

After a little while I locked my other door, cut the buzzer, made the office dark, and left. I saw no one who looked like a lifetaker. I drove to my house, packed a suitcase, drove to a service station where they were almost fond of me, stored my car, and picked up a rental Chevrolet.

I drove this to Poynter Street, dumped my suitcase in the sleazy apartment I had rented early in the afternoon, and went to dinner at Victor's. It was nine o'clock, too late to drive to Bay City and take Anne to dinner.

I ordered a double Gibson with fresh limes and drank it, and I was as hungry as a schoolboy.

On the way back to Poynter Street I did a good deal of weaving in and out and circling blocks and stopping, with a gun on the seat beside me. As far as I could tell, no one was trying to tail me.

I stopped on Sunset at a service station and made two calls from the box. I caught Bernie Ohls just as he was leaving to go home.

"This is Marlowe, Bernie. We haven't had a fight in years. I'm getting lonely."

"Well, get married. I'm chief investigator for the Sheriff's Office now. I rank acting captain until I pass the exam. I don't hardly speak to private eyes."

"Speak to this one. I need help. I'm on a ticklish job where I could get killed."

"And you expect me to interfere with the course of nature?"

"Come off it, Bernie. I haven't been a bad guy. I'm trying to save an ex-mobster from a couple of executioners."

"The more they mow each other down, the better I like it."

"Yeah. If I call you, come running or send a couple of good boys. You'll have had time to teach them."

We exchanged a couple of mild insults and hung up. I dialed Ikky Rossen's number. His rather unpleasant voice said, "Okay, talk."

"Marlowe. Be ready to move out about midnight. We've spotted your boy friends and they are holed up at the Beverly-Western. They

won't move to your street tonight. Remember, they don't know you've been tipped."

"Sounds chancy."

"Good God, it wasn't meant to be a Sunday School picnic. You've been careless, Ikky. You were followed to my office. That cuts the time we have."

He was silent for a moment. I heard him breathing. "Who by?" he asked.

"Some little tweezer who stuck a gun in my belly and gave me the trouble of taking it away from him. I can only figure they sent a punk on the theory they don't want me to know too much, in case I don't know it already."

"You're in for trouble, friend."

"When not? I'll come over to your place about midnight. Be ready. Where's your car?"

"Out front."

"Get it on a side street and make a business of locking it up. Where's the back door of your flop?"

"In back. Where would it be? On the alley."

"Leave your suitcase there. We walk out together and go to your car. We drive by the alley and pick up the suitcase or cases."

"Suppose some guy steals them?"

"Yeah. Suppose you get dead. Which do you like better?"

"Okay," he grunted. "I'm waiting. But we're taking big chances."

"So do race drivers. Does that stop them? There's no way to get out but fast. Douse your lights about ten and rumple the bed well. It would be good if you could leave some baggage behind. Wouldn't look so planned."

He grunted okay and I hung up. The telephone box was well lighted outside. They usually are in service stations. I took a good long gander around while I pawed over the collection of giveaway maps inside the station. I saw nothing to worry me. I took a map of San Diego just for the hell of it and got into my rented car.

On Poynter I parked around the corner and went up to my second-floor sleazy apartment and sat in the dark watching from my window. I saw nothing to worry about. A couple of medium-class chippies came out of Ikky's apartment house and were picked up in a late-model car. A man about Ikky's height and build went into the apartment house. Various other people came and went. The street was fairly quiet. Since they put in the Hollywood Freeway nobody much uses the off-the-boulevard streets unless they live in the neighborhood.

It was a nice fall night—or as nice as they get in Los Angeles' climate—clearish but not even crisp. I don't know what's happened to the weather in our overcrowded city, but it's not the weather I knew when I came to it.

It seemed like a long time to midnight. I couldn't spot anybody watching anything, and no couple of quiet-suited men paged any of

the six apartment houses available. I was pretty sure they'd try mine first when they came, but I wasn't sure if Anne had picked the right men, and if the tweezer's message back to his bosses had done me any good or otherwise.

In spite of the hundred ways Anne could be wrong, I had a hunch she was right. The killers had no reason to be cagey if they didn't know Ikky had been warned. No reason but one. He had come to my office and been tailed there. But the Outfit, with all its arrogance of power, might laugh at the idea he had been tipped off or come to me for help. I was so small they would hardly be able to see me.

At midnight I left the apartment, walked two blocks watching for a tail, crossed the street, and went into Ikky's dive. There was no locked door, and no elevator. I climbed steps to the third floor and looked for his apartment. I knocked lightly. He opened the door with a gun in his hand. He probably looked scared.

There were two suitcases by the door and another against the far wall. I went over and lifted it. It was heavy enough. I opened it—it was unlocked.

"You don't have to worry," he said. "It's got everything a guy could need for three-four nights, and nothing except some clothes that I couldn't glom off in any ready-to-wear place."

I picked up one of the other suitcases. "Let's stash this by the back door."

"We can leave by the alley too."

"We leave by the front door. Just in case we're covered—though I don't think so—we're just two guys going out together. Just one thing. Keep both hands in your coat pockets and the gun in your right. If anybody calls out your name behind you, turn fast and shoot. Nobody but a lifetaker will do it. I'll do the same."

"I'm scared," he said in his rusty voice.

"Me too, if it helps any. But we have to do it. If you're braced, they'll have guns in their hands. Don't bother asking them questions. They wouldn't answer in words. If it's just my small friend, we'll cool him and dump him inside the door. Got it?"

He nodded, licking his lips. We carried the suitcases down and put them outside the back door. I looked along the alley. Nobody, and only a short distance to the side street. We went back in and along the hall to the front. We walked out on Poynter Street with all the casualness of a wife buying her husband a birthday tie.

Nobody made a move. The street was empty.

We walked around the corner to Ikky's rented car. He unlocked it. I went back with him for the suitcases. Not a stir. We put the suitcases in the car and started up and drove to the next street.

A traffic light not working, a boulevard stop or two, the entrance to the Freeway. There was plenty of traffic on it even at midnight. California is loaded with people going places and making speed to get there. If you don't drive eighty miles an hour, everybody passes you. If you do, you have to watch the rear-view mirror for highway patrol cars. It's the rat race of rat races.

Ikky did a quiet seventy. We reached the junction to Route 66 and he took it. So far nothing. I stayed with him to Pomona.

"This is far enough for me," I said. "I'll grab a bus back if there is one, or park myself in a motel. Drive to a service station and we'll ask for the bus stop. It should be close to the Freeway."

He did that and stopped midway on a block. He reached for his pocketbook and held out four thousand-dollar bills.

"I don't really feel I've earned all that. It was too easy."

He laughed with a kind of wry amusement on his pudgy face. "Don't be a sap. I have it made. You didn't know what you was walking into. What's more, your troubles are just beginning. The Outfit has eyes and ears everywhere. Perhaps I'm safe if I'm damn careful. Perhaps I ain't as safe as I think I am. Either way, you did what I asked. Take the dough. I got plenty."

I took it and put it away. He drove to an all-night service station and we were told where to find the bus stop. "There's a cross-country Greyhound at 2:25 a.m.," the attendant said, looking at a schedule. "They'll take you, if they got room."

Ikky drove to the bus stop. We shook hands and he went gunning down the road toward the Freeway. I looked at my watch and found a liquor store still open and bought a pint of Scotch. Then I found a bar and ordered a double with water.

My troubles were just beginning, Ikky had said. He was so right.

I got off at the Hollywood bus station, grabbed a taxi, and drove to my office. I asked the driver to wait a few moments. At that time of night he was glad to. The night man let me into the building.

"You work late, Mr. Marlowe. But you always did, didn't you?"

"It's that sort of business," I said. "Thanks, Jimmy."

Up in my office I pawed the floor for mail and found nothing but a longish narrowish box, Special Delivery, with a Glendale postmark.

It contained nothing at all but a freshly sharpened pencil—the mobster's mark of death.

(*continued on page 84*)

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **BENJAMIN SIEGEL**

TITLE: ***The Man Who Couldn't Drink:***

TYPE: Detective Story

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Jeffrey West and alcohol simple did not mix. Would this incompatibility cost him his girl, his career, perhaps his life?*

AT THREE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING I was awakened by a banging on the door. I got out of bed trying to walk as close to floating as I could and begged whoever it was to stop. I leaned against the door and held my head. Somebody from the other side said he was from the Homicide Division of the District Attorney's office.

"Sure you are," I said.

I opened the door thinking I would see the gag at the sight of them—misguided friends, drinking companions bringing with them only the problem of my convincing them to leave. They were strangers. They were polite, competent, and without humor. One gave his name as Severin, the other as Karns.

"Wrong house, wrong man," I said. "Wrong time of night. Right?"

"Are you Jeffrey West?" Severin said.

"Yes."

"The District Attorney wants some information from you," Severin said patiently. "Please come with us."

I began to protest but it was too much trouble. I dressed trying to keep my head from tipping. I rode between them in a year-old police car.

We went into the shabby building with the dreary formality of city departments after hours. The District Attorney's office was different—even warm with its legal bindings and deep leather chairs. He said his name was Miles Packer and offered his hand. He smiled in a friendly way. I would have preferred him solemn. I doubt if the patient appreciates, just before he goes under, a smile on the face of the surgeon, or

if the man strapped to the electric chair relishes a sign of friendly and cheerful interest in one of the spectators.

"This is an informal meeting," Packer said, "but it *is* being recorded. Do you mind?"

"The only thing I mind," I said, "is not knowing why I'm here."

A man worked efficiently over a stenotype machine. Severin was busy studying the legal titles.

"Amos Gibney was murdered this evening," Packer said.

I let out air through my teeth and shook my head. That was a mistake. I made a tent with my fingers over my temples and tried to soothe the beast threshing within.

Packer took a pipe from his pocket and pulled a humidor toward him. He began to fill the pipe as if each shred of tobacco were infinitely precious. "Can you help us? Will you tell us what you know about it?"

"I'll tell you whatever I can," I stated. "I don't know if it will help."

"From the beginning," Severin said. "And take your time."

"Can I please have some aspirin first?" I said.

Packer took out a bottle of aspirin from his desk and I took a couple and swallowed them before he could extend carafe and glass. Severin grimaced as I forced them down.

"From the beginning," Packer said.

You couldn't determine just what the beginning was. You'd have to get into the cell structure, perhaps, to find out why alcohol was a special kind of poison to me. Because I had promised Anne not to touch it again and I had—only that once to find out if I'd still be affected—Anne and I had stopped seeing each other. Annie, straight shooter, uncompromiser, believer in the words of the old song—a liar is worse than a cheat. She said she loved me, and would not see me again, and I said I loved her, and be damned if I wanted anything to do with a girl who lacked faith, empathy, and forgiveness.

When I decorated the Moberly house and Mrs. Moberly asked me to her party, I almost called Anne to come with me. That I didn't probably proves that self-punishment is fundamental to human behavior

The party was dull and I wasn't particularly proud of the house. I was very proud of the fee. So much for the long-ago early morning discussions over coffee in the all-night cafeterias about Frank Lloyd Wright and the work of the Bauhaus and how the architect shapes not only the building but the future . . .

But I didn't take a drink. And that made me madder than ever at Anne—the point was, I had no real interest in liquor—so I decided to reach in, once and for all, and cast her out like some irksome intruder.

At that moment of my greatest rebound receptivity Mrs. Moberly came over on her fat feet ridiculously squeezed into tiny pumps, having been frantically manufacturing wants and attending to them all evening.

"I must introduce you to someone special," she said.

A thirty-year-old bachelor awakens in the Mrs. Moberlys a kind of furious challenge. I think they score it like a game, awarding themselves so many points for an introduction, a bonus for a second date, and so on. Because I have never been introduced by them to any except plain girls with sinus conditions, I was somewhat less than eager I looked over Mrs. Moberly's head hoping my expression would indicate I had just spotted someone it was vitally necessary I speak to. Mrs. Moberly ignored this, taking my arm in a grip like an oarsman, and propelling me to a corner of the room where a girl stood examining a vase on a small table. She turned as we approached, and smiled.

Whereupon I swore to myself never again to live by prior opinions, and decided to do something particularly fine for Mrs. Moberly, like introducing her to a good chiropodist.

"Ellen, my dear," Mrs. Moberly said this Jeffrey West. Mr. West, Miss Gibney."

"I wanted to meet you," Ellen said.

I mumbled something, never having learned the reply to that particular gambit.

"I'll leave you two," said Mrs. Moberly happily.

When she had gone I stared at Ellen Gibney. She was beautiful. She was small (Anne was almost my height), dark (Anne's hair was warm wheat), and completely exquisite. Finally I pulled my eyes away, half afraid they would stick.

"I've been looking over your house," she said.

"Yes?" I said, prepared to be modest about it.

"I can't help but contrast it with another example of your work. I saw the model of the building you designed for Purity Soap. Second prize, wasn't it? I saw it in a bank building downtown."

I said defensively that there was nothing wrong with Mrs. Moberly getting the kind of house *she* liked. Ellen said that was no excuse at all. Then I noticed a man at the other end of the room who had glanced at me and Ellen and then away too quickly. I had seen him before but could not remember where. He was tall and blond, a little too old and a little too big and heavy for the crewcut and college clothes he wore. I asked Ellen if she knew him.

She nodded without interest. "I know him. His name's Hollister."

"Oh, sure. I remember now."

"Friend of yours?"

"Came into my office—" I

frowned. "Friend of *yours?*"

"You want to say something nasty about him, don't you?"

"N-no. He said he was window shopping, and wanted to know if I could design a home for him—a 'living envelope,' he said. A setting for his personality."

"Condemn a man for reading a magazine article?"

"My architect's eye. The man was Romanesque."

"You want to explain that?"

"You look at the old Roman walls and it appears they're supported by those thick arches. Actually the job's being done by the unrevealed masonry."

She put her hand on my arm. "Can we go somewhere where we can talk?"

"Yes!" I said.

We found our hostess and said goodbye. Mrs. Moberly had the look of a golfer below par on the sixteenth hole. Ellen and I went out and walked along the river. We talked for a long time. I spoke about city planning and houses on top of hills with no affront to nature and low smokeless factories in colored stone and glass. Then I took her home and the Fifth Avenue address was a shock.

"You didn't know about me?" she asked.

"I certainly didn't know I was walking with royalty."

"Having spent an evening with a man who didn't know I was the daughter of Amos Gibney don't spoil it for me. It's never happened before."

"I'll tell you what. Even though you're awfully rich I'd still like to see you again."

"You mean that?" she said, and oddly enough her tone seemed serious.

We arranged to meet for lunch at Roberto's. I went home and could not sleep. I kept thinking of her beauty and the quality of her understanding of my ambitions—and this before knowing she was the daughter of Amos Gibney, the impact of whose wealth was felt across the country. I let myself enter just the bare edge of a fantasy—what would it be like to function in my field without all the economic compromises that earning a living enforces?

The morning light was starkly sane, like the light of most mornings. I was sure I had misread her interest; at most, I had been a pleasant and probably, for her, unusual companion for an evening. Before noon I would probably receive a polite communication from a social secretary. Miss Gibney regrets, but . . .

There was no call and I went to Roberto's to wait and Ellen came. We took a table and Roberto—thick gray hair and with a heavy gold chain across his vest—came over and greeted me like the old friends we were. I introduced him to Ellen and he was frankly impressed.

"Bellina," he said to me.

Ellen smiled.

He asked her if she had not been there before.

"I don't think so—" She turned to me, "Forgive me, Jeff, but I'm starving."

"Surely I could not forget a face like this," Roberto mumbled to himself.

I ordered a drink for Ellen but none for myself. She asked if the omission had a purpose. I looked through the alcove to Roberto's bar and repressed a shudder. "I'll tell you about it sometime."

Ellen leaned forward and touched her fingertips to mine. "Jeff, I have to know something."

"Yes?"

"Is it the same—with both of us —or—"

"Ellen," I said, unbelieving.

"A girl has to be careful she isn't just giving her heart away," Ellen said gravely.

"How is it," I said, "you're not—"

"Married?"

"Well, yes."

"It goes back a long time. Shall I tell you the sad story of my life?"

"Tell."

"It's a dull story, really. Poor little rich girl. I can't remember my mother—she died when I was very young. I was brought up by servants and never saw much of my father. His instructions were to guard me. I had everything money could buy for a little girl. My dolls were works of art. But I couldn't share them. I had no friends."

"Why?"

"Do you let just anyone handle a precious vase? Little girls rode on bicycles, roller skates, climbed trees. If I were to get a skinned knee my governess would get hysterical—"

"And now?"

"It's almost the same."

I knew why Roberto was taking so long. For Ellen, the lunch had to be perfect. If I stopped to pick out a flower for her from a woman selling roses from a basket the selection would take minutes—for Ellen it couldn't be just any rose.

And this loveliness that should have been courted by kings and rajahs wanted *me!* There was no way to understand it.

Well, we met almost daily for lunch and I saw her several evenings a week. My work suffered. I experienced the aimless irritability of a man involved in some indeterminate procedure foreign to his established routine. It had to be defined, resolved, and one evening I said this to Ellen.

"I think I was ready the first night, Jeff. I was waiting for you."

"Ready?" I said.

"Don't you think we should get married?" she said.

My first reaction was pure bachelor funk.

"Don't," Ellen said softly, "look so frightened."

It was not, I thought, that I didn't want to marry her. A man would have to be an idiot not to want an Ellen to be legally and per-

manently his. Somehow, as she waited, I made the transition to affirmation and that it was based on what *any* man would want did not then seem false.

The next day she told me about her father. "Jeff, I did a stupid thing. I spoke to him and he can see you at four o'clock."

"Today?" I said emptily.

"He's so darned busy and—well—I just wanted you to meet him."

"I'm willing," I said.

"What makes it particularly bad is that I've got an appointment I can't get out of—"

"Great," I said.

"So I'll have to brief you, Jeff. He's a difficult man. He doesn't want to let me go."

"Most fathers—"

She looked down, her lower lip beginning to tremble. "He's never been a father to me. He's a keeper."

"If he's really such an ogre—you *are* of age, you know."

"That's just it, I want his permission. I want to be like any other girl—"

Ellen looked so doleful, so completely appealing, that I told her not to worry that when I spoke to her father, surely he could feel nothing but friendliness toward me.

"That's the point. If you try to be friendly he'll read it as obsequiousness. Everybody has kowtowed to him all his life."

"What should I do, snarl at him?"

"Please, Jeff, no matter how ridiculous it sounds please do it my way. I mean that you're to stand up to him. If he shouts at you, shout back. Don't you see? No one has ever dared. It's our only chance."

I would have protested but she began to sob. Unobtrusively a tear formed in each eye and hung, reluctant to fall. In jellied compassion I took her hand and promised I would do exactly what she wanted.

"Honest, Jeff," she said wanly. "I know him."

"Don't worry," I said.

Ellen stood up. "I'll meet you back here afterward. I'll be here from five o'clock on."

"Right. Bring antibiotics and tranquilizers."

"Remember, Jeff, stand up to him."

"Sure," I said.

When she had gone, Roberto brought over a plate of soup for me, unasked, and sat down. I played with it, then found I was hungry. He said, "Your Ellen. Beautiful."

"Yes. But I'm not. What does she see in me, Roberto, my friend?"

He shrugged. "Even the old Greek gods could not understand women. What chance have we?"

"What would you think of a man who turned down a woman like that?"

"He should have his head examined."

"That's what I think," I said.

I went home to take another shower. I dressed to present a picture of a sober successful desirable-as-a-son-in-law young man. At five

to four I rang the bell of the Gibney house.

A thin bowed man opened the door. I told him who I was, and he said he was Edward Bottler, Mr. Gibney's secretary.

"Come in," he said sadly, the way the caretaker of Hades might greet a new soul. "Mr. Gibney is expecting you."

In the entrance hall he turned to me and said, "You and Ellen—"

"Yes."

He sighed. "Mr. Gibney—" He sighed again.

"If you have anything to say—" I suggested.

"Mr. Gibney has interviewed other—ah—suitors. It has always been most unpleasant. I thought some forewarning might be useful."

"Thanks," I said, wondering about the other suitors.

My first impression of Amos Gibney was that he looked quite ordinary—a smallish man in a gray suit and G.I.-type eyeglasses. He rose from his desk in the library to offer me his hand, sat down at once, and without looking at me asked me to take a chair.

It was going to be a classic interview. I decided that you have to be an idiot to greet your daughter's young man from behind a desk, and the thought was somehow steadying.

"I simply haven't the time," he said querulously, "to lead up to what I intend saying. Nor to offer you a drink or pretend a cordiality I simply cannot feel."

Because he had paused I said "Oh?"

"Mr. West, any plans you entertain for my daughter will have to be cancelled. She will not marry you, or anyone. Is that clear?"

"No!" I said loudly, half rising and falling back into my chair, thinking Ellen's advice had seemed odd but that it might be perfectly sound after all. "It is not clear at all."

"Then I shall be more explicit. Through the years there have been several young men with nostrils aquiver at the scent of Gibney money, coming in here like suppliant weasels asking for Ellen. When they first appear out of their holes I have them investigated—thoroughly. The one before you was a prime example of vice and the main chance. Ellen I am afraid has a proclivity for the worthless ones. What was his name—oh, yes, Hollister."

"Hollister?" I said.

"It was comparatively simple for me to dissuade that one—as it will be, I'm sure, with you."

"Will it?" I said, getting up, thinking Ellen was right—against this kind of megalomania you could only stand up and shout.

He put out the flat of his hand to me—a practiced tired gesture. Hold on, little man, it said.

I was yelling now. I was ashamed of myself but I couldn't stop. I

ranted about dictators, medieval fathers, the worth of the individual, people playing God, and so on. None of it was original, nor particularly impressive.

He heard me out. When I was finished he said "Mr. West you will not see Ellen again."

I said hopelessly "Why?"

"First, to be fair about it, Ellen will not marry—that would stand even if you were not, as you are, completely unacceptable to me. Because, Mr. West, you are a potential murderer."

"What!" I said.

He referred to a sheet of paper on the desk. "A month ago after a little drinking in the bar of a restaurant called Roberto's, you fought with a man, forced him to the floor with your hands on his throat, and would have killed him if you had not been pulled away. He was a complete stranger to you."

I had a feeling of the room being stretched with Gibney and his desk pulled out like taffy and then released. I swallowed on the sourness in my throat

"True, Mr. West?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"A letter was sent me."

"From whom?"

"It was unsigned."

"You want to know about it, Mr. Gibney? You want to know *anything* about me?"

"Frankly, no."

"Well, I think you should know about this. I can't explain it—it's happened a few times. I drink and then do something stupid. Uusually I get into a fight. Then I don't remember what happened. In this case I was told that the man I fought with was very insulting—but I suppose that doesn't matter. All right, it's a dangerous weakness—I admit it. So knowing that I'm prone to idiot behavior when I drink I just don't drink any more. It's as simple as that. I'm not an alcoholic. The stuff is poison to me and I know it and keeping away from it is no problem—no problem at all."

"Mr. West, I haven't time for these confessionals. I think the purpose of this meeting has been attained, don't you?" In some manner he must have signaled, for the door opened and Bottler came in. "Mr. West is just leaving."

I felt my face grow very hot, then cold. I got up and without a word followed Bottler out of the room. In the hall he said, "I'm sorry, Mr. West. This is the way it always is."

"Your boss is a maniac."

"He has his problems, sir."

I called a taxi and went to Roberto's, isolated in a kind of red mist. Ellen was seated at the bar. She watched me come in and reached both her hands out. She said, "Bad?"

I looked at her very carefully.

"Please don't," she said.

"Don't what?"

"You're looking at me for traces of my father."

"I didn't mean to."

Ellen signaled. "Bring Mr. West a drink."

The bartender threw a questioning expression at me.

I looked at the bottles shimmering behind the bar like brook pebbles in the sun.

Ellen said, "I know what you must have gone through. You can take just *one* drink, Jeff. You're entitled to it."

I said, "Bring me a double scotch, Jimmy."

"Mr. West—" he said doubtfully.

Ellen leaned over and kissed me. "I won't leave you alone for a minute," she said . . .

"But she did leave you," Severin said.

"I forced her to. I got nasty. I remember telling her that with her father's genes she didn't have a chance."

"You must be quite a guy when you're plastered," said Severin companionably. "What did you do after that?"

"I left. I remember walking out. And that's all. I just don't remember anything else. Until Severin got me out of bed. Will you tell me how Gibney was killed?"

Severin said, after a glance at Packer, "Bottler found him. Around eight o'clock. Somebody used a poker on his head. With pleasure, it looked like."

I swallowed. "Somebody. Me?"

No one answered. Outside it was light, and there were sounds of the city coming awake.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"Now? Now you go about your business."

"Just like that? I'm not—arrested or anything?"

"If, as a result of our investigation," Packer said in a formal tone, "we find evidence pointing to you we'll know where to find you. Just don't do anything foolish—like trying to leave the city."

I stood up.

"Goodbye, Mr. West. Thanks for your cooperation."

I went out into the street, into the erupting city. I marveled at all the people going to their jobs secure in the knowledge of how they had spent the previous night, each with no fear that he might have committed murder. I felt that I had to see Ellen, and yet I wished it were not necessary. More for delay than because of hunger I went into a crowded diner and had two cups of coffee at the counter. Then I went to the house on Fifth Avenue.

Bottler let me in. He was grave and controlled. He said it was a terrible thing and I agreed. I asked about Ellen and he said she had been given sedation.

"You heard nothing?" I said.

"I was in the basement running a power saw."

I asked what he intended to do.

"I'll stay on as long as Miss Gibney has need of me. Mr. Gibney left me well provided for—he was a

fine man. For twenty years he and Ellen have been the only family I've known."

I said I wanted to see Ellen.

"Her room is at the head of the stairs."

I went up and tapped on her door. There was no answer and when I pushed, it opened and I went in. She was sitting up in bed, eyes open, her face white and stricken and her eyes abnormally large. She turned her head to me as if with effort. "Jeff?"

"Ellen—what can I say?"

"I don't know why you came," she said.

"What?"

"Unless—what did you expect? My thanks?"

She turned her head to the pillow.

I tried to speak and couldn't. I left.

I walked for a couple of hours. By then the newspapers were out with the story. I was "among those questioned." It seemed to me the account was heavily implicit with my guilt. I decided that Ellen, in her shock, was hardly responsible for her attitude toward me, so I went back to see her again.

This time there were reporters there. Bottler was harassed but effectively fending them off. I drew him aside and he told me Ellen was in the library. I went there and found her standing beside the chair in which her father had been sitting the only time I'd seen him alive. Or the only time I could remember seeing him.

She looked up, saw me, and smiled. Her smile was like a knife thrown at me. In her misery she was able, with wry torment, to take note of my iniquity. There was nothing I could say against this, and as before I simply left.

It was worse now, much worse, and nothing helped. I called my office to say I was not coming in and went home. And waiting for me was Anne.

She looked clean and I was afraid to approach her, feeling I had been knee-deep in mud for a long time. The skin crinkled at the corners of her eyes as she shook her head sadly. "Turn my back on you for a single minute—and blowie!"

"Yes," I said meekly.

"Are you in love with this girl?"

"I thought—oh, no, Annie. How could I be?"

"That was the main thing I wanted to know," she said.

"But I was going to marry her. That's the truth."

"You think I've been in a nunnery? The cure works both ways, doesn't it?"

"You didn't," I said.

She smiled. I made a gesture and then my arms were around her. For a moment the ache stopped.

"Jeff, how could one man be so dumb?"

"I'm in bad trouble, Annie."

"Tell me."

I told her everything that had happened—at least, everything I could remember. When I finished she was silent for a while and I was afraid she felt condemnation, but then she reached for my hand as she thought.

"Not you," she said finally. "Not that way. I'm sure, Jeff."

"If I did it—if I took a poker to that old man—I feel Annie that I'd *want* them to find out."

"Maybe we could get you to remember. The scientific approach. You could get drunk again—"

I shuddered. "Not for any reason, not ever, no matter what, for the rest of my life, so help me."

I walked around the room and made reaching-out gestures, grasping air. "I don't want to just wait around for another clobbering."

"What is there to do but wait?" Anne said.

"I don't know. Something. Go home, Annie—I'll call you."

"The last time I left you—"

"Don't worry. I'm really cured."

I put Anne into a cab and went down to Roberto's. Roberto offered me money a place to hide and a character testimonial. He didn't say he was sure I was innocent. After all, he had seen what I was capable of the night I had the fight in his bar.

"What I think," Roberto said, "is that all men carry bombs in themselves and some of them go off and some don't."

"Thanks," I said.

He shrugged, having observed life for a long time and not accepted the glossy versions most of us live with.

"That night," I said. "There must have been somebody here who saw me—a man named Hollister." I described him.

"I think I know him," Roberto said. "A sometime customer."

"Good. Where does he live?"

Roberto shook his head.

"Not now," I said. "Don't stop me now."

Roberto called over the bartender.

"Sure, Mr. West, I know him. He's got a room over on Seventh."

I went out armed with the address and a conviction that something fitted. I rang Hollister's bell. It took a while and I waited, having heard sounds of movement.

Hollister opened the door. I said I had to talk to him. He was wearing only the bottoms of pajamas, his blond fat torso looking as if it had never known sun or the strain of exercise.

"What do you know," he said, "the boy architect." He was very drunk.

I went into his room with the feeling of walking into a bear pit, only the bear was unchained and I was just one poor lonely dog.

Hollister sprawled into a chair. On the table beside it was a glass of beer into which he poured some whiskey from a depleted bottle. My stomach heaved.

"Too bad," Hollister said. "But I know how you must have felt about that old skunk."

"You wrote him that letter, didn't you?"

"Letter?" He drank off the mixture and carefully wiped his lips with a knuckle.

"Didn't you?"

"So what if I did?"

I hate people who don't sign their names to letters, especially when the letters are about me. I made some kind of gesture, presumably threatening, and he stood up. He said, "Where did a nothing like you ever dream that Ellen—" He held back a hiccup, his pouches pursing like a hamster's. "Sure I wrote that letter. Why not? Why not let somebody else get the same treatment I got from that old—"

"Who killed him?" I said.

"You. Don't you read the papers?"

I thought if I hit him my fist would sink so deep into his flabbiness I could never get it out. He said, beginning to weave slightly, "Ellen and me. It was always Ellen and me. You damn fool—"

I went out. I could hear him yelling back in the room: "You damn fool, fool, fool—"

I called up the District Attorney's office, asked for Severin, and arranged to meet him in the diner. He was having a cup of coffee when I got there and waved me to a seat. I went to him with my wrists out together. "Yes or no?"

"Not yet, West."

"Do you know anything?"

"Much more than we did."

"You know about Hollister?"

"What about him?"

"He saw me get drunk and nasty that night. He's the one who wrote Gibney about me."

"And then he killed the old man, figuring he had set you up with a motive?"

"If it wasn't me, it has to be somebody else. And I prefer that it wasn't me."

"Maybe it was Bottler," Severin said.

"Of course," I said. "The Bottler did it. How do you figure that?"

"He said he was running a power saw in the basement about the time it happened. He wasn't. I looked over the saw and there wasn't any fresh sawdust."

"You detectives" I said admiringly.

"If you want to come up there with me," Severin said, "I'd like to see Bottler again."

I thought of seeing Ellen.

Severin said, nodding, "She thinks it was you, West."

Bottler let us in and said that Ellen was in her room. Severin said not to call her yet. "You lied to us," Severin said.

Bottler stood working his hands together. He asked us if we wanted to sit down and we followed him into the huge old-fashioned kitchen with the arrows in cabinets to indicate which room was calling.

"That was the life," Severin said.

"It has not been that way here for a long time," Bottler said. "Just Mr. Gibney and Ellen, and never any guests."

"You saw someone the night he was killed, didn't you?"

Bottler looked down at his hands dry-washing each other. "It's like a road ahead of you, straight, never turning, and you're going to spend your life just going along it. Then what do you do when it splits off into all those little separate turnings? What do you do?"

"Who did you see?" Severin asked quietly.

"It was a little after eight. I saw someone coming out of the library."

"Yes?"

"It was Mr. Hollister."

"He'll get away!" I said a little hysterically.

"No, he won't," Severin said. "Why didn't you tell us before, Bottler?"

"He said—and Ellen—I just didn't know what to do."

"What else?"

"Nothing. Just nothing," Bottler said.

"I think we'll see Miss Gibney now."

"I'll bring her down."

She came in, impossibly lovely, nodded to Severin, but gave no indication she even knew me. Already she was back in her proper sphere—someone I could never approach. That we had talked of marriage and love was as unreal as a dream. I felt the nostalgic twinge that you get from listening to an old song. But it went no deeper than that.

"Did you know a man named Hollister?" Severin asked her.

"Yes."

"Did you know he was here at the time your father was killed?"

"I've said all I'm going to say about that." Her face was perfectly calm. She had fought hard for adjustment and was strong enough to keep it that way. But I got a nasty feeling about it—perhaps because I had been so painlessly rejected.

Severin asked permission to use the phone and dialed. I looked at Ellen to see if she would look back. She didn't. I looked for and hoped to see some small sign of embarrassment or grief or nervousness. Like biting a lip or picking at a finger. There was nothing, and in a moment I'd have yelled at her, done something, when I heard Severin say into the phone: "Pick up Hollister and bring him to the office. I'm coming right down."

"Mr. Severin," Ellen said.

"Yes?"

"I would prefer that you did not continue to return here with questions. You, or anyone."

"I'll try not to," Severin said.

He guided me out as if I needed his hand on my arm, and I probably did.

As we drove downtown he said,

"That's quite a woman you were going to marry."

"Were is right. Do you understand any of this?"

"No."

"Am I supposed to understand any of it?"

"Brother," Severin said, "the things to be understood are poker, international finance, and viruses. Not women, not love, not—if you don't mind the allusion—murder."

Hollister was already there, hurriedly dressed and mumbling his indignation. They had him in Packer's office. The District Attorney, Severin was told, was on the way down.

Hollister said, "This is a hell of an imposition. In the middle of the night. I'm a taxpayer and—"

"It's because you pay our salary," Severin said, "that we have to try to earn it. You can't argue with that."

"Why—"

"As soon as the District Attorney gets here."

Packer finally arrived, and he and Severin conferred in the hall. They came back and Packer sat behind the desk. He smiled at Hollister and said, "I understand you're going to be able to straighten out this whole business for us."

"Straighten out! I'll straighten you out—you and your whole damned department! You've got no right—"

"It's not a right, it's a duty, and sometimes a privilege. Why did you write that letter about Mr. West?"

Hollister began to bluster, changed his mind, considered. "So I wrote it. Why not? I wanted West to get some of the same treatment I did. Why not?"

"I see," Packer said agreeably. "And then *you* were seen leaving the room in which Mr. Gibney had just been killed. Would you like to make a statement about that, Mr. Hollister?"

"Statement? What do you mean I was seen—"

I felt sorry for him. I could see his hands thrusting out of the water and desperately clutching at nothing. Nobody was supposed to help him; he was supposed to drown before your eyes.

Suddenly Packer's voice crackled. I had not thought the young lawyer had so much steel in him. "We have more than enough to charge you with, Hollister. You don't have to say anything more if you don't want to—"

"Charge?" Hollister said.

He looked at Packer. Then he twisted to look at us, then back to the District Attorney. It was as if his expression had been fixed to some superimposed skin which now began slowly to melt, revealing the true face of fright underneath.

"Murder," Packer said.

Hollister's eyes almost turned over.

And I was sorry for him. Where is it written that compassion is only

favor and reward for the good?

"I won't," Hollister said, the sweat breaking out of him, "be left holding the bag."

"Tell us about it."

"Ellen and I—we were going to be married. This West—he was nothing—Ellen and I were going together and the problem was her father. He wouldn't let her go. And he'd gotten a few reports about me that weren't strictly accurate. One night we saw this fellow West in a bar. He had a couple of drinks and almost killed a guy. Ellen got the idea. It was her, you understand that?"

"Go on," Packer said.

"I checked on him. At first it was a kind of joke, you see? Here was a fellow, if he drank a few and got mad— Well, I didn't really think Ellen was serious. I just went along. She arranged to meet West and got him to fall for her. I wrote that letter to Gibney to steam him up. Not that he needed it. Anybody came to him for his daughter was sure to get the bum's rush—"

Hollister mopped his forehead. "Ellen convinced West he ought to get tough with her father—so Bottler could hear them argue. Then, afterward, with West sore enough, Ellen got him to start drinking—"

Packer said "So it was you then who killed Amos Gibney?"

Hollister shouted, "No! Ellen went home and waited for West. But West never showed. You know what he did?" He began to laugh, and choked, and sat trying to catch his breath.

"What did I do?" I asked him.

Hollister giggled. "West got drunk, all right, but all he did was go home and go to bed. I followed him. Then I went home myself. Ellen called me. She sounded wild and I was afraid of what she might do, so I ran over there. I was too late. I saw her with the poker—she had just finished. Bottler saw me coming out, but he saw Ellen with me and that's why he wouldn't talk about it."

All of a sudden I had to get out of there. This was now their business and I wanted no part of it. I asked Packer and he said I was free to go.

Severin said, "They pointed you like a gun, West."

I said, "Thank God I didn't go off."

I wondered if it was too late to call Anne. I decided it wasn't.

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THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE

by A. CONAN DOYLE

I HAD CALLED UPON MY FRIEND, MR. Sherlock Holmes, one day in the autumn of last year, and found him in deep conversation with a very stout, florid-faced elderly gentleman, with fiery red hair. With an apology for my intrusion I was about to withdraw, when Holmes pulled me abruptly into the room and closed the door behind me.

"You could not possibly have come at a better time, my dear Watson," he said cordially.

"I was afraid you were engaged."

"So I am. Very much so."

"Then I can wait in the next room."

"Not at all. This gentleman, Mr. Wilson, has been my partner and helper in many of my most successful cases, and I have no doubt that he will be of the utmost use to me in yours also."

The stout gentleman half rose from his chair and gave a bob of greeting, with a quick little questioning glance from his small, fat-encircled eyes.

"Try the settee," said Holmes, relapsing into his armchair, and putting his fingertips together, as was his custom when in judicial moods. "I know, my dear Watson, that you share my love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life. You have shown your relish for it by the enthusiasm which has prompted you to chronicle, and, if you will excuse my saying so, somewhat to embellish so many of my own little adventures."

"Your cases have indeed been of the greatest interest to me," I observed.

"You will remember that I remarked the other day, just before we went into the very simple problem presented by Miss Mary Sutherland, that for strange effects and extraordinary combinations we must go to life itself, which is always far more daring than any effort of the imagination."

"A proposition which I took the liberty of very seriously doubting."

"You did, Doctor, but none the less you must come round to my view, for otherwise I shall keep on piling fact upon fact on you, until your reason breaks down under them and acknowledges me to be right. Now, Mr. Jabez Wilson here has been good enough to call upon me this morning, and to begin a narrative which promises to be one of the most singular which I have listened to for some time. You have heard me remark that the strangest and most unique things are very often connected not with the larger but with the smaller crimes, and occasionally, indeed, where there is room for doubt whether any positive crime has been committed. As far as I have heard, it is impossible for me to say whether the present case is an instance of crime or not, but the course of events is certainly among the most singular that I have ever listened to. Perhaps, Mr. Wilson, you would have the great kindness to recommence your narrative. I ask you, not merely because my friend, Dr. Watson, has not heard the opening part, but also because the peculiar nature of the story makes me anxious to have every possible detail from your lips. As a rule, when I have heard some slight indication of the course of events I am able to guide myself by the thousands of other similar cases which occur to my memory, In the present instance I am forced to admit that the facts are, to the best of my belief, unique."

The portly client puffed out his chest with an appearance of some little pride, and pulled a dirty and wrinkled newspaper from the inside pocket of his greatcoat. As he glanced down the advertisement column, with his head thrust forward, and the paper flattened out upon his knee, I took a good look at the man, and endeavored, after the fashion of my companion, to read the indications which might be presented by his dress or appearance.

I did not gain very much, however, by my inspection. Our visitor bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow. He wore rather baggy, gray, shepherd's-check trousers, a not over-clean black frock-coat, unbuttoned in the front, and a drab waistcoat with a heavy brassy Albert chain, and a square pierced bit of metal dangling down as an ornament. A frayed top hat and a faded brown overcoat with a wrinkled velvet collar lay upon a chair beside him. Altogether, look as I would, there was nothing remarkable about the man save his blazing red head and the expression of extreme chagrin and discontent upon his features.

Sherlock Holmes's quick eye took in my occupation, and he shook his head with a smile as he noticed my questioning glances. "Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labor, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else."

Mr. Jabez Wilson started up in his chair, with his forefinger upon the paper, but his eyes upon my companion.

"How in the name of good fortune did you know all that, Mr. Holmes?" he asked. "How did you know, for example, that I did manual labor? It's as true as gospel, for I began as a ship's carpenter."

"Your hands, my dear sir. Your right hand is quite a size larger than your left. You have worked with it and the muscles are more developed."

"Well, the snuff, then, and the Freemasonry?"

"I won't insult your intelligence by telling you how I read that, especially as, rather against the strict rules of your order, you use an arc-and-compass breastpin."

"Ah, of course, I forgot that. But the writing?"

"What else can be indicated by that right cuff so very shiny for five inches, and the left one with the smooth patch near the elbow where you rest it upon the desk."

"Well, but China?"

"The fish which you have tattooed immediately above your wrist could only have been done in China. I have made a small study of tattoo marks, and have even contributed to the literature of the subject. That trick of staining the fishes' scales a delicate pink is quite

peculiar to China. When, in addition, I see a Chinese coin hanging from your watch chain, the matter becomes even more simple."

Mr. Jabez Wilson laughed heavily. "Well, I never!" said he. "I thought at first that you had done something clever, but I see that there was nothing in it after all."

"I begin to think, Watson," said Holmes, "that I make a mistake in explaining. *'Omne ignotum pro magnifico,'* you know, and my poor little reputation, such as it is, will suffer shipwreck if I am so candid. Can you not find the advertisement, Mr. Wilson?"

"Yes, I have got it now," he answered, with his thick, red finger planted halfway down the column. "Here it is. This is what began it all."

I took the paper from him and read as follows:

"To THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE: On account of the bequest of the late Ezekiah Hopkins, of Lebanon, Pa., U.S.A., there is now another vacancy open which entitles a member of the League to a salary of four pounds a week for purely nominal services. All red-headed men who are sound in body and mind and above the age of twenty-one years are eligible. Apply in person on Monday, at eleven o'clock, to Duncan Ross, at the offices of the League, 7 Pope's Court, Fleet Street" . . .

"What on earth does this mean?" I ejaculated, after I had twice read over the extraordinary announcement.

Holmes chuckled and wriggled in his chair, as was his habit when in high spirits. "It is a little off the beaten track, isn't it?" said he. "And now, Mr. Wilson, off you go at scratch, and tell us all about yourself, your household, and the effect which this advertisement had upon your fortunes. You will first make a note, Doctor, of the paper and the date."

"It is *The Morning Chronicle* of April 27, 1890. Just two months ago."

"Very good. Now, Mr. Wilson."

"Well, it is just as I have been telling you, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," said Jabez Wilson, mopping his forehead, "I have a small pawnbroker's business at Coburg Square, near the City. It's not a very large affair, and of late years it has not done more than just give me a living. I used to be able to keep two assistants, but now I only keep one; and I would have a job to pay him but that he is willing to come for half wages to learn the business."

"What is the name of this obliging youth?" asked Sherlock Holmes.

"His name is Vincent Spaulding, and he's not such a youth either. It's hard to say his age. I should not wish for a smarter assistant, Mr. Holmes; and I know very well that he could better himself, and earn twice what I am able to give him. But, after all, if he is satisfied, why

should I put ideas in his head?"

"Why indeed? You seem most fortunate in having an employee who comes under the full market price. It is not a common experience among employers in this age. I don't know that your assistant is not as remarkable as your advertisement."

"Oh, he has his faults, too," said Mr. Wilson. "Never was such a fellow for photography. Snapping away with a camera when he ought to be improving his mind, and then diving down into the cellar like a rabbit into its hole to develop his pictures. That is his main fault; but, on the whole, he's a good worker. There's no vice in him."

"He is still with you, I presume?"

"Yes, sir. He and a girl of fourteen, who does a bit of simple cooking, and keeps the place clean—that's all I have in the house, for I am a widower, and never had any family. We live very quietly, sir, the three of us; and we keep a roof over our heads, and we pay our debts, if we do nothing more.

"The first thing that put us out was that advertisement. Spaulding, he came down into the office just this day eight weeks, with this very paper in his hand, and he says:

"'I wish to the Lord, Mr. Wilson, that I was a red-headed man.'

"'Why that?' I asks.

"'Why,' says he, 'here's another vacancy in the League of the Red-Headed Men. It's worth quite a little fortune to any man who gets it, and I understand that there are more vacancies than there are men, so that the trustees are at their wits' end what to do with the money. If my hair would only change color here's a nice little crib all ready for me.'

"'Why, what is it, then?' I asked. You see, Mr. Holmes, I am a very stay-at-home man, and, as my business came to me instead of my having to go to it, I was often weeks on end without putting my foot over the door mat. In that way I didn't know much of what was going on outside, and I was always glad of a bit of news.

"'Have you never heard of the League of the Red-Headed Men?' he asked, with his eyes open.

"'Never.'

"'Why, I wonder at that, for you are eligible yourself for one of the vacancies.'

"'And what are they worth?'

"'Oh, merely a couple of hundred a year, but the work is slight, and it need not interfere very much with one's other occupations.'

"Well, you can easily think that that made me prick up my ears, for the business has not been over good for some years, and an extra couple of hundred would have been very handy.

"'Tell me all about it,' said I.

"'Well,' said he, showing me the advertisement, 'you can see for yourself that the League has a vacancy, and there is the address where you should apply for particu-

lars. As far as I can make out, the League was founded by an American millionaire, Ezekiah Hopkins, who was very peculiar in his ways. He was himself red-headed, and he had a great sympathy for all red-headed men; so when he died, it was found that he had left his enormous fortune in the hands of trustees, with instructions to apply the interest to the providing of easy berths to men whose hair is of that color. From all I hear it is splendid pay, and very little to do.'

"'But,' said I, 'there would be millions of red-headed men who would apply.'

"'Not so many as you might think,' he answered. 'You see it is really confined to Londoners, and to grown men. This American had started from London where he was young, and he wanted to do the old town a good turn. Then, again, I have heard it is no use applying if your hair is light red, or dark red, or anything but real, bright, blazing, fiery red. Now, if you cared to apply, Mr. Wilson, you would just walk in; but perhaps it would hardly be worth your while to put yourself out of the way for the sake of a few hundred pounds.'

"Now it is a fact, gentlemen, as you may see for yourselves, that my hair is of a very full and rich tint, so that it seemed to me that, if there was to be any competition in the matter, I stood as good a chance as any man that I had ever met. Vincent Spaulding seemed to know so much about it that I thought he might prove useful, so I just ordered him to put up the shutters for the day, and to come right away with me. He was very willing to have a holiday, so we shut the business up, and started off for the address that was given us in the advertisement.

"I never hope to see such a sight as that again, Mr. Holmes. From north, south, east, and west every man who had a shade of red in his hair had tramped into the City to answer the advertisement. Fleet Street was choked with red-headed folk, and Pope's Court looked like a coster's orange barrow. I should not have thought there were so many in the whole country as were brought together by that single advertisement. Every shade of color they were—straw, lemon, orange, brick, Irish-setter, liver, clay; but, as Spaulding said, there were not many who had the real vivid flame-colored tint. When I saw how many were waiting, I would have given it up in despair; but Spaulding would not hear of it. How he did it I could not imagine, but he pushed and pulled and butted until he got me through the crowd, and right up to the steps which led to the office. There was a double stream upon the stair, some going up in hope, and some coming back dejected; but we wedged in as well as we could, and soon found ourselves in the office."

"Your experience has been a

most entertaining one," remarked Holmes, as his client paused and refreshed his memory with a huge pinch of snuff. "Pray continue your very interesting statement."

"There was nothing in the office but a couple of wooden chairs and a deal table, behind which sat a small man, with a head that was even redder than mine. He said a few words to each candidate as he came up, and then he always managed to find some fault in them which would disqualify them. Getting a vacancy did not seem to be such a very easy matter after all. However, when our turn came, the little man was much more favorable to me than to any of the others, and he closed the door as we entered, so that he might have a private word with us.

"'This is Mr. Jabez Wilson,' said my assistant, 'and he is willing to fill a vacancy in the League.'

"'And he is admirably suited for it,' the other answered. 'He has every requirement. I cannot recall when I have seen anything so fine.' He took a step backward, cocked his head on one side, and gazed at my hair until I felt quite bashful. Then suddenly he plunged forward, wrung my hand, and congratulated me warmly.

"'It would be injustice to hesitate,' said he. 'You will, however, I am sure, excuse me for taking an obvious precaution.' With that he seized my hair in both his hands, and tugged until I yelled with the pain. 'There is water in your eyes,' said he, as he released me. 'I perceive that all is as it should be. But we have to be careful, for we have twice been deceived by wigs and once by paint. I could tell you tales of cobbler's wax which would disgust you with human nature.' He stepped over to the window and shouted through it at the top of his voice that the vacancy was filled. A groan of disappointment came up from below, and the folk all trooped away in different directions, until there was not a red head to be seen except my own and that of the manager.

"'My name,' said he, 'is Mr. Duncan Ross, and I am myself one of the pensioners upon the fund left by our noble benefactor. Are you a married man, Mr. Wilson? Have you a family?'

"I answered that I had not.

"His face fell immediately.

"'Dear me!' he said, gravely, 'that is very serious indeed. I am sorry to hear you say that. The fund was, of course, for the propagation and spread of the redheads as well as for their maintenance. It is exceedingly unfortunate that you should be a bachelor.'

"My face lengthened at this, Mr. Holmes, for I thought that I was not to have the vacancy after all; but, after thinking it over for a few minutes, he said that it would be all right.

"'In the case of another,' said he, 'the objection might be fatal, but

we must stretch a point in favor of a man with such a head of hair as yours. When shall you be able to enter upon your new duties?'

"'Well, it is a little awkward, for I do have a business already,' said I.

"'Oh, never mind about that, Mr. Wilson!' said Vincent Spaulding. 'I shall be able to look after that.'

"'What would be the hours?' I asked.

"'Ten to two.'

"Now a pawnbroker's business is mostly done of an evening, Mr. Holmes, especially Thursday and Friday evenings, which is just before payday; so it would suit me very well to earn a little in the mornings. Besides, I knew that my assistant was a good man, and that he would see to anything that turned up.

"'That would suit me very well,' said I. 'And the pay?'

"'Is four pounds a week.'

"'And the work?'

"'Is purely nominal.'

"'What do you call purely nominal?'

"'Well, you have to be in the office, or at least in the building, the whole time. If you leave, you forfeit your whole position forever. The will is very clear upon that point. You don't comply with the conditions if you budge from the office during that time.'

"'It's only four hours a day, and I should not think of leaving,' said I.

"'No excuse will avail,' said Mr. Duncan Ross. 'Neither sickness, nor business, nor anything else. There you must stay, or you lose your billet.'

"'And the work?'

"'Is to copy out the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. There is the first volume of it in that press. You must find your own ink, pens, and blotting paper, but we provide this table and chair. Will you be ready tomorrow'

"'Certainly,' I answered.

"'Then, goodbye, Mr. Jabez Wilson, and let me congratulate you once more on the important position which you have been fortunate enough to gain.' He bowed me out of the room, and I went home with my assistant hardly knowing what to say or do, I was so pleased at my own good fortune.

"Well, I thought over the matter all day, and by evening I was in low spirits again; for I had quite persuaded myself that the whole affair must be some great hoax or fraud, though what its object might be I could not imagine. It seemed altogether past belief that anyone could make such a will, or that they would pay such a sum for doing anything so simple as copying out the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Vincent Spaulding did what he could to cheer me up, but by bedtime I had reasoned myself out of the whole thing. However, in the morning I determined to have a look at it anyhow, so I bought a penny bottle of ink, and with a quill pen and seven sheets of foolscap paper I started off for Pope's court.

"Well, to my surprise and delight everything was as right as possible. The table was set out ready for me, and Mr. Duncan Ross was there to see that I got fairly to work. He started me off upon the letter A, and then he left me; but he would drop in from time to time to see that all was right with me. At two o'clock he bade me good-day, complimented me upon the amount that I had written, and then locked the door of the office after me.

"This went on day after day, Mr. Holmes, and on Saturday the manager came in and planked down four golden sovereigns for my week's work. It was the same next week, and the same the week after. Every morning I was there at ten, and every afternoon I left at two. By degrees Mr. Duncan Ross took to coming in only once of a morning, and then, after a time, he did not come in at all. Still, of course, I never dared to leave the room for an instant, for I was not sure when he might come, and the billet was such a good one, and suited me so well, that I would not risk the loss of it.

"Eight weeks passed away like this, and I had written about Abbots and Archery, and Armour, and Architecture and Attica, and hoped with diligence thal I might get on to the B's before very long. It cost me something in foolscap, and I had pretty nearly filled a shelf with my writings. And then suddenly the whole business came to an end."

"To an end?"

"Yes, sir. And no later than this morning. I went to my work as usual at ten o'clock, but the door was shut and locked, with a little square of cardboard hammered onto the middle of the panel with a tack. Here it is, and you can read what it says for yourself."

He held up a piece of white cardboard, about the size of a sheet of note-paper. It read in this fashion:

THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE DISSOLVED

Oct. 9, 1890

Sherlock Holmes and I surveyed this curt announcement and the rueful face behind it, until the comical side of the affair so completely overtopped every consideration that we both burst out into a roar of laughter.

"I cannot see that there is anything very funny," cried our client, flushing up to the roots of his flaming hair. "If you can do nothing better than laugh at me, I can go elsewhere."

"No, no," cried Holmes, shoving him back into the chair from which he had half risen. "I really wouldn't miss your case for the world. It is most refreshingly unusual. But there is, if you will excuse my saying so, something just a little funny about it. Pray what steps did you take when you found the card upon the door?"

"I was staggered, sir. I did not know what to do. Then I called at the offices round, but none of them seemed to know anything about it. Finally, I went to the landlord, who

is an accountant living on the ground floor, and I asked him if he could tell me what had become of the Red-Headed League. He said that he had never heard of any such body. Then I asked him who Mr. Duncan Ross was. He said that the name was new to him.

"'Well,' said I, 'the gentleman at Number Four."

"'What, the red-headed man?'

"'Yes.'

"'Oh,' said he, 'his name was William Morris. He was a solicitor, and was using my room as a temporary convenience until his new premises were ready. He moved yesterday.'

"'Where could I find him?'

"'Oh, at his new offices. He did tell me the address. Yes—17 King Edward Street, near St. Paul's.'

"I started off, Mr. Holmes, but when I got to that address it was a manufactory of artificial kneecaps, and no one in it had ever heard of either Mr. William Morris or Mr. Duncan Ross."

"And what did you do then?" asked Holmes.

"I went home to Saxe-Coburg Square, and I asked the advice of my assistant. But he could not help me in any way. He could only say that if I waited I should hear by post. But that was not quite good enough, Mr. Holmes. I did not wish to lose such a place without a struggle, so, as I had heard that you were good enough to give advice to poor folk who were in need of it, I came right away to you."

"And you did very wisely," said Holmes. "Your case is an exceedingly remarkable one, and I shall be happy to look into it. From what you have told me I think that it is possible that graver issues hang from it than might at first sight appear."

"Grave enough!" said Mr. Jabez Wilson. "Why, I have lost four pound a week."

"As far as you are personally concerned," remarked Holmes, "I do not see that you have any grievance against this extraordinary league. On the contrary, you are, as I understand, richer by some thirty pounds, to say nothing of the minute knowledge which you have gained on every subject which comes under the letter A. You have lost nothing by them."

"No, sir. But I want to find out about them, and who they are, and what their object was in playing this prank—if it was a prank—upon me. It was a pretty expensive joke for them, for it cost them two-and-thirty pounds."

"We shall endeavor to clear up these points for you. And, first, one or two questions, Mr. Wilson. This assistant of yours who first called your attention to the advertisement—how long had he been with you?"

"About a month then."

"How did he come?"

"In answer to an advertisement."

"Was he the only applicant?"

"No, I had a dozen."

"Why did you pick him?"

"Because he was handy and would come cheap."

"At half wages, in fact."

"Yes."

"What is he like, this Vincent Spaulding?"

"Small, stout-built, very quick in his ways, no hair on his face, though he's not short of thirty. Has a white splash of acid upon his forehead."

Holmes sat up in his chair, in considerable excitement. "I thought as much," said he. "Have you ever observed that his ears are pierced for earrings?"

"Yes, sir. He told me that a gypsy had done it for him when he was a lad."

"Hum!" said Holmes, sinking back in deep thought. "He is still with you?"

"Oh, yes, sir; I have only just left him."

"And has your business been attended to in your absence?"

"Nothing to complain of, sir. There's never very much to do of a morning."

"That will do, Mr. Wilson. I shall be happy to give you an opinion upon the subject in the course of a day or two. Today is Saturday, and I hope that by Monday we may come to a conclusion."

"Well, Watson," said Holmes, when our visitor had left us, "what do you make of it all?"

"I make nothing of it," I answered frankly. "It is a most mysterious business."

"As a rule," said Holmes, "the more bizarre a thing is the less mysterious it proves to be. It is your commonplace, featureless crimes which are really puzzling, just as a commonplace face is the most difficult to identify. But I must be prompt over this matter."

"What are you going to do?"

"To smoke," he answered. "It is quite a three-pipe problem, and I beg that you won't speak to me for fifty minutes."

He curled himself up in his chair, with his thin knees drawn up to his hawklike nose, and there he sat with his eyes closed and his black clay pipe thrusting out like the bill of some strange bird. I had come to the conclusion that he had dropped asleep, and indeed was nodding myself, when he suddenly sprang out of his chair with the gesture of a man who has made up his mind, and put his pipe down upon the mantelpiece.

"Sarasate plays at St. James's Hall. "What do you think, Watson? Could your patients spare you for a few hours?"

"I have nothing to do today. My practice is never very absorbing."

"Then put on your hat and come. I am going through the City first, and we can have some lunch on the way. I observe that there is a good deal of German music on the program, which is rather more to my taste than Italian or French. It is introspective, and I want to introspect. Come along!"

We traveled by the Underground as far as Aldersgate; and a short walk took us to Saxe-Coburg Square, the scene of the singular story which we had listened to in the morning. It was a poky, little, shabby-genteel place, where four lines of dingy, two-storied brick houses looked out into a small railed-in inclosure, where a lawn of weedy grass and a few clumps of faded laurel bushes made a hard fight against a smoke-laden and uncongenial atmosphere.

Three gilt balls and a brown board with JABEZ WILSON in white letters, upon a corner house, announced the place where our red-headed client carried on his business. Sherlock Holmes stopped in front of it with his head on one side, and looked it all over, with his eyes shining brightly between puckered lids. Then he walked slowly up the street, and then down again to the corner, still looking keenly at the houses. Finally he returned to the pawnbroker's and, having thumped vigorously upon the pavement with his stick two or three times, he went up to the door and knocked. It was instantly opened by a bright-looking, clean-shaven young fellow, who asked him to step in.

"Thank you," said Holmes, "I only wished to ask you how you would go from here to the Strand."

"Third right, four left," answered the assistant, promptly, closing the door.

"Smart fellow, that," observed Holmes as we walked away. "He is, in my judgment, the fourth smartest man in London, and for daring I am not sure that he has not a claim to be third. I have known something of him before."

"Evidently," said I, "Mr. Wilson's assistant counts for a good deal in this mystery of the Red-Headed League. I am sure that you inquired your way merely in order that you might see him."

"Not him."

"What then?"

"The knees of his trousers."

"And what did you see?"

"What I expected to see."

"Why did you beat the pavement?"

"My dear Doctor, this is a time for observation, not for talk. We are spies in an enemy's country. We know something of Saxe-Coburg Square. Let us now explore the parts which lie behind it."

The road in which we found ourselves as we turned round the corner from the retired Saxe-Coburg Square presented as great a contrast to it as the front of a picture does to the back. It was one of the main arteries which convey the traffic of the City to the north and west. The roadway was blocked with the immense stream of commerce flowing in a double tide inward and outward, while the footpaths were black with the hurrying swarm of pedestrians. It was difficult to realize, as we looked at the line of fine

shops and stately business premises, that they really abutted on the other side upon the faded and stagnant square which we had just quitted.

"Let me see," said Holmes, standing at the corner, and glancing along the line, "I should like just to remember the order of houses here. It is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London. There is Mortimer's, the tobacconist; the little newspaper shop; the Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank; the Vegetarian Restaurant; and McFarlane's carriage-building depot. That carries us right on to the other block. And now, Doctor, we've done our work, so it's time we had some play. A sandwich and a cup of coffee, and then off to violin-land, where all is sweetness and delicacy and harmony, and there are no red-headed clients to vex us with their conundrums."

My friend was an enthusiastic musician, being himself not only a very capable performer, but a composer of no ordinary merit. All the afternoon he sat in the stalls wrapped in the most perfect happiness, gently waving his long thin fingers in time to the music, while his gently smiling face and his languid, dreamy eyes were as unlike those of Holmes the sleuth-hound, Holmes the relentless, keen-witted, ready-handed criminal agent, as it was possible to conceive. In his singular character the dual nature alternately asserted itself, and his extreme exactness and astuteness represented, as I have often thought, the reaction against the poetic and contemplative mood which occasionally predominated in him.

The swing of his nature took him from extreme languor to devouring energy; and, as I knew well, he was never so truly formidable as when, for days on end, he had been lounging in his armchair amid his improvisations and his black-letter editions. Then it was that the lust of the chase would suddenly come upon him, and that his brilliant reasoning power would rise to the level of intuition, until those who were unacquainted with his methods would look askance at him as on a man whose knowledge was not that of other mortals. When I saw him that afternoon so enwrapped in the music of St. James's Hall, I felt that an evil time might be coming upon those whom he had set himself to hunt down.

"You want to go home, no doubt, Doctor," he remarked to me as we emerged.

"Yes, it would be as well."

"And I have some business to do which will take some hours. This business at Coburg Square is serious."

"Why serious?"

"A considerable crime is in contemplation. I have every reason to believe that we shall be in time to stop it. But today being Saturday rather complicates matters. I shall want your help tonight."

"At what time?"

"Ten will be early enough."

"I shall be at Baker Street at ten."

"Very well. And I say, Doctor, there may be some little danger, so kindly put your army revolver in your pocket." He waved his hand, turned on his heel, and disappeared in an instant among the crowd.

I trust that I am not more dense than my neighbors, but I was always oppressed with a sense of my own stupidity in my dealings with Sherlock Holmes. Here I had heard what he had heard, I had seen what he had seen, and yet from his words it was evident that he saw clearly not only what had happened, but what was about to happen, while to me the whole business was still confused and grotesque.

As I drove home to my house in Kensington I thought over it all, from the extraordinary story of the red-headed copier of the *Encypaedia* down to the visit to Saxe-Coburg Square, and the ominous words with which he had parted from me. What was this nocturnal expedition, and why should I go armed? Where were we going, and what were we to do? I had the hint from Holmes that this smooth-faced pawnbroker's assistant was a formidable man—a man who might play a deep game. I tried to puzzle it out, but gave it up in despair, and set the matter aside until night should bring an explanation.

It was a quarter-past nine when I started from home and made my way across the Park, and so through Oxford Street to Baker Street. Two hansoms were standing at the door, and, as I entered the passage, I heard the sound of voices from above.

On entering his room, I found Holmes in animated conversation with two men, one of whom I recognized as Peter Jones, the official police agent; while the other was a long, thin, sad-faced man, with a very shiny hat and oppressively respectable frock-coat.

"Ha! Our party is complete," said Holmes, buttoning up his pea jacket, and taking his heavy hunting crop from the rack. "Watson, I think you know Mr. Jones, of Scotland Yard? Let me introduce you to Mr. Merryweather, who is to be our companion in tonight's adventure."

"We're hunting in couples again, Doctor, you see," said Jones, in his consequential way. "Our friend here is a wonderful man for starting a chase. All he wants is an old dog to help him do the running down.

"I hope a wild goose may not prove to be the end of our chase," observed Mr. Merryweather gloomily.

"You may place considerable confidence in Mr. Holmes, sir," said the police agent loftily. "He has his own little methods, which are, if he won't mind my saying so, just a little too theoretical and fantastic, but he has the makings of a detective in him. It is not too much to say that once or twice, as in that business of

the Sholto murder and the Agra treasure, he has been more nearly correct than the official force."

"Oh, if you say so, Mr. Jones, it is all right!" said the stranger, with deference. "Still, I confess that I miss my rubber. It is the first Saturday night for seven-and-twenty years that I have not had my rubber."

"I think you will find," said Sherlock Holmes, "that you will play for a higher stake tonight than you have ever done yet, and that the play will be more exciting. For you, Mr. Merryweather, the stake will be some thirty thousand pounds; and for you, Jones, it will be the man upon whom you wish to lay your hands."

"John Clay, the murderer, thief, smasher, and forger. He's a young man, Mr.Merryweather, but he is at the head of his profession, and I would rather have my bracelets on him than on any criminal in London. He's a remarkable man, is young John Clay. His grandfather was a Royal Duke, and he himself has been to Eton and Oxford. His brain is as cunning as his fingers, and though we meet signs of him at every turn, we never know where to find the man himself. He'll crack a crib in Scotland one week, and be raising money to build an orphanage in Cornwall the next. I've been on his track for years, and have never set eyes on him yet."

"I hope that I may have the pleasure of introducing you tonight. I've had one or two little turns also with Mr. John Clay, and I agree with you that he is at the head of his profession. It is past ten, however, and quite time that we started. If you two will take the first hansom, Watson and I will follow in the second."

Sherlock Holmes was not very communicative during the long drive, and lay back in the cab humming the tunes which he had heard in the afternoon. We rattled through an endless labyrinth of gas-lit streets until we emerged into Farringdon Street.

"We are close there now," my friend remarked. "This fellow Merryweather is a bank director and personally interested in the matter. I thought it as well to have Jones with us also. He is not a bad fellow, though an absolute imbecile in his profession. He has one positive virtue. He is as brave as a bulldog and as tenacious as a lobster if he gets his claws upon anyone. Here we are, and they are waiting for us."

We had reached the same crowded thoroughfare in which we had found ourselves in the morning. Our cabs were dismissed, and following the guidance of Mr. Merryweather, we passed down a narrow passage, and through a side door which he opened for us. Within there was a small corridor, which ended in a very massive iron gate. This also was opened, and led down a flight of winding stone steps, which terminated at another gate.

Mr. Merryweather stopped to light a lantern, and then conducted us down a dark, earth-smelling passage, and so, after opening a third door, into a huge vault or cellar, which was piled all round with crates and massive boxes.

"You are not very vulnerable from above," Holmes remarked, as he held up the lantern and gazed about him.

"Nor from below," said Mr. Merryweather, striking his stick upon the flags which lined the floor. "Why, dear me, it sounds quite hollow!" he remarked, looking up in surprise.

"I must really ask you to be a little more quiet," said Holmes severely. "You have already imperiled the whole success of our expedition. Might I beg that you would have the goodness to sit down upon one of those boxes, and not to interfere?"

The solemn Mr. Merryweather perched himself upon a crate, with a very injured expression upon his face, while Holmes fell upon his knees upon the floor, and, with the lantern and a magnifying lens, began to examine minutely the cracks between the stones. A few seconds sufficed to satisfy him, for he sprang to his feet again, and put his glass in his pocket.

"We have at least an hour before us," he remarked, "for they can hardly take any steps until the good pawnbroker is safely in bed. Then they will not lose a minute, for the sooner they do their work the longer time they will have for their escape. We are at present, Doctor—as no doubt you have divined—in the cellar of the City branch of one of the principal London banks. Mr. Merryweather is the chairman of directors, and he will explain to you that there are reasons why the more daring criminals of London should take a considerable interest in this cellar at present."

"It is our French gold," whispered the director. "We have had several warnings that an attempt might be made upon it."

"Your French gold?"

"Yes. We had occasion some months ago to strengthen our resources, and borrowed, for that purpose, thirty thousand napoleons from the Bank of France. It has become known that we have never had occasion to unpack the money, and that is still lying in our cellar. The crate upon which I sit contains two thousand napoleons packed between layers of lead foil. Our reserve of bullion is much larger at present than is usually kept in a single branch office, and the directors have had misgivings upon the subject."

"Which were very well justified," observed Holmes. "And now it is time that we arranged our little plans. I expect that within an hour matters will come to a head. In the meantime, Mr. Merryweather, we must put the screen over that dark lantern."

"And sit in the dark?"

"I am afraid so. I had brought a pack of cards in my pocket, and I thought that, as we were a *partie carrée*, you might have your rubber after all. But I see that the enemy's preparations have gone so far that we cannot risk the presence of a light. And, first of all, we must choose our positions. These are daring men, and, though we shall take them at a disadvantage, they may do us some harm, unless we are careful. I shall stand behind this crate, and you conceal yourself behind those. Then, when I flash a light upon them, close in swiftly. If they fire, Watson, have no compunction about shooting them down."

I placed my revolver, cocked, upon the top of the wooden case behind which I crouched. Holmes shot the slide across the front of his lantern, and left us in pitch darkness—such an absolute darkness as I have never before experienced. The smell of hot metal remained to assure us that the light was still there, ready to flash out at a moment's notice. To me, with my nerves worked up to a pitch of expectancy, there was something depressing and subduing in the sudden gloom, and in the dank air of the vault.

"They have but one retreat," whispered Holmes. "That is back through the house into Saxe-Coburg Square. I hope that you have done what I asked you, Jones?"

"I have an Inspector and two officers waiting at the front door."

"Then we have stopped all the holes. And now we must be silent and wait."

What a time it seemed! From comparing notes afterwards, it was but an hour and a quarter, yet it appeared to me that the night must have almost gone, and the dawn be breaking above us. My limbs were weary and stiff, for I feared to change my position, yet my nerves were worked up to the highest pitch of tension, and my hearing was so acute that I could not only hear the gentle breathing of my companions, but I could distinguish the deeper, heavier inbreath of the bulky Jones from the thin, sighing note of the bank director. From my position I could look over the case in the direction of the floor. Suddenly my eyes caught the glint of a light.

At first it was but a lurid spark upon the stone pavement. Then it lengthened out until it became a yellow line, and then, without any warning or sound, a gash seemed to open and a hand appeared, a white, almost womanly hand, which felt about in the center of the little area of light.

For a minute or more the hand, with its writhing fingers, protruded out of the floor. Then it was withdrawn as suddenly as it appeared, and all was dark again save the single lurid spark, which marked a chink between the stones.

Its disappearance, however, was but momentary. With a rending,

tearing sound, one of the broad white stones turned over upon its side, and left a square, gaping hole, through which streamed the light of a lantern. Over the edge there peeped a clean-cut, boyish face, which looked keenly about it, and then, with a hand on either side of the aperture, drew itself shoulder-high and waist-high, until one knee rested upon the edge.

In another instant he stood at the side of the hole, and was hauling after him a companion, lithe and small like himself, with a pale face and a shock of very red hair.

"It's all clear," he whispered. "Have you the chisel and the bags? Great Scott! Jump, Archie, jump, and I'll swing for it!"

Sherlock Holmes had sprung out and seized the intruder by the collar. The other dived down the hole, and I heard the sound of rending cloth as Jones clutched at his coat. The light flashed upon the barrel of a revolver, but Holmes's hunting crop came down on the man's wrist, and the pistol fell.

"It's no use, John Clay," said Holmes blandly, "you have no chance at all."

"So I see," the other answered, with the utmost coolness. "I fancy that my pal is all right, though I see you have got his coat-tails."

"There are three men waiting for him at the door," said Holmes.

"Oh, indeed. You seem to have done the thing very completely. I must compliment you."

"And I you," Holmes answered. "Your red-headed idea was very new and effective."

"You'll see your pal again presently," said Jones. "He's quicker at climbing down holes than I am. Just hold out while I fix the derbies."

"I beg that you will not touch me with your filthy hands," remarked our prisoner, as the handcuffs clattered upon his wrists. "You may not be aware that I have royal blood in my veins. Have the goodness also, when you address me, always to say 'sir' and 'please.'"

"All right," said Jones, with a stare and a snigger. "Well, would you please, sir, march upstairs where we can get a cab to carry your highness to the police station."

"That is better," said John Clay serenely. He made a sweeping bow to the three of us, and walked quietly off.

"Really, Mr. Holmes," said Mr. Merryweather, as we followed them from the cellar, "I do not know how the bank can thank you or repay you. There is no doubt that you have detected and defeated in the most complete manner one of the most determined attempts at bank robbery that have ever come within my experience."

"I have had one or two little scores of my own to settle with Mr. John Clay," said Holmes. "I have been at some small expense over this matter, which I shall expect the bank to refund, but beyond that I am amply repaid by having had an

experience which is in many ways unique, and by hearing the very remarkable narrative of the Red-Headed League."

"You see, Watson," he explained, in the early hours of the morning, as we sat over a glass of whiskey and soda in Baker Street, "it was perfectly obvious from the first that the only possible object of this rather fantastic business of the advertisement of the League, and the copying of the *Encyclopaedia*, must be to get this not over-bright pawnbroker out of the way for a number of hours every day. It was a curious way of managing it, but really it would be difficult to suggest a better. The method was no doubt suggested to Clay's ingenious mind by the color of his accomplice's hair. The four pounds a week was a lure which must draw him, and what was it to them, who were playing for thousands? They put in the advertisement, one rogue has the temporary office, the other rogue incites the man to apply for it, and together they manage to secure his absence every morning in the week. From the time that I heard of the assistant having come for half wages, it was obvious to me that he had some strong motive for securing the situation."

"But how could you guess what the motive was?"

"Had there been women in the house, I should have suspected a mere vulgar intrigue. That, however, was out of the question. The man's business was a small one, and there was nothing in his house which could account for such elaborate preparations, and such an expenditure as they were at. It must then be something *out* of the house. What could it be? I thought of the assistant's fondness for photography, and his trick of vanishing into the cellar. The cellar! There was the end of this tangled clue. Then I made inquiries as to this mysterious assistant, and found that I had to deal with one of the coolest and most daring criminals in London. He was doing something in the cellar—something which took many hours a day for months on end. What could it be, once more? I could think of nothing save that he was running a tunnel to some other building.

"So far I had got when we went to visit the scene of action. I surprised you by beating upon the pavement with my stick. I was ascertaining whether the cellar stretched out in front or behind. It was not in front. Then I rang the bell, and, as I hoped, the assistant answered it. We have had some skirmishes, but we had never set eyes upon each other before. I hardly looked at his face. His knees were what I wished to see. You must yourself have remarked how worn, wrinkled, and stained they were. They spoke of those hours of burrowing. The only remaining point was what they were burrowing for. I walked round the

corner, saw that the City and Suburban Bank abutted on our friend's premises, and felt that I had solved my problem. When you drove home after the concert I called upon Scotland Yard, and upon the chairman of the bank directors, with the result that you have seen."

"And how could you tell that they would make their attempt tonight?"

"Well, when they closed their League offices that was a sign that they cared no longer about Mr. Jabez Wilson's presence; in other words, that they had completed their tunnel. But it was essential that they should use it soon, as it might be discovered, or the bullion might be removed. Saturday would suit them better than any other day, as it would give them two days for their escape. For all these reasons I expected them tonight."

"You reasoned it out beautifully," I exclaimed, in unfeigned admiration. "It is so long a chain, and yet every link rings true."

"It saved me from ennui," he answered, yawning. "Alas! I already feel it closing in upon me. My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so."

"And you are a benefactor of the race," said I.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well perhaps, after all, it is of some little use," he remarked. "*'L'homme c'est rien—l'oeuvre c'est tout,'* as Gustave Flaubert wrote to George Sand."

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THE 7 ERRORS IN *The Red-Headed League*

by THOMAS L. STIX

IT WAS A BLEAK DECEMBER EVENING in the year 1955. The rain beat upon the windows, and the roaring log fire made the three of us feel secure. A pair of five-shilling cigars (supplied by Mr. Elmer Davis) and a Home Run cigarette, supplied by me, bespoke my generosity as a host. Mr. Edgar Smith stirred uneasily. "I don't suppose it can do any harm now, after all these years."

My guests were distinguished. Elmer Davis was, of course, the first head of the OWI under F.D.R. —a famous newspaperman, commentator, and novelist, and author of the Buy-Laws of the Baker Street Irregulars. Edgar Smith was the beloved "Buttons" of that great and esoteric organization, and, in the more mundane affairs of men, a vice-president of General Motors.

Mr. Davis looked at me and the sheaf of papers I was holding. "Read it again, Thomas. I always find that the rereading of a closely reasoned article clarifies the problem."

"A bourbon," I suggested, "might help."

"A scotch," said Mr. Smith, "might help me more."

Thus urged, I began to read: "Five and sixty years have passed since Dr. Watson interrupted Mr. Sherlock Holmes and Mr. Jabez Wilson at a meeting in 221B Baker Street, and I venture to state that no one in all those years has researched *The Red-Headed League* as deeply as I have. And I regret to inform you, gentlemen, that there are no less than *seven* mistakes, misstatements, and foolish and erroneous deductions which I cannot account for—nor, if I may say so, do I wish to do so. The grief is too mortal. If I hear cries of 'Treason, sir, treason!' from this august body I can only say, in the words of my compatriot, 'If this be treason, make the most of it!'

"Let us therefore proceed in the best order that we can and with such small logic as we may possess.

"We are introduced to Mr. Wilson as an 'elderly gentleman, with fiery red hair.' How old was Mr. Wilson? We do not know; but in 1890, the year of the event, Dr. Watson was 39. He regarded Mr. Wilson as an elderly gentleman—which would mean 60, perhaps. At 60 one does not possess fiery red hair—indeed, by the age of 50 the pigmentation has usually changed. This is not my opinion, gentlemen—it is the considered and expressed opinions of Dr. Josiah Joyce of the Charing Cross Hospital, and of Mr. Albertus Thomas, author of *Hair and Where To Grow It.* So right at the

beginning we are faced, in the words of the Master himself, with 'a lie, Watson, a great, big, thumping, obtrusive, uncompromising lie —that's what meets us on the threshold.'

"Let us proceed. Says Mr. Holmes, 'Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labor, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else.'

"The facts that Mr. Wilson did manual labor, had been in China, had done a considerable amount of writing lately, and was a Freemason, are amply substantiated. That he took snuff? Sherlock Holmes would not insult Mr. Wilson's—or Dr. Watson's—intelligence on this point, and both meekly subsided. As for us, gentlemen, we wish to have our intelligence insulted. How did Mr. Holmes know about the snuff? Well, he didn't. But it sounded good, and he thought he could get away with it—and did—until this very evening. Dr. Leon Sterndale, the great lion hunter and explorer, asked Mr. Sherlock Holmes, 'Do all your successes depend upon this prodigious power of bluff?' The bad doctor may have had a pertinent question. To prove himself right, Mr. Sherlock Holmes had Mr. Wilson subsequently take a large pinch of snuff. Fie on such reasoning! One does not say of a man contentedly smoking a pipe that he is a pipe smoker. That, gentlemen, is observation, not deduction.

"But we must go on. Mr. Duncan Ross, manager of the Red-Headed League, said, 'You must find your own ink, pens, and blotting paper, but we will provide this table and chair.' Is that a likely statement from the man who was the manager for the late Ezekiah Hopkins, philanthropist of Lebanon, Pa., U.S.A.? Would a man who paid four pounds per week for purely nominal services boggle at pen, ink, and blotting paper?

'The whole conception of copying the *Encyclopædia Britannica* is likewise to be examined for accuracy, and then discarded as arrant nonsense. Would not the royal blood of John Clay have had the red-headed pawnbroker copy something more in line with their common interest? *The Life of Good Queen Bess,* for example, combines royalty and red-heads. Furthermore, Mr. Wilson said, 'Eight weeks passed away like this, and I had written about Abbots, and Archery, and Armour, and Architecture and Attica, and hoped with diligence that I might get on to the B's before very long.' Gentlemen, the *Encyclopædia Britannica*—the 1875 edition, which is the one that must have been used—has 928 pages in Volume One, and doesn't reach the article on Attica until page 794 of Volume Two.

"Now, the average page of the

Encyclopædia Britannica of 1875 has 3,728 words. The calculation is simple. According to the pawnbroker's story, he copied more than 6,419,616 words in eight weeks, working only four hours a day. That, gentlemen, is at the rate of 33,435 words per hour, or 557.25 words per minute. That is manifestly impossible. If he had copied at the rate of one page an hour—a prodigious amount to accomplish—Mr. Wilson would be just beginning to write about 'Ab-Ul-Mejid 1823-61—the Sultan of Turkey.' Gentlemen, for sixty-five years we have been had.

"We now move inexorably toward the climax. John Clay was the fourth smartest man in London—on the testimony of Sherlock Holmes himself. Would not the fourth smartest man in London have known what Sherlock Holmes looked like? Surely Holmes was famous enough even then. Holmes knew that Clay had an acid splash on his forehead and had had his ears pierced—yet the fourth smartest man in London knew nothing of Holmes's appearance!

"And that is not the only improbability discernible in the fourth smartest man in London. Why did he give notice to Mr. Jabez Wilson *before* the robbery? The tunnel was finished, yes; but it gave Mr. Wilson the opportunity—an opportunity that he seized brilliantly—to consult Mr. Sherlock Holmes. What was another four pounds to John Clay, when he was playing for thirty thousand? If, indeed, he was the fourth smartest man in London, he was doubtless the first most penurious.

"Finally, we come to the point where deduction is no longer needed. We have but to read the facts as set down. In 'The Morning Chronicle' of April 27, 1890, appeared the advertisement of the Red-Headed League. On April 28th, Mr. Jabez Wilson, aided by John Clay—alias Vincent Spaulding—answered the advertisement and was accepted. He began to work the next day—April 29th. Eight weeks and thirty-two pounds thereafter is, according to the Gregorian calendar, June 24th. But read on: 'The Red-Headed League Dissolved'—on *October* 9, 1890. In other words, at least fifteen weeks have not been accounted for, and 60 pounds—a princely sum to Mr. Jabez Wilson—have not been paid.

"And in this connection, let me lead up to another pertinent question. Mr. Wilson started working for the Red-Headed League on April 29, 1890. He worked, he said, precisely eight weeks. When he went to work at the beginning of the ninth week—June 23 or June 24, 1890—he was greeted by the little square of cardboard announcing the end of the Red-Headed League. But how, gentlemen, could the League be *dissolved* October 9, 1890 when it was only June 23 or 24, 1890?"

Mr. Davis moved uneasily. His cigar had gone out, and his glass was empty. "It is a horrible revelation, Thomas—horrible! I hope you will not publish this while I am still alive."

Edgar Smith walked up and down before the fire. "Elmer is right, Tom. I just couldn't survive if this were to come to light.'

And so I put these notes and queries away until this day . . .

EDITORS' NOTE: In rereading *The Red-Headed League* we came upon still another—shall we say, an 8th inconsistency? Mr. Wilson said that "on Saturday the manager came in and planked down four golden sovereigns for my week's work." Later in the same scene of the story Mr. Holmes said that "Today is Saturday." But that means Mr. Wilson did not get his pay that morning, for the door of the League's office "was shut and locked" when the pawnbroker arrived to start his ninth week's work; and after asking his assistant's advice, Mr. Wilson "came right away" to Sherlock Holmes.

Therefore this question: If Mr. Wilson did not receive his eighth week's pay on the Saturday he consulted Mr. Holmes, how did he, as he claimed, earn 32 pounds? It would seem that he received 28 pounds, for seven weeks of work, and was not paid for the eighth week—or that he really worked 9 weeks, and was not paid for the ninth week. Either way something is wrong—either the mathematics of the (three-pipe) problem are awry or the dates involved in the deeper mysteries of *The Red-Headed League* are askew . . .

NEXT MONTH . . .

8 *new* stories including—

VICTOR CANNING's	*The Department of Patterns*
HUGH PENTECOST's	*Hover Through the Fog*
HENRY SLESAR's	*Museum Piece*
JULIAN SYMONS'	*Strolling in the Square One Day*

and 2 reprints you won't want to miss!

ROSS MACDONALD's	*Bring the Killer to Justice*
EDGAR A. POE's	*Diddling*

The February issue will be on sale January 2nd.

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

Prize contests, as EQMM readers well know, have a way of stimulating writers to their best efforts. Two new prize-winners are especially rewarding: Cecil Jenkins' A MESSAGE FROM SIRIUS (Dons' Crime Novel Competition; Dodd, Mead, $3.50) is a Scotland Yard puzzle of unusual solidity combined with a bitterly moody picture of our civilization in the early 1960's. Thomas Walsh's THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE (Inner Sanctum Mystery Prize; Simon & Schuster, $3.50) is an honest study of a young priest's moral dilemma as a murder witness, set in a tightly unified and beautifully plotted suspense story.

★★★ **THE WITCH OF THE LOW-TIDE, *by John Dickson Carr*** (Harper, $3.50)

Another fine period melodrama from Carr: lively evocation of Edwardian England (1907), plus a devilish impossible-murder problem.

★★★ **THE MOONBEAMS, *by Vernon Beste*** (Harper, $3.95)

Strong and unusually credible story of agents and double agents in Occupied France, 1942. (English title: FAITH HAS NO COUNTRY)

★★★ **NEW PEOPLE AT THE HOLLIES, *by Josephine Bell*** (Macmillan, $2.95)

Crooks running an old folks' home are vanquished by their aged charges; ingenious and attractive tale.

★★★ **SENT TO HIS ACCOUNT, *by Eilis Dillon*** (British Book Centre, $2.95)

Overdue American debut of an Irish novelist, weak on detectival plotting but strong on quiet rural charm.

★★★ **MURDER HAS ITS POINTS, *by Frances & Richard Lockridge*** (Lippincott, $2.95)

Gentle satire on the book business, good puzzle and police work, likable people and cats . . . in short, a typical Lockridge book.

Collier Books, a new line of 95¢ reprints, features crime books of strikingly high quality. Its first release includes such British classics as Michael Innes' LAMENT FOR A MAKER (1938; AS14Y), such admirable but neglected American novels as Lawrence Treat's BIG SHOT (1951; AS37) and such excellent fact-crime studies as THE CARLYLE HARRIS CASE by Charles Boswell and Lewis Thompson (1955; AS5).

PHILIP MARLOWE'S LAST CASE

by RAYMOND CHANDLER

(continued from page 43)

I didn't take it too hard. When they mean it, they don't send it to you. I took it as a sharp warning to lay off. There might be a beating arranged. From their point of view, that would be good discipline. "When we pencil a guy, any guy that tries to help him is in for a smashing." That could be the message.

I thought of going to my house on Yucca Avenue. Too lonely. I thought of going to Anne's place in Bay City. Worse. If they got wise to her, real hoods would think nothing of beating her up too.

It was the Poynter Street flop for me—easily the safest place now. I went down to the waiting taxi and had him drive me to within three blocks of the so-called apartment house. I went upstairs, undressed, and slept raw. Nothing bothered me but a broken spring—that bothered my back.

I lay until 3:30 pondering the situation with my massive brain. I went to sleep with a gun under the pillow, which is a bad place to keep a gun when you have one pillow as thick and soft as a typewriter pad. It bothered me, so I transferred it to my right hand. Practice had taught me to keep it there even in sleep.

I woke up with the sun shining. I felt like a piece of spoiled meat. I struggled into the bathroom and doused myself with cold water and wiped off with a towel you couldn't have seen if you held it sideways. This was a really gorgeous apartment. All it needed was a set of Chippendale furniture to be graduated into the slum class.

There was nothing to eat and if I went out, Miss-Nothing Marlowe might miss something. I had a pint of whiskey. I looked at it and smelled it, but I couldn't take it for breakfast on an empty stomach, even if I could reach my stomach, which was floating around near the ceiling.

I looked into the closets in case a previous tenant might have left a crust of bread in a hasty departure. Nope. I wouldn't have like it anyhow, not even with whiskey on it. So I sat at the window. An hour of that and I was ready to bite a piece off a bellhop's arm.

I dressed and went around the corner to the rented car and drove to an eatery. The waitress was sore too. She swept a cloth over the counter in front of me and let me have the last customer's crumbs in my lap.

"Look, sweetness," I said, "don't

be so generous. Save the crumbs for a rainy day. All I want is two eggs three minutes—no more—a slice of your famous concrete toast, a tall glass of tomato juice with a dash of Lee and Perrins, a big happy smile, and don't give anybody else any coffee. I might need it all."

"I got a cold," she said. "Don't push me around. I might crack you one on the kisser."

"Let's be pals. I had a rough night too."

She gave me a half smile and went through the swing door sideways. It showed more of her curves, which were ample, even excessive. But I got the eggs the way I liked them. The toast had been painted with melted butter past its bloom.

"No Lee and Perrins," she said, putting down the tomato juice. "How about a little Tabasco? We're fresh out of arsenic too."

I used two drops of Tabasco, swallowed the eggs, drank two cups of coffee, and was about to leave the toast for a tip, but I went soft and left a quarter instead. That really brightened her. It was a joint where you left a dime or nothing. Mostly nothing.

Back on Poynter Street nothing had changed. I got to my window again and sat. At about 8:30 the man I had seen go into the apartment house across the way—the one about the same height and build as Ikky—came out with a small brief case and turned east. Two men got out of a dark-blue sedan. They were of the same height and very quietly dressed and had soft hats pulled low over their foreheads. Each jerked out a revolver.

"Hey, Ikky!" one of them called out.

The man turned. "So long, Ikky," the other man said.

Gunfire racketed between the houses. The man crumpled and lay motionless. The two men rushed for their car and were off, going west. Halfway down the block I saw a limousine pull out and start ahead of them.

In no time at all they were completely gone.

It was a nice swift clean job. The only thing wrong with it was that they hadn't given it enough time for preparation.

They had shot the wrong man.

I got out of there fast, almost as fast as the two killers. There was a smallish crowd grouped around the dead man. I didn't have to look at him to know he was dead—the boys were pros. Where he lay on the sidewalk on the other side of the street I couldn't see him—people were in the way. But I knew just how he would look and I already heard sirens in the distance. It could have been just the routine shrieking from Sunset, but it wasn't. So somebody had telephoned. It was too early for the cops to be going to lunch.

I strolled around the corner with my suitcase and jammed into the

rented car and beat it away from there. The neighborhood was not my piece of shortcake any more. I could imagine the questions.

"Just what took you over there, Marlowe? You got a flop of your own, ain't you?"

"I was hired by an ex-mobster in trouble with the Outfit. They'd sent killers after him!"

"Don't tell us he was trying to go straight."

"I don't know. But I liked his money."

"Didn't do much to earn it, did you?"

"I got him away last night. I don't know where he is now, and I don't want to know."

"You got him away?"

"That's what I said."

"Yeah—only he's in the morgue with multiple bullet wounds. Try something better. Or somebody's in the morgue."

And on and on. Policeman's dialogue. It comes out of an old shoebox. What they say doesn't mean anything, what they ask doesn't mean anything. They just keep boring in until you are so exhausted you flip on some detail. Then they smile happily and rub their hands, and say, "Kind of careless there, weren't you? Let's start all over again."

The less I had of that, the better. I parked in my usual parking slot and went up to the office. It was full of nothing but stale air. Every time I went into the dump I felt more and more tired. Why the hell hadn't I got myself a government job ten years ago? Make it fifteen years. I had brains enough to get a mail-order law degree. The country's full of lawyers who couldn't write a complaint without the book.

So I sat in my office chair and disadmired myself. After a while I remembered the pencil. I made certain arrangements with a .45 gun, more gun than I ever carry—too much weight. I dialed the Sheriff's Office and asked for Bernie Ohls. I got him. His voice was sour.

"Marlowe. I'm in trouble—real trouble," I said.

"Why tell me?" he growled. "You must be used to it by now."

"This kind of trouble you don't get used to. I'd like to come over and tell you."

"You in the same office?"

"The same."

"Have to go over that way. I'll drop in."

He hung up. I opened two windows. The gentle breeze wafted a smell of coffee and stale fat to me from Joe's Eats next door. I hated it, I hated myself, I hated everything.

Ohls didn't bother with my elegant waiting room. He rapped on my own door and I let him in. He scowled his way to the customer's chair.

"Okay. Give."

"Ever hear of a character named Ikky Rossen?"

"Why would I? Record?"

"An ex-mobster who got disliked

by the mob. They put a pencil through his name and sent the usual two tough boys on a plane. He got tipped and hired me to help him get away."

"Nice clean work."

"Cut it out, Bernie." I lit a cigarette and blew smoke in his face. In retaliation he began to chew a cigarette. He never lit one, but he certainly mangled them.

"Look," I went on. "Suppose the man wants to go straight and suppose he doesn't. He's entitled to his life as long as he hasn't killed anyone. He told me he hadn't."

"And you believed the hood, huh? When do you start teaching Sunday School?"

"I neither believed him nor disbelieved him. I took him on. There was no reason not to. A girl I know and I watched the planes yesterday. She spotted the boys and tailed them to a hotel. She was sure of what they were. They looked it right down to their black shoes. This girl—"

"Would she have a name?"

"Only for you."

"I'll buy, if she hasn't cracked any laws."

"Her name is Anne Riordan. She lives in Bay City. Her father was once Chief of Police there. And don't say that makes him a crook, because he wasn't."

"Uh-huh. Let's have the rest. Make a little time too."

"I took an apartment opposite Ikky. The killers were still at the hotel. At midnight I got Ikky out and drove with him as far as Pomona. He went on in his rented car and I came back by Greyhound. I moved into the apartment on Poynter Street, right across from his dump."

"Why—if he was already gone?"

I opened the middle desk drawer and took out the nice sharp pencil. I wrote my name on a piece of paper and ran the pencil through it.

"Because someone sent me this. I didn't think they'd kill me, but I thought they planned to give me enough of a beating to warn me off any more pranks."

"They knew you were in on it?"

"Ikky was tailed here by a little squirt who later came around and stuck a gun in my stomach. I knocked him around a bit, but I had to let him go. I thought Poynter Street was safer after that. I live lonely."

"I get around," Bernie Ohls said. "I hear reports. So they gunned the wrong guy."

"Same height, same build, same general appearance. I saw them gun him. I couldn't tell if it was the two guys from the Beverly-Western. I'd never seen them. It was just two guys in dark suits with hats pulled down. They jumped into a blue Pontiac sedan, about two years old, and lammed off, with a big Caddy running crash for them."

Bernie stood up and stared at me for a long moment. "I don't think they'll bother with you now," he

said. "They've hit the wrong guy. The mob will be very quiet for a while. You know something? This town is getting to be almost as lousy as New York, Brooklyn, and Chicago. We could end up real corrupt."

"We've made a hell of a good start."

"You haven't told me anything that makes me take action, Phil. I'll talk to the city homicide boys. I don't guess you're in any trouble. But you saw the shooting. They'll want that."

"I couldn't identify anybody, Bernie. I didn't know the man who was shot. How did *you* know it was the wrong man?"

"You told me, stupid."

"I thought perhaps the city boys had a make on him."

"They wouldn't tell me, if they had. Besides, they ain't hardly had time to go out for breakfast. He's just a stiff in the morgue to them until the ID comes up with something. But they'll want to talk to you, Phil. They just love their tape recorders."

He went out and the door whooshed shut behind him. I sat there wondering if I had been a dope to talk to him. Or to take on Ikky's troubles. Five thousand green men said no. But they can be wrong too.

Somebody banged on my door. It was a uniform holding a telegram. I receipted for it and tore it loose.

It said: ON MY WAY TO FLAGSTAFF. MIRADOR MOTOR COURT. THINK I'VE BEEN SPOTTED. COME FAST.

I tore the wire into small pieces and burned them in my big ashtray.

I called Anne Riordan.

"Funny thing happened," I told her, and told her about the funny thing.

"I don't like the pencil," she said. "And I don't like the wrong man being killed—probably some poor bookkeeper in a cheap business or he wouldn't be living in that neighborhood. You should never have touched it, Phil."

"Ikky had a life. Where he's going he might make himself decent. He can change his name. He must be loaded or he wouldn't have paid me so much."

"I said I didn't like the pencil. You'd better come down here for a while. You can have your mail readdressed—if you get any mail. You don't have to work right away anyhow. And L.A. is oozing with private eyes."

"You don't get the point. I'm not through with the job. The city dicks have to know where I am, and if they do, all the crime reporters will know too. The cops might even decide to make me a suspect. Nobody who saw the shooting is going to put out a description that means anything. The American people know better than to be witnesses to gang killings.

"All right, but my offer stands."

The buzzer sounded in the outside room. I told Anne I had to hang up. I opened the communicating door and a well-dressed—I might say elegantly dressed—middle-aged man stood six feet inside the outer door. He had a pleasantly dishonest smile on his face. He wore a white Stetson and one of those narrow ties that go through an ornamental buckle. His cream-colored flannel suit was beautifully tailored.

He lit a cigarette with a gold lighter and looked at me over the first puff of smoke.

"Mr. Philip Marlowe?"

I nodded.

"I'm Foster Grimes from Las Vegas. I run the Rancho Esperanza on South Fifth. I hear you got a little involved with a man named Ikky Rossen."

"Won't you come in?"

He strolled past me into my office. His appearance told me nothing—a prosperous man who liked or felt it good business to look a bit western. You see them by the dozen in the Palm Springs winter season. His accent told me he was an easterner, but not New England. New York or Baltimore, likely. Long Island, the Berkshires—no, too far from the city.

I showed him the customer's chair with a flick of the wrist and sat down in my antique swivel-squeaker. I waited.

"Where is Ikky now, if you know?"

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

"How come you messed with him?"

"Money."

"A damned good reason," he smiled. "How far did it go?"

"I helped him leave town. I'm telling you this, although I don't know who the hell you are, because I've already told an old friend-enemy of mine, a top man in the Sheriff's Office."

"What's a friend-enemy?"

"Law men don't go around kissing me, but I've known him for years, and we are as much friends as a private star can be with a law man."

"I told you who I was. We have a unique set-up in Vegas. We own the place except for one lousy newspaper editor who keeps climbing our backs and the backs of our friends. We let him live because letting him live makes us look better than knocking him off. Killings are not good business any more."

"Like Ikky Rossen."

"That's not a killing. It's an execution. Ikky got out of line."

"So your gun boys had to rub the wrong guy. They could have hung around a little to make sure."

"They would have, if you'd kept your nose where it belonged. They hurried. We don't appreciate that. We want cool efficiency."

"Who's this great big fat 'we' you keep talking about?"

"Don't go juvenile on me, Marlowe."

"Okay. Let's say I know."

"Here's what we want. He reached into his pocket and drew out a loose bill. He put it on the desk on his side. "Find Ikky and tell him to get back in line and everything is oke. With an innocent bystander gunned, we don't want any trouble or any extra publicity. It's that simple. You get this now," he nodded at the bill. It was a grand. Probably the smallest bill they had. "And another when you find Ikky and give him the message. If he holds out—curtains."

"Suppose I say take your grand and blow your nose with it?"

"That would be unwise." He flipped out a Colt Woodsman with a short silencer on it. A Colt Woodsman will take one without jamming. He was fast too, fast and smooth. The genial expression on his face didn't change.

"I never left Vegas," he said calmly. "I can prove it. You're dead in your office chair and nobody knows anything. Just another private eye that tried the wrong pitch. Put your hands on the desk and think a little. Incidentally, I'm a crack shot even with this damned silencer."

"Just to sink a little lower in the social scale, Mr. Grimes, I ain't putting no hands on no desk. But tell me about this."

I flipped the nicely sharpened pencil across to him. He grabbed for it after a swift change of the gun to his left hand—very swift. He held the pencil up so that he could look at it without taking his eyes off me.

I said, "It came to me by Special Delivery mail. No message, no return address. Just the pencil. Think I've never heard about the pencil, Mr. Grimes?"

He frowned and tossed the pencil down. Before he could shift his long lithe gun back to his right hand I dropped mine under the desk and grabbed the butt of the .45 and put my finger hard on the trigger.

"Look under the desk, Mr. Grimes. You'll see a .45 in an open-end holster. It's fixed there and it's pointing at your belly. Even if you could shoot me through the heart, the .45 would still go off from a convulsive movement of my hand. And your belly would be hanging by a shred and you would be knocked out of that chair. A .45 slug can throw you back six feet. Even the movies learned that at last."

"Looks like a Mexican stand-off," he said quietly. He holstered his gun. He grinned. "Nice work, Marlowe. We could use a man like you. I suggest that you find Ikky and don't be a drip. He'll listen to reason. He doesn't really want to be on the run for the rest of his life."

"Tell me something, Mr. Grimes. Why pick on me? Apart from Ikky, what did I ever do to make you dislike me?"

Not moving, he thought a mo-

ment, or pretended to. "The Larsen case. You helped send one of our boys to the gas chamber. That we don't forget. We had you in mind as a fall guy for Ikky. You'll always be a fall guy, unless you play it our way. Something will hit you when you least expect it."

"A man in my business is always a fall guy, Mr. Grimes. Pick up your grand and drift out quietly. I might decide to do it your way, but I have to think about it. As for the Larsen case, the cops did all the work. I just happened to know where he was. I don't guess you miss him terribly."

"We don't like interference." He stood up. He put the grand note casually back in his pocket. While he was doing it I let go of the .45 and jerked out my Smith and Wesson five-inch .38.

He looked at it contemptuously. "I'll be in Vegas, Marlowe—in fact, I never left Vegas. You can catch me at the Esperanza. No, we don't give a damn about Larsen personally. Just another gun handler. They come in gross lots. We *do* give a damn that some punk private eye fingered him."

He nodded and went out by my office door.

I did some pondering. I knew Ikky wouldn't go back to the outfit. He wouldn't trust them enough even if he got the chance. But there was another reason now. I called Anne Riordan again.

"I'm going to look for Ikky. I have to. If I don't call you in three days, get hold of Bernie Ohls. I'm going to Flagstaff, Arizona. Ikky says he will be there."

"You're a fool," she wailed. "It's some sort of trap."

"A Mr. Grimes of Vegas visited me with a silenced gun. I beat him to the punch, but I won't always be that lucky. If I find Ikky and report to Grimes, the mob will let me alone."

"You'd condemn a man to death?" Her voice was sharp and incredulous.

"No. He won't be there when I report. He'll have to hop a plane to Montreal, buy forged papers, and plane to Europe. He may be fairly safe there. But the Outfit has long arms and Ikky won't have a dull life staying alive. He hasn't any choice. For him it's either hide or get the pencil."

"So clever of you, darling. What about your own pencil?"

"If they meant it, they wouldn't have sent it. Just a bit of scare technique."

"And you don't scare, you wonderful handsome brute."

"I scare. But it doesn't paralyze me. So long. Don't take any lovers until I get back."

"Damn you, Marlowe!"

She hung up on me. I hung up on myself.

Saying the wrong thing is one of my specialties.

I beat it out of town before the homicide boys could hear about

me. It would take them quite a while to get a lead. And Bernie Ohls wouldn't give a city dick a used paper bag. The Sheriff's men and the City Police cooperate about as much as two tomcats on a fence.

I made Phoenix by evening and parked myself in a motor court on the outskirts. Phoenix was damned hot. The motor court had a dining room, so I had dinner. I collected some quarters and dimes from the cashier and shut myself in a phone booth and started to call the Mirador in Flagstaff.

How silly could I get? Ikky might be registered under any name from Cohen to Cordileone, from Watson to Woichehovski. I called anyway and got nothing but as much of a smile as you can get on the phone.

So I asked for a room the following night. Not a chance unless someone checked out, but they would put me down for a cancellation or something. Flagstaff is too near the Grand Canyon. Ikky must have arranged in advance. That was something to ponder too.

I bought a paperback and read it. I set my alarm watch for 6:30. The paperback scared me so badly that I put two guns under my pillow. It was about a guy who bucked the hoodlum boss of Milwaukee and got beaten up every fifteen minutes. I figured that his head and face would be nothing but a piece of bone with a strip of skin hanging from it. But in the next chapter he was as gay as a meadow lark.

Then I asked myself why I was reading this drivel when I could have been memorizing *The Brothers Karamazov*. Not knowing any good answers, I turned the light out and went to sleep.

At 6:30 I shaved, showered, had breakfast, and took off for Flagstaff. I got there by lunchtime, and there was Ikky in the restaurant eating mountain trout. I sat down across from him. He looked surprised to see me.

I ordered mountain trout and ate it from the outside in, which is the proper way. Boning spoils it a little.

"What gives?" he asked me with his mouth full. A delicate eater.

"You read the papers?"

"Just the sports section."

"Let's go to your room and talk about it."

We paid for our lunches and went along to a nice double. The motor courts are getting so good that they make a lot of hotels look cheap. We sat down and lit cigarettes.

"The two hoods got up too early and went over to Poynter Street. They parked outside your apartment house. They hadn't been briefed carefully enough. They shot a guy who looked a little like you."

"That's a hot one," he grinned. "But the cops will find out, and the Outfit will find out. So the tag for me stays on."

"You must think I'm dumb," I said. 'I am."

"I thought you did a first-class job, Marlowe. What's dumb about that?"

"What job did I do?"

"You got me out of there pretty slick."

"Anything about it you couldn't have done yourself?"

"With luck—no. But it's nice to have a helper."

"You mean sucker."

His face tightened. And his rusty voice growled. "I don't catch. And give me back some of that five grand, will you? I'm shorter than I thought."

"I'll give it back to you when you find a hummingbird in a salt shaker."

"Don't be like that." He almost sighed, and flicked a gun into his hand. I didn't have to flick. I was holding one in my side pocket.

"I oughtn't to have boobed off," I said. "Put the heater away. It doesn't pay any more than a Vegas slot machine."

"Wrong. Them machines pay the jackpot every so often. Otherwise—no customers."

"Every so seldom, you mean. Listen, and listen good."

He grinned. His dentist was tired waiting for him.

"The set-up intrigued me," I went on, debonair as Philo Vance in an S. S. Van Dine story and a lot brighter in the head. "First off, could it be done? Second, if it could be done, where would I be? But gradually I saw the little touches that flawed the picture. Why would you come to me at all? The Outfit isn't that naive. Why would they send a little punk like this Charles Hickon or whatever name he uses on Thursdays? Why would an old hand like you let anybody trail you to a dangerous connection?"

"You slay me, Marlowe. You're so bright I could find you in the dark. You're so dumb you couldn't see a red, white, and blue giraffe. I bet you were back there in your unbrain emporium playing with that five grand like a cat with a bag of catnip. I bet you were kissing the notes."

"Not after you handled them. Then why the pencil that was sent to me? Big dangerous threat. It reinforced the rest. But like I told your choir boy from Vegas, they don't send them when they mean them. By the way, he had a gun too. A Woodsman .22 with a silencer. I had to make him put it away. He was nice about that. He started waving grands at me to find out where you were and tell him. A well-dressed, nice-looking front man for a pack of dirty rats. The Women's Christian Temperance Association and some bootlicking politicians gave them the money to be big, and they learned how to use it and make it grow. Now they're pretty well unstoppable. But they're still a pack of dirty rats. And they're always where they can't make a

mistake. That's inhuman. Any man has a right to a few mistakes. Not the rats. They have to be perfect all the time. Or else they get stuck with *you.*"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I just know it's too long."

"Well, allow me to put it in English. Some poor jerk from the East Side gets involved with the lower echelons of a mob. You know what an echelon is, Ikky?"

"I been in the Army," he sneered.

"He grows up in the mob, but he's not all rotten. He's not rotten enough. So he tries to break loose. He comes out here and gets himself a cheap job of some sort and changes his name or names and lives quietly in a cheap apartment house. But the mob by now has agents in many places. Somebody spots him and recognizes him. It might be a pusher, a front man for a bookie joint, a night girl. So the mob, or call them the Outfit, say through their cigar smoke: 'Ikky can't do this to us. It's a small operation because he's small. But it annoys us. Bad for discipline. Call a couple of boys and have them pencil him.' But what boys do they call? A couple they're tired of. Been around too long. Might make a mistake or get chilly toes. Perhaps they like killing. That's bad too. That makes for recklessness. The best boys are the ones that don't care either way. So although they don't know it, the boys they call are on their way out. But it would be kind of cute to frame a guy they already don't like, for fingering a hood named Larsen. One of these puny little jokes the Outfit takes big. 'Look, guys, we even got time to play footsie with a private eye.' So they send a ringer."

"The Torrence brothers ain't ringers. They're real hard boys. They proved it—even if they did make a mistake."

"Mistake nothing. They got Ikky Rossen. You're just a singing commercial in this deal. And as of now you're under arrest for murder. You're worse off than that. The Outfit will habeas corpus you out of the clink and blow you down. You've served your purpose and you failed to finger me into a patsy."

His finger tightened on the trigger. I shot the gun out of his hand. The gun in my coat pocket was small, but at that distance accurate. And it was one of my days to be accurate.

He made a faint moaning sound and sucked at his hand. I went over and kicked him hard in the chest. Being nice to killers is not part of my repertoire. He went over backward and stumbled four or five steps. I picked up his gun and held it on him while I tapped all the places—not just pockets or holsters —where a man could stash a second gun. He was clean—that way anyhow.

"What are you trying to do to me?" he whined. "I paid you.

You're clear. I paid you damn well."

"We both have problems there. Your's is to stay alive." I took a pair of cuffs out of my pocket and wrestled his hands behind him and snapped them on. His hand was bleeding. I tied his show handkerchief around it and then went to the telephone and called the police.

I had to stick around for a few days, but I didn't mind that as long as I could have trout caught eight or nine thousand feet up. I called Annie and Bernie Ohls. I called my answering service. The Arizona D.A. was a young keen-eyed man and the Chief of Police was one of the biggest men I ever saw.

I got back to L.A. in time and took Anne to Romanoff's for dinner and champagne.

"What I can't see," she said over a third glass of bubbly, "is why they dragged you into it, why they set up the fake Ikky Rossen. Why didn't they just let the two lifetakers do their job?"

"I couldn't really say. Unless the big boys feel so safe they're developing a sense of humor. And unless this Larsen guy who went to the gas chamber was bigger than he seemed to be. Only three or four important mobsters have made the electric chair or the rope or the gas chamber. None that I know of in the life-imprisonment states like Michigan. If Larsen was bigger than anyone thought, they might have had my name on a waiting list."

"But why wait?" she asked me. "They'd go after you quickly."

"They can afford to wait. Who's going to bother them? Except when they make a mistake.

"Income tax rap?"

"Yeah, like Capone. Capone may have had several hundred men killed, and killed a few of them himself, personally. But it took the Internal Revenue boys to get him. But the Outfit won't make that mistake often."

"What I like about you, apart from your enormous personal charm, is that when you don't know an answer you make one up."

"The money worries me," I said. "Five grand of their dirty money. What do I do with it?"

"Don't be a jerk all your life. You earned the money and you risked your life for it. You can buy Series E Bonds—they'll make the money clean. And to me that would be part of the joke."

"*You* tell *me* one good sound reason why they pulled the switch."

"You have more of a reputation than you realize. And suppose it was the false Ikky who pulled the switch? He sounds like one of these over-clever types that can't do anything simple."

"The Outfit will get him for making his own plans—if you're right.

"If the D.A. doesn't. And I couldn't care less about what happens to him. More champagne, please."

They extradited "Ikky" and he broke under pressure and named the two gunmen—after I had already named them, the Torrence brothers. But nobody could find them. They never went home. And you can't prove conspiracy on one man. The law couldn't even get him for accessory after the fact. They couldn't prove he knew the real Ikky had been gunned.

They could have got him for some trifle, but they had a better idea. They left him to his friends. They just turned him loose.

Where is he now? My hunch says nowhere.

Anne Riordan was glad it was all over and I was safe. Safe—that isn't a word you use in my trade.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 226th "first story" published by EQMM . . . Here is the letter that accompanied Sister Paschala's manuscript: "You will probably be surprised to see the name of a nun attached to this story. I am also a registered nurse and a full-fledged high-school teacher at a girls' academy.

"This is the first time I've ever submitted a mystery story for publication. Up until now my writing has consisted of articles on maternal and child health or poems and plays for children published in national magazines or school journals.

"After winning a fellowship for nurses in journalism I went to Creighton University. A professor in creative writing wrote on one of my stories: 'Sister, I'm tired of your sweet little stories about frustrated altar boys. Let's have something meaty.' I've been writing gory murders ever since.

"At Christmas I visited a mission in Puerto Rico. The mission is poor, so I thought if I could sell a mystery, the money would help the mission."

And here is the handwritten note your Editors received after we purchased Sister Paschala's "first story": "The letter from your secretary caused quite a stir around the convent yesterday. Already the Sisters are picking out the dishes for our Puerto Rican mission, to be paid for with the check you sent. I wish I could write some more stories for you to help pay for our hospital equipment. Thank you very much and God bless you."

. . . Be sure to read further editorial comment when you have finished Sister Paschala's story.

?

by SISTER PASCHALA, O.P.

HARRIS COULDN'T LEAVE THE REfrigerator alone. It dominated the small room, dwarfing the table and stools and sink. It was the most important thing in the room. Sunlight slanted through the narrow window in the west wall and spotlighted the shining whiteness of the low-humming machine.

Harris reached his square, violet-stained fingers toward the metal handle. Beside the handle was a

sign: *Don't slam the door. Blood stored here.*

He opened the door gently. Everything was the same: on the top shelf were the bottles of blood already crossmatched—a neat, clean row with their white collars telling for whom they were intended.

The second and third shelves held the reserve supply for the blood bank—bottles with white collars and test tubes attached containing blood samples to be used in crossmatching.

On the bottom shelf was an enamel tray of frogs used for pregnancy tests. A piece of gauze was fastened over the top of the tray to prevent the frogs from leaping out, but they hibernated peacefully like green blobs of dough on a cookie sheet.

One frog was alone in a pan. It had been used for a test that morning and hadn't yet gone back to its lethargic sleep. It blinked at Harris through the confining gauze and let out a couple of sluggish croaks as if to say, "I know, I know." It was slimy and evil, and Harris felt like killing it.

He laughed to himself. He mustn't let fancy run away with him. Play it cool—that was what he had to do.

The blood with his name on the collar was still there—in the right-hand corner. He didn't need to read the inscription:

For: *Chauncey Harris*
Type: *B negative*

He knew it. He knew the whole thing by heart: Joseph Kuhm, donor; typing and crossmatching by Ardis Gregory, registered technician. It was all written on the white collar.

What the collar didn't say was that Chauncey Harris, registered technician, had changed bottles.

Across the hall in the laboratory the phone rang. Miss Gregory answered and presently said, "Mr. Harris, it's for you."

He closed the refrigerator door carefully and limped across the hall with the slight shuffle of his clubfoot. He was a mild-mannered, quiet little man. Although he was only 24 he appeared much older, probably because his brown hair was thinning on top and his dark eyes were lined with crow's-feet from perpetually squinting into a microscope.

"Harris speaking," he said.

It was Dr. Vaughn. "Harris, are you busy right now, or can you come to my office? I've something important to discuss with you."

"I'll be right up, Doctor," Harris answered in a pleasant voice. He put the receiver back on the hook; he knew what was coming. But he'd play it cool. Nobody could prove a thing.

He tried to wash off some of the gentian violet he had been using to stain slides. He always got it all over his fingers.

As he dried his hands he turned to Ardis Gregory, his assistant tech-

nician. Her head was bent close to the head of the new student she was breaking in. She was checking the girl's crossmatching on a blood sample.

"Miss Gregory, I'm going to Dr. Vaughn's office in case you need me."

"All right, Mr. Harris," she said without looking up.

That was part of it. Nobody ever looked up to him. Nobody ever paid any attention to him. Lives depended on the things he discovered, the hospital revolved around him, but he was ignored.

Hell, even the doctors relied on him to know if a patient had pneumonia, tuberculosis, or anemia. He was the detective who found all the criminals of disease. He laughed at his own joke. He knew one criminal he wasn't going to tell them about.

"Sit down, Harris," Dr. Vaughn, said, indicating a chair. There was a worried frown between the pathologist's gray eyes; he kept chewing on the frame of his glasses. "You know why I want to talk to you?"

"Yes, sir. I imagine it's about Tony Chiminello." Harris' voice caught on the name. "I've heard the scuttlebutt about his death—that it could have been caused by the transfusion."

Dr. Vaughn nodded. "As head of the laboratory department I'm responsible for what goes on there. This Chiminello case has me worried." He patted his bald head with one hand. "I hate to talk to you about it, Harris, because I know Tony was your buddy."

"Tony was my roommate until he married my sister about six months ago."

"I didn't know he was part of your family!"

"They hadn't been married a year. I can't believe he's dead."

"I'm sorry, Harris." Dr. Vaughn paused awkwardly. "Wasn't he about your age?"

"Yes, he was twenty-four. Always such a healthy fellow, too. Weighed two twenty, six feet tall—never had a sick day in his life until this gall bladder came up." Harris paused. He pictured Tony with his Latin good looks, dark curly hair, snapping black eyes, the casual charm of the complete extrovert—Tony the irresponsible, the irrepressible. And now Tony was dead.

Dr. Vaughn cleared his throat. "Our investigation shows that Chiminello died of the wrong transfusion."

"But that couldn't be," Harris answered quickly. "Miss Gregory crossmatched the blood. Tony was type O positive, and that's the type we sent to the operating room."

The doctor tapped the back of his hand with his glasses. "That's why I don't like giving blood in surgery. When the patient is under anesthesia you don't get the usual warning signals of a reaction."

"What makes you think Tony died from getting the wrong type of blood, doctor?" Harris asked.

"The first indication we had was hives and itching as soon as Chiminello woke up." The doctor enumerated on his fingers. "Then there was a complete kidney block, nausea, vomiting—all the external signs." He stopped chewing his glasses and put them back on. "Besides, the findings at the autopsy were conclusive. There's no doubt that it was the wrong type of blood." Dr. Vaughn waited for Harris to say something.

"I know Miss Gregory checked and double-checked," Harris said. "She's always very careful."

"Is there any way the bottles could have got mixed?" asked Vaughn.

Harris peered at him as he would at a specimen under a high-power lens. Was it a stab in the dark, or did the doctor suspect something? He said, "Each bottle has an identification collar. If the wrong bottle was taken, we'd know it from what was left in the bank."

"Have you checked what you still have in the blood bank?"

"Yes, Doctor. And everything checks."

"Did anyone else get a transfusion that morning?"

"No."

"Are your blood-typing sera fresh?' asked the pathologist.

"Yes, Doctor. We always keep a fresh supply on hand."

"Then I can't figure it out," the doctor muttered. "I think I'll have to look around the lab, maybe check on methods. There must have been a slip-up somewhere—a fatal slip-up."

The two men took the elevator to the ground floor where the laboratory was located. As they walked toward the room, they could hear the whir of the centrifuge and the high shrill whine of the hematocrit spinner. The strong stench of formaldehyde struggled against the sickly sweet odor of acetone.

Miss Gregory, busy explaining a procedure to her student, rose from the high stool before the microscope as Dr. Vaughn and Harris entered the room. Briefly the pathologist told her about the mistake in the blood transfusion.

The girl went white, the freckles standing out on her upturned nose like splotches of mud on a clean sheet.

"But Doctor, I checked and double-checked that blood," Miss Gregory protested. "I'm sure the blood crossmatched perfectly with Mr. Chiminello's. He was O positive and we gave him O positive." She looked to Harris for confirmation. He nodded.

"Could you have mixed the bottles in any way?" asked the doctor patiently.

"I don't see how." The girl hurried to the refrigerator. Dr. Vaughn and Harris followed.

"Every bottle is numbered and accounted for," she said, pointing to the rows of bottles. "Those on the top shelf have been crossmatched for patients and are ready to go if needed." She wet her lips as if she found it hard to talk. "Those with the test tubes of blood have not been crossmatched yet. They're our reserve supply."

A frog on the bottom shelf moved lazily, blinking one eye. To Harris it seemed that the frog was winking at him.

Dr. Vaughn was looking at the blood on the top shelf. He took out the top right-hand bottle. "Is this crossmatched for you, Harris? I see your name on it."

Before Harris could answer, Miss Gergory explained. "I crossmatched that. I was showing my new student how to crossmatch." She turned to Harris. "Mr. Harris let us have a sample of his blood to experiment with."

"I wanted to throw the blood out afterwards," said Harris. *God knows he did!* He had wanted to get rid of it before anyone discovered it was O positive—the O positive blood which should have been given to Tony Chiminello.

Miss Gregory broke in, "B negative is a rare type, so I didn't want to throw it away, just in case we might need it. It does expire in two more days, so I guess I could have thrown it out," she conceded anxiously.

Harris winced as she slammed the refrigerator door. She always slammed the door. He must speak to her about it again. She knew the jarring could break the blood corpuscles and destroy the value of the blood. But he wouldn't say anything today—he didn't want to upset her, not until that top right-hand bottle of blood was disposed of.

Two more days, thought Harris—two more days of waiting, watching, making sure she didn't try to type that blood for anyone else. Two more days, and then the evidence—the only evidence—would be destroyed.

His mind reverted to his brother-in-law. Tony had it coming. Harris didn't have any regrets about what he had done. Nobody treated Chauncey Harris' sister the way that crum did and get away with it! Married only six months, and already Tony was running around with some doll not worth a flick of Mary's finger!

Harris had hated Tony for other reasons. The way he'd drawl "Chauncey," with a mocking sneer. Or the way he'd say, "Hey, Crip, how's the underworld these days?" Laughing at Harris for his small size, his limp, for beating his brains out in a hospital lab. But he wouldn't get a chance to laugh at Mary. Harris had seen to that.

It was pure luck the way things had worked out. Not even premeditated. Tony was scheduled for a gall bladder operation. The cross-

matching had been done the day before surgery. Not that Tony was expected to need blood—just a precautionary measure, the routine for all patients undergoing major surgery.

Harris had been in the lab when the call came to rush the pint of blood for Chiminello to the operating room. He had gone to the refrigerator and reached to the top shelf for the blood marked for Tony—the O positive. And besides Tony's bottle had stood the one marked for Harris—the B negative that Ardis Gregory was using to teach her student typing and crossmatching.

The thought had come to Harris in a flash. Who would know the difference? All blood looked the same, and the bottles were identical. Changing collars was a matter of two seconds, and Tony got the wrong blood. For Tony it had spelled death . . .

Dr. Vaughn finished his inspection and recalled Harris from his recollections. "If you find anything, Harris, get in touch with me at once." He left the lab, worried and perplexed.

After the pathologist had gone, Harris removed his white coat, washed his purple-stained fingers once again, and got ready to go home. Miss Gregory was in a slump. She had been out of school only three months. This was her first job and she took it very seriously.

She looked at Harris, her sapphire eyes pleading "I'm sure I typed and crossmatched that blood correctly."

Harris patted her shoulder awkwardly. He never knew quite how to act with women. He didn't have any of the smoothness that had been Tony's.

"Go home, kid. Don't let it get you," was all he could say. Then he had another thought. For him it was a brave one, because he shied away from girls. "Can I give you a lift?" She nodded and followed him to his car.

She seemed grateful for the ride, but she was silent on the way home. He dropped her off at the little green cottage where she lived with her mother.

Nice kid, thought Harris as he drove away; and he became absorbed in unaccustomed thoughts of Ardis Gregory and how it would be to date her. He was so lost in thought that he failed to see the heavy transport coming from the right at the intersection. The truck had the right of way, but Harris kept barreling along.

There was a shuddering crash, a sharp incisive pain, and then oblivion . . .

Harris came to with a murmuring of low voices in his ears. He couldn't orient himself, but it sounded as if the voices were talking about him.

"He isn't badly hurt, but an

artery in his leg was severed. He's lost a lot of blood. We'll have to pour it into him."

He recognized the voice as that of Dr. Judson. "It'll take thirty minutes to crossmatch. That's too long. He's already in shock from loss of blood. Maybe we'd better start some plasma."

The nurse was checking Harris' pulse. She turned to the doctor. "Miss Gregory has a pint already crossmatched for him, Doctor. She did it the other day for an experiment. She's gone to get it."

He could visualize Ardis reaching for the top right-hand bottle . . . the bottle with the switched collar . . . containing Tony's blood . . . the wrong blood . . .

Harris tried to tell them. His eyes rolled wildly. Sweat broke out all over him. But he couldn't make a sound or raise a finger.

Miss Gregory was saying to the doctor, "We're lucky to have this ready to go."

The doctor nodded, swabbed Harris' arm, and applied a tourniquet.

Prize Contest for Readers

Win $50 for the best title!

As you have noticed, we presented Sister Paschala's "first story" without a title. We did this in order to give readers a chance to suggest appropriate titles of their own— for *11 cash prizes!*

It is really quite simple. Think of a good title for Sister Paschala's story, write it (or more than one, if you wish) on a post card, include your name and address, and mail the card to Title Contest Editor, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, 505 Park Avenue, New York 22, New York.

For the best title we will award a first prize of $50 in cash, and for the 10 next best, $5 each. It's a breeze! And besides, you will be doing a good deed—for we will award a duplicate first prize of $50 to Sister Paschala—to help that fine woman in her splendid work.

All post-card entries must be received by us no later than Jan. 10th, 1962, and the prizes will be awarded by Feb. 1st, 1962. Entries will be judged on the basis of aptness and effectiveness. The winning titles will be selected by the editorial staff of EQMM and their decisions will be accepted by all contestants as final. No entries can be returned. The contest is open to everyone except employees of Davis Publications, Inc., their families, and anyone connected with St. Catharine Academy, St. Catharine, Kentucky.

Make it a big, happy contest—and help Sister Paschala receive a duplicate first prize of $50 which she can devote to her wonderful humanitarian efforts.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ALLEN LANG**

TITLE: ***The Trail of the Catfish***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Max Holloway

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A "new" kind of sleuth—book cop, detective of the duodecimos. Join the public library's public eye on the trail of Public Enemy No. 1, the "Professor Moriarty" of library crime.*

INTERPOL AND THE TEXAS RANGERS, the F.B.I. and the Secret Service, New York's Finest and Chicago's Best all held the admiration of ex-corporal Max Holloway. His heart, though, was set on becoming a cop in his own home town.

The yardstick slapped Max down. Five feet, seven and a half inches in his G.I. sox, he proved a fingers-breadth too short to swap his Army greens for a set of Police Academy grays. Consoling himself with the thought that he could hardly do worse than the Military Police, he settled for the one local law-enforcement job he was tall enough to fit. Max Holloway signed on as a junior investigator with the Public Library.

"People caravan around this country like Arabs in a heat wave," Mr. McGrath said. He covered his mouth with a fist, stifling a dyspeptic belch—fruit of a stomach gone sour from thirty years with the Detective Division of the City Police, a stomach sweetened none by McGrath's association with the miscreants of his new precinct the Public Library. "The average American family moves every five and a half years," McGrath said. "A man may check out half a dozen books here today. By next Tuesday he'll be working in Atlanta or Los Angeles, with our books packed away in the attic with the overcoat he doesn't need any more."

Max's new boss thumbnailed a

pair of digestive mints from the roll on his desk and crunched for a moment. "Our job here," he went on, "is to remind the absent-minded and to frustrate the thief, to get our books back whether they're lost, strayed, or swiped. We're short a hundred and twenty thousand volumes as of our last inventory. That's enough literature, Holloway, to pay your salary for seventy years barring raises. Now I don't expect you to catch a thief like the Catfish right off; I just want you to help us plug some of the smaller leaks from the stacks."

"Who's this Catfish?" Max asked.

"Bigger game than you're ready for, Holloway," McGrath said. "He's a youngster about your age who steals an awful lot of books. I nicknamed him the Catfish because he wears a mustache and speaks a blend of cornpone and molasses that turns our lady librarians all dewy-eyed and weak-kneed. Forget I mentioned him. The Catfish is my personal ulcer." McGrath scribbled a note and handed it to his new operative. "Take this to the terrible-tempered clerk you'll find outside," he said. "She'll put you on the payroll and get you started as a book cop."

Max, uncertain whether the Public Library's Special Investigator drew salutes from his subordinates, nodded instead. "Thank you, Mr. McGrath," he said. "I'll bring your books back."

"Not all at once, Holloway," McGrath growled. "Give our staff a few days to clear shelf space before you bring home a hundred thousand volumes."

The clerk in the outside office, an unreconciled spinster glanced at Max's note and sniffed. "Another Jimmy Cagney," she said. "Instead of an electric typewriter—which is what we really need—they send me an apprentice G-man. I suppose it's too much, Mr. Holloway, to hope that you have any experience in library work."

"I haven't," Max admitted. "I did take a couple of specialized police courses at Camp Gordon, though, and I spent two years overseas with the MPs."

"You may find the task of recovering library books a bit more challenging than dragging drunken privates out of foreign bars" she said. "I don't know what our Library is coming to. Next thing you know, we'll have us a bouncer."

"I'm real sorry you got me instead of your plug-in typewriter, Ma'm," Max said. "I'll work real hard to collect enough fines to buy you one—with a brand-new ribbon every Monday."

The clerk looked up and smiled. "Forgive my hideous manners, Mr. Holloway," she said. "On days like this, buried in paperwork, I almost wish Gutenberg had left well enough alone. Now here's our routine.

"The Library lends its books for

a period of twenty-one days. A first notice is sent to the borrower five days after his book becomes overdue, and a second notice in ten. After thirty days and three letters of warning, we give one of you investigators the name and address of the delinquent borrower. You chase him down and get the book, or collect the retail price of its replacement. You charge the regular five cents a day overdue fine for each book, plus a dollar collection fee for each trip you have to make to get it."

"What if the borrower refuses to pay?" Max asked.

"There's a law that can give him six months in jail for maliciously keeping a book out past the due date," she explained. She handed Max a mimeographed sheet. "Here's a copy of the ordinance. We hardly ever take anyone to court except out-and-out thieves; but that's our little secret, right? We're after books, not convictions. Do you have any questions, Mr. Holloway?"

"Just one," Max said. "Do you know anything about the Catfish?"

"Not really," the clerk said. "Sometimes I think there really is a Catfish, running off with our books by the barrow-load; other times I think the Catfish is just a pet name Mr. McGrath has for his stomach trouble. He works too hard, poor Mr. McGrath. Help him all you can." She handed Max a stack of papers. "Here's your raw material. Some of these are letters to people the Post Office hasn't been able to trace. Others are carbons of notices that haven't been acknowledged. Here's a list of books that have disappeared from the shelves, likely stolen, missing at our last inventory. I've no idea how you'll go about finding the stolen books. That's a police job. I think you'll do fine, though. You'll earn me the price of my new typewriter, Mr. Holloway."

"All I've got to do is trace one book six thousand days overdue and collect the fine," Max said.

"Meanwhile, thanks a lot."

Max Holloway spent his first week with the Public Library in learning that literacy is indeed universal. He discovered a copy of the *Larousse Encyclopædia of Astronomy*, retail price $17.50, on a marble-top table in a two hundred dollar a month penthouse apartment, the Library's stamp and call-number razored off. He recovered three dog-earned novels of Kathleen Norris from a shack behind the City Dump. A copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*, eight weeks overdue, was in the possession of a schoolgirl who didn't like wearing glasses: she confessed that she'd been reading the book upside down in an attempt to improve her naked eyesight. She hadn't thought it would take so long to learn to read from right to left. Max collected *The Brothers* and $3.40 from the girl, and suggested that in the fu-

ture she confine her ocular calisthenics to the daily newspaper, ten cents the copy.

Max made the first entries in his personal file of Catfishana, notes of books checked out to Pierre G. T. Beauregard, to Thomas Jonathan Jackson, to a dozen other borrowers whose names had a military, Rebel ring—books that had nothing in common with one another except that none of them was ever seen again. He tuned his ear to the sound of Southern speech, listening at the charge-out counter for the false Confederate notes of his genius at book theft. He kept a sharp eye peeled for a larcenous mustache.

And while the Catfish's dossier grew fatter, Max initiated himself into the arcana of his bookish branch of the police profession. He learned the ways of the biblioklept, whose most common *modus operandi* is to conceal the book he wishes to steal in an artfully folded newspaper. He grew wise to the tricks of the biblioclast, a monster who maims his victims rather than abducting them cleanly, using a razor blade or the cruel Chewed String. A simple device, this last: the thief who wishes to make off with a color plate or a page of data from a bound volume balls up a length of string in his mouth and leaves it there until it is soaked with his criminal juices. Then he forces the wet string back into the seam of the book, next to the page on which he has designs. In a few moments the binding edge of the page is damp, and the thief can tug free the plate without fear of that tearing sound to which the ears of reading-room librarians are professionally alert. Max learned, too, the pinhole-and-needle technique of uncovering damp-string thefts in a matter of seconds—a secret that must be reserved, in the interest of controlling the dastardly crime of biblioclasm, to *bona fide* holders of a Library Science degree.

In following the Catfish trail to bookstores Max stumbled on a clue that led him to finger a bookseller so unworthy of his craft as to pass on certain orders to an underprivileged heroin addict. This snowbird would fill these orders from the stacks of the Public Library; whereupon the books were rebound by the barbarous bibliopole and sold to his innocent customers. This scheme netted the bookseller half a year in prison, and sent his agent to Lexington for a session of bluegrass therapy.

Less offensive was the case of the under-aged accomplice. Here Max extracted, from the walker of a thirteen-month-old baby who had grown eighteen inches during half an hour's visit to the Library, a Reference Room copy of *Webster's New International Dictionary*. The infant's mother, in tears when Max apprised her of the possible legal consequences of her larceny, confessed that she had stolen the book

only in anticipation of teaching her child to read. The fond mother got off with a ringing lecture from the dyspeptic Mr. McGrath.

Accumulating in Max's brief case was a core of uncollectibles: books charged out by pseudonymous John Smiths (and R. E. Lees, Jubal A. Earlys, Longstreets, Forrests, Pillows, and Picketts, constellations of Southern stars; books in the baggage of people hastening toward the greener grass; and the long, long list of volumes that had melted (or had been Catfish-nibbled?) from the Library's shelves without the attentions of the charge-out desk. Feeling that he needed professional advice, and willing to seek it from the most attractive librarian available in the Readers' Adviser alcove, Max approached the young lady identified by her desk-plate as Miss Jordan. "Good morning, Miss Jordan," he said. "I'm Max Holloway."

"And how may I help you, Mr. Holloway?" she asked.

A redhead worthy of sonnets Max thought. Nice voice. No rings or other evidence of impediment. Warm smile. He interrupted his inventory, in pale prose, to explain his mission. "I'm with the Library's investigative staff," he said. "We keep losing books, as you know. People drop them into shopping bags with the groceries, hide them under their coats like body-armor, lower them out the windows on lengths of fishline. Last week I caught a leather-jacketed kid with Reference Room maps of four states tucked into his motorcycle boots. An elderly gentleman had *Dorland's Medical Dictionary* under his hat and was caught only because the book shifted as he walked down the steps out front, and nearly busted his foot. Anyway, Miss Jordan I've got a list here of about a hundred of the books you people found missing last time you checked the shelves. They don't seem to have much in common, these books—not much of any clue that would point me to the people who stole them. I thought perhaps you could help me find a common denominator."

Miss Jordan scanned Max's list. "This is certainly a mixed bag, Mr. Holloway," she said. "Don't you think it possible that a hundred different people each stole one book?"

Max shook his head. "I think it's likely that we lose a few dozen books a year to ordinary people, but thousands to thieves who make a hobby of book theft. I want to find out what kind of book attracts these regulars."

"Here are general novels, philosophy, dog-raising, biography, a Bible—fancy that!—Westerns, Shakespeare, and Arthur Murray's *How To Become a Good Dancer*," Miss Jordan said. "All I can suggest, Mr. Holloway, that you suppose that Thief A is the Western fan, Thief B is fond of purloined philosophy, and so on. But I don't

see how that hypothesis would help you trace our lost books."

"I've got to start from some sort of guesswork," Max said. "How do I find out where these different kinds of books are on the shelves?"

Miss Jordan smiled. "You are asking me to show you the Card Catalogue and to take you on a tour of the stacks. I accept, as is my duty. Have you ever used the Catalogue, Mr. Holloway?"

"Only Sears-Roebuck's," Max admitted.

"Then I'll show you how ours works," she said. "Do you have a library card?"

"No, Ma'm. I don't have much time for reading."

"Then you'd better sign up for a card today, and take the time to use it," Miss Jordan said. She stood. "A man in the profession of retrieving books will do a better job if he has some notion of the value of the treasure he's responsible for, don't you think?"

"Yes, Ma'm," Max said. He observed that Miss Jordan wasn't overly tall, either, and decided that it would take an entire book of sonnets to do the girl justice.

"Fill out this questionnaire when we're done with our tour, and I'll type up a borrower's card for you. Meanwhile, let's look at the Card Catalogue and see how the Dewey Decimal System can help you sift out the book you need from the three million we've got. The more information of this sort you gather, the more grist your little gray cells will have to work with. Right?"

"Little gray cells?" Max asked.

"Highly spoken of by a famous Belgian investigator," Miss Jordan said. "Check out one of Agatha Christie's books sometime soon, Mr. Holloway." She pulled a drawer from the Card Catalogue. "Nonfiction books are listed here under subject, title, and author," she explained. "I've looked under the subject-heading HOMICIDE, since you're in police work and we've been talking of Miss Christie. You'll notice that there are lots of novels at the back—books with homicide in the title. The technical works are up front. Like this one: Young's *Homicide Investigation.*"

Max peered across Miss Jordan's shoulder, a prospect made convenient by her admirable height, to read the catalogue card. "What does this notation, *black cloth,* mean?" he asked.

"The binding," Miss Jordan said. "We send almost all our fiction, and a lot of the nonfiction too, to the bindery downstairs before we shelve it. The commercial bindings just won't stand up to the use they get in a public library. You can see that the card also tells you the access date, publisher, year of publication, and retail price, as well as the number of copies we keep here at the Main Library. The number at the upper left-hand corner of the card tells you where to find the

book. 321 is the Dewey number for books on law enforcement; 321.42 Y21 stands for one particular book —Young's *Homicide Investigation.* All clear?"

"Got it so far," Max said, busy with his pencil and notebook.

Max spent an edifying two hours with Miss Jordan, learning the techniques of legitimate book-borrowing. When he had completed his solo, finding the first half-dozen books on his "lost list" in the Card Catalogue, then making his way unassisted to the shelves from which they had been abducted, Miss Jordan congratulated Max and presented him with his diploma, a library card. Max at once charged out Young's book on murder, a volume filled with forensic fact and color plates that would make a hangman blanch. "I don't know how to thank you, Miss Jordan," he said.

"I'm just doing my job, and enjoying it," Miss Jordan said. "Remember, Mr. Holloway, you've got to return that book within twenty-one days; otherwise, we'll turn your name over to our investigative department. And you know how tough that bunch is. They always get their book." She smiled again, and extended her hand.

Max took the slender hand, and released it only reluctantly. "Always," he said, "unless the Catfish got it."

Miss Jordan was suddenly pale. She looked toward the floor.

"Do you know about the Catfish?"

"I'm ashamed to say I do," Miss Jordan said. "I was one of his first victims, Mr. Holloway." She shook her head and looked Max in the eye. "I was a patsy, that's all there is to it," she said. "I didn't check his references or anything—he signed his card Jay Davis—just helped him find the books he wanted. Expensive books, too. He talked the loveliest 'Suthron' you ever heard, mixed in with all sorts of head-turning compliments. I'd have let him move the stacks out on a hand-truck if he'd asked me."

"I'll catch that Catfish," Max vowed, taking Miss Jordan's hand again, firmly. "You're not the only girl he's talked out of her books."

Miss Jordan glared. "That's one of the reasons I hope you reel in that Rebel rascal!"

"Can you describe him to me?"

"It was almost two years ago that I met him," Miss Jordan said. "He's about your age, Mr. Holloway, a little taller, tanned—he was then, it was midsummer—with baby-blue eyes. And the softest, smoothest line of talk I've heard ever, like: 'Y' know, Ma'm, down where I come from, we got bunches of flowers a-settin' in little jugs on our library tables. Up here, y'all do it better, gettin' lovely-lookin' library ladies to bright-up the dusty ol' books'—that sort of chatter. I'm ashamed to have been made such a fool of, Mr. Holloway."

"Call me Max." Max gave her hand a squeeze of understanding. "I hope I can talk with you again, Miss Jordan, when I run into problems. Or when I get a line hooked into our two-faced Catfish."

"Please do . . . Max," she said. "My name, by the way, is Barbara."

Before he returned to formal work, Max undertook a bit of personal investigation. He determined from the borrowers' file that Miss Barbara Jordan had a library card, that she was twenty-two, and that she had a birthday coming up next week. He copied the Jordan address and phone number into his pocket notebook against the need of consulting a professional librarian after closing hours, or on Sunday.

Next Max explored the bindery department—five big basement rooms filled with the kindergarten smell of paste and glue and paper-clippings. "About eighty per cent of the books we bind here are general fiction," the bindery foreman told him, shouting over the chatter of a sewing machine. "They're bound in black. Science-fiction is sky-blue, and Westerns are bound green. For prairies, I suppose. Murder mysteries, we give red covers. All this helps the librarians sort out the special fiction." Max had the function of the sewing frame and the standing press, the blocking press and the plough, the fillet and the roll, all explained to him. Then he went upstairs to his boss.

Mr. McGrath set aside his Library copy of Allen's *The Physiology and Treatment of Peptic Ulcer*. "Quitting already?"

"No, sir," Max said. "I'd like to ask you a favor."

"Anything but a raise," McGrath promised. "What favor?"

"I want to go fishing."

"The Catfish?" McGrath demanded.

"I have a witness who can identify the man, and I've got a pretty good notion of his M.O."

"Max, do you know how deep the Catfish is into us?"

"Several thousand books," Max guessed.

"Add three thousand five hundred to your estimate, and one truck," McGrath said. "A young man with a mustache was seen driving our Westfield Bookmobile this morning, shortly after the librarian assigned to the truck parked it to get a cup of coffee. The Bookmobile hasn't been seen since."

"The Catfish strikes again," Max said.

"If there's a Professor Moriarty of book theft, the Catfish is that man," McGrath exclaimed. "In Safe and Loft we had a case once that reminds me of this one. We had a burglar raiding law offices all over town, tearing the desk drawers open, tossing everything out of the files like confetti. We couldn't find a motive. Nothing that seemed valuable was taken, not even money in the drawers.

You know what that crazy joker was after, Max? Stamps. He was a stamp collector! He broke in and tore the tax stamps off the title deeds. When we finally caught up with him, he clobbered me with a brass paperweight—sent me to the hospital for ten days. These collecting nuts are hard to crack, Max. They're apt to explode when you put the pressure on them."

"I've been around," Max said. "I know MP judo, some *karate,* back-of-the-barn dirty fighting, and the school of the *yawara."*

"You say you know how the Catfish operates?"

"With Rebel charm laid on like whipped cream, and the entire Southern cast of *Lee's Lieutenants,"* Max said. "He sidles up to a young female librarian, his teeth all a-sparkle in a big smile, a-drippin' honey-dew. He tells her she's the prettiest little thing north of the Panama Canal; says he needs a card—new in the city, you know, fresh up from the magnolia belt—and signs his application for a borrower's card with the name of a Confederate general. After this sweet-talkin' buildup, no girl is going to be so crass as to check the Catfish's references. By the time the Library finds out his name's a phony, the Catfish has fattened up his collection by half a dozen books."

"He's taking personal revenge for Appomattox," McGrath muttered. "Who's this eyewitness?"

"Miss Barbara Jordan, one of our librarians," Max said. "She was one of the Catfish's earliest victims. Miss Jordan is still sore about being sugar-talked out of a batch of expensive books. If she'll describe the man who conned her to the police artist over at the Bureau of Criminal Identification, I can get a picture of him to flash around to potential victims. I want this Catfish, Chief."

"Barbara Jordan, eh?" McGrath grunted. "I've watched you Sputnik-ing around that little redhead of ours! Okay. Polish up your Sunday armor, Paladin. Tell the beauteous Barbara you're stalking her false admirer, and I'll clear your use of the police artist with BCI."

"Thanks, Chief."

"If you get hit on the head," McGrath said, "if you lose the South Wing of the Library to the Catfish, don't come crying to me. I'm giving you a week, Max. After that I'll try to persuade the F.B.I. he's transported our Bookmobile out of the state, and is a Dyer Act violator. If J. Edgar's lean-jawed bloodhounds can't track the Catfish down, we'll have to go back to chiseling books on stones to big and heavy to swipe. Now get going, Max, before my ulcer perforates from sheer chagrin."

Max, baiting their date with a pepperoni pizza, arranged a seance between Barbara Jordan and the Bureau of Criminal Identification's staff artist. Working with a soft

pencil and a brick of art gum, the BCI patrolman questioned Barbara. First he determined the shape of the Catfish's face, then the placing of his eyes and nose, the purse of his lips, the set of his ears. "His earlobes stick straight out at the sides like little wings," Barbara remembered, "as though they'd been bent out horizontal with a pair of pliers." The artist drew in the suspect's hair as she recalled it, and sketched in the mustache which, with the "Suthron" speech, had given the Catfish his name.

Max had the artist produce two versions of the final drawing, one with the mustache, one without—in case, Max said, the Catfish should try to court anonymity by recourse to his razor.

Barbara had photocopies made of each of the two conceptions of the Catfish on one of the Library's machines. With fifty copies of each version tucked into his brief case, Max began making the rounds of the Library's branches, the remaining Bookmobiles, and the lending libraries of the city.

The Catfish had presented himself under a roll call of names that set the Stars and Bars streaming again. He had been Kirby-Smith and Earl Van Dorn, Loring and Price and H. H. Sibley, Ewell and Barron and John H. Morgan—names to quicken any pulse fed by Southern blood, names that Max—mere Yankee—recognized only by constant reference to his *Pocket History of the Late Rebellion.*

In M.O. the Catfish was consistent. He invariably approached impressionable girl librarians or clerks. He was always gallant with the grand gallantry of the antebellum Old Catawba cavalier. And he always left the premises with an armload of books that those premises were never to see again.

Interrogating the damp-eyed, heartsick girls and their grim male supervisors, Max learned that the Catfish had never disguised either his appearance or his accent—a fact not remarkable since these were his most valuable larcenous assets. He had supplied himself with a variety of identifications—the names of generals from Alabama to Tennessee on driver's licenses, Social Security cards, Diner's Club and Carte Blanche, gasoline courtesy cards and department store Charga-Plates. Once, Max was told, a Braxton Bragg had presented as his *bona fides* the photoinset ID wallet of an F.B.I. agent. This, a Federal offense, was not reported by Max. He wanted his Catfish gigged for stealing books, not for the post-mortem recruitment of a Confederate general into Union service.

One name, indisputably a mask for the Catfish, stumped the index of Max's *Pocket History of the Late Rebellion.* This was Richard G. Gatling, he *nom de crime* under which the bibliokleptomaniacal Southerner had made off with *Jane's Fighting Ships,* the four-

volume *World of Mathematics* (boxed), and Hammeier's *Book Collecting for Fun and Profit.*

To identify the mysterious Mr. Gatling, Max retired to the Main Library, superbly situated as it was for biographical research. He discovered that Richard G. Gatling had invented the famous gun that made Indians obsolete, and that he'd been born in North Carolina. "This is the first time the Catfish has worn a civilian name," Max told Barbara. "Five to one his home state is North Carolina."

A request to call the office of the Library Investigator should a man matching the BCI sketch appear was left, with a copy of the picture, at each bookstore and Library branch Max visited. A woman called from a store the Catfish had not yet tapped. "He was here," she said. "He had a bunch of books he wanted to sell us; but when I said I'd have to get the boss to price them he just up and left. The nicest man, he was—can't be the one you're after. Still, all his books have Public Library stamps inside the covers, and that's a little suspicious, isn't it?"

Max hurried across the city to the bookstore, Barbara accompanying him as technical adviser. The volumes the Catfish had abandoned, some thirty of them, were in a cardboard beer carton. All were Main Library books, as Barbara discovered from the access numbers lettered on the card pockets, and they'd been stolen at various times over the past two years. There was *Sexual Behavior in the American Male, Lady Chatterley's Lover, Peyton Place, Lolita,* and *My Gun Is Quick.* Seeming out of place in this mass of science, art, and erotica was the Federal Writers Project *North Carolina Guide.* "These must have been too rich for our boy's blood," Barbara suggested. "Except for that guidebook, they all have a pretty randy reputation."

"It's the guidebook that interests me most," Max said. "Let's go drink some coffee."

Thanking the girl in the bookstore for calling them, Max took Barbara to the restaurant across the street. He instructed the waitress there to keep their coffee cups filled, and opened the guidebook. "These books didn't fit the Catfish's collection," Max said. "Maybe it's as you say, Barb—maybe he just doesn't care for racy literature. That doesn't explain his getting rid of this *North Carolina Guide.* It looks as innocent as Mother Goose."

"Mother Goose was pretty rough political satire, back in the middle of the Sixteenth Century," she said.

"The Catfish wouldn't know that," Max said, turning pages. "His interests lie in the middle of the Nineteenth. There's something in this book that bugged him as bad as Kinsey, and I've got to find out what it is."

The clue, inconspicuous as a la-

tent fingerprint, wasn't found till three refills of coffee later. 649 pages thick, the *North Carolina Guide* was filled with descriptions of the famous Self-Kick-in-the-Pants Machine (Croatan, Tour 15A on US 70), directions to the gravestone of Seth Sothel, North Carolina's "most despised governor" (Side Tour From Hertford), and the history of the saloon in which Mr. E. A. Poe is reputed ("an unsupported legend") to have composed "The Raven."

But it was the tiny town of Piney that caught Max's eye. "At 112 m.," said the guidebook, "is PINEY. Once a mecca for those suffering from asthma and hay fever, it later shrank to a quiet country village. Here is SWEARINGEN HOUSE (*private*), built by Covey Swearingen in 1861-2. Federal Gen. Stoneman was a guest here in 1865. Because of his cordial reception and the fact that he allegedly was in love with a relative of the Swearingens in California, the town of Piney was spared the destruction wreaked by the Union Army on much of the surrounding country."

In the margin next to this historical sweetmeat, erased and smudged, but still legible to the questing eye, was an explosive notation: *All lies!"*

With Barbara serving as his typist, Max got off an airmail special-delivery letter to the Piney paper, listed in Ayer's as the Piney Weekly Welkin. In this letter Max confessed an urge to learn something of the doings in Piney, and asked especially whether the Editor knew of a member of the Swearingen clan currently resident in the big city.

While waiting for an answer to fly up from the Carolinas, Max took the Catfish's picture to automotive paint shops, searching for a Bookmobile having the Library's name painted over. He had drawn a dozen blanks when the word came out of the South.

"Johnny B. Swearingen," stated the lady editor of the Piney Weekly Welkin, "will be overjoyed to meet so dedicated a friend of the Tarheel State as yourself, Mr. Holloway. Mr. Swearingen's address in your city, should you choose to call on him, is 121 Williams Street. I have taken the liberty of enclosing a recent copy of the Welkin. The article circled will tell you why our Johnny B. (who is far too modest to tell you himself!) is so loved by his friends and neighbors back in Piney. Yours most sincerely . . ."

The Weekly Welkin did indeed explain why Mr. Swearingen—alias the Catfish—was so loved in Piney, and why he had been so busy with his one-man book drive. *"LOCAL RESIDENT ESTABLISHES FREE LIBRARY,"* read the head. In the body of the story it became apparent that this local-boy-made-good-in-the-big-city had sent home over eight thousand books in the

past two years, "both new books and books from the surplus stock of the Public Library of his adopted city, all in the best of taste, purchased by Mr. Swearingen for the folks home in Piney," the story said. "The Johnny B. Swearingen Free Public Library recently established in the fine old Swearingen House, stands as Piney's proud new beacon of culture." An even more exciting acquisition was promised as a teaser: "Mr. Swearingen promises that folks living outside Piney will soon be able to borrow books at their very doorsteps, thanks to a new gift made possible by the munificence of Piney's native son, bearer of one of the finest names of the South, worthy upholder of the tradition of Benjamin Franklin and Mr. Andrew Carnegie."

Max laid the enlightening Weekly Welkin before Mr. McGrath. "Looks like you've found him, Max," McGrath said. He picked up his phone. "I'll get a policeman to go with you to pick up the Catfish."

"Chief," Max said, "I guess you've done some fishing?"

"Some," McGrath allowed.

"How'd you like it if you fought the biggest fish in the lake to the side of your boat, then some stranger rowed up to snatch the rod out of your hand?"

McGrath put the phone back into its cradle. "Okay, Max. Gird up your Black Belt and wade in."

Max took Barbara Jordan and a copy of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* along on his Catfish gaff. 121 Williams Street proved to be a brick block of apartments. Max left Barbara in the Library's car and went into the lobby. "Swearingen" was listed under a mailbox with a fourth-floor number.

Max pressed the buzzer impatiently, gripping his *EQMM*, which he had twisted into a tight roll. No reply. He turned and banged on the Building Superintenent's door with the rolled-up magazine. The Super, smelling richly of malt, sulked to the door, which he opened on the chain.

"Mr. Swearingen's working," he said through the gap under the chain. "He's out earning his rent money. Is that a crime?"

It developed, after Max had flattered the tradition of private detection by parting with a five-dollar bill, that the Catfish worked at a used-car lot not far away. An apt job, Max thought as he walked back to his car, for a man blessed with Johnny B.'s command of piratical patter. He told Barbara where the Catfish trail was leading them.

"What if he's armed, Max?" she asked. "What if he's got a gun?"

"So I'll take it away from him," Max said, feeling all of six feet tall. "Don't you fret your pretty head, Honey-Chile."

"Don't josh me, Max Holloway,"

Barbara said. "If you get yourself shot dead, it'll spoil my whole entire day." She paused. "I mean that seriously, Max. It would spoil my whole, entire life."

"What is this strange power I have over girl librarians?" Max asked. "Maybe I should take up book theft."

The used-car lot where the Catfish worked looked like a carnival pitched in a town where the sheriff was acquiescent. Oilcloth banners were strung along wires and flapped in the spring breeze. The eye was embarrassed by the brilliance of the polished chrome and the fresh-waxed bosoms of second-hand chariots.

Max parked the unmarked Library car in the driveway. "You stay here, Barb."

He twisted his *EQMM* tight and gripped it in his right hand, making a compact cylinder, hard as a mallet. It wasn't a proper *yawara* stick, but it would serve.

"Good mawnin', sir," the salesman said, walking up to the Library car. He held out his hand. "My name is Johnny B. Swearingen, but y'all can call me Johnny."

"Max Holloway," Max said, and transferred his improvised weapon to his left hand to shake with his suspect.

"It's him!" Barbara whispered hoarsely. "I mean, it's he!"

"Looks like you an' the little lady got a pretty fair piece of tradin' goods in that there old car of yourn," the salesman said. "If you're thinkin' of steppin' up to a livelier model, Mr. Holloway, you picked a right smart time to do it. A couple more weeks, when the new cars come out, you wouldn't have yourselves a good down-payment."

The Catfish fitted very nicely the picture sketched by the BCI patrolman. The mustache was black and precise, the earlobes pinched out like miniature elbows. The man was, all in all, as handsome as any young librarian bored with books could wish. "I really stopped by about a problem I've got," Max said. "Of course, if you can give me a good trade, I might talk cars. Meanwhile, what I need is some advice on giving the old heap a fresh paint job."

"We got a paint shop right here on the premises," the Catfish said. "We might could help you with the paintin', but you'd be doin' yourself and that pretty li'l gal of yourn a favor to pick up somethin' a couple years younger, somethin' with enough perk and vinegar to really stir the gravel."

"Could I see your paint shop?" Max asked.

"We're doin' up a truck this minute," Swearingen said. "Step right this way, Mr. Holloway. Bring the Missus, if you think she wouldn't mind botherin' her pretty little nose with banana oil and polishin' compound."

"Wait for me, Barbara," Max said. He followed Swearingen into

the giant Quonset hut that served as the paint shop.

The Library's kidnaped Bookmobile was baking, freshly scarlet, under a tiara of enormous incandescent lamps. "Pretty, ain't she?" Swearingen asked. Max took note of the cases of books—the Bookmobile's stolen stock—stacked up against the walls. "Now, if'n you want your ol' car redone, I'll be happy as a lark to have one of the fellas here give you a right good price. I'd be a mite happier, though, if you'd let me show you and Mrs. Holloway a spankin' new set of wheels. Give you a trade that'd really be a steal."

"That's what I'm here about, Swearingen," Max said. "A steal."

"What in the world you talkin' about?" the Catfish asked.

"About the Johnny B. Swearingen Free Public Library, down in Piney, North Carolina."

"You a policeman?" Swearingen demanded.

"For the moment," Max said. He gripped his weapon tight and bent his knees a bit to be ready against any aggressive movements Swearingen might make.

"You got to understand my problem" the Catfish said. "Here I am, a man with the proudest name in Piney, just a-sellin' used cars. How in the world can I tell my home-folks that I ain't the big shot they want me to be? So I send 'em a few books from time to time. You got lots up here. Folks down home in Piney like to read, too."

"Let's go back to the scene of the crime," Max said. "My boss at the Library is looking forward to meeting you, Catfish."

A pint can of scarlet automobile enamel, its cover loose, is a missile with heavy and dramatic impact when bounced off the peak of the skull. Max, paint streaming over his ears, sagged and fell to one knee, then rallied up to jam his rolled *EQMM* smack into Swearingen's nose. Max staggered behind the book thief and fitted the rolled magazine between the Catfish's legs in the inelegant but functional *yawara* stick come-along.

Barbara, standing at the entrance of the paint shop in clear defiance of Max's orders, screamed. "He's killed you!"

"Not entirely," Max said. "Most of this blood-looking stuff is red paint." He bowed Swearingen back and marched him out to the car.

The Catfish shook his head. "Folks back home sure were a-lookin' forward to gettin' that there Bookmobile."

"This will stand as the darkest day in Piney since General Stoneman sat down to supper," Max said.

"That story," the Catfish said, "is a dirty Yankee lie!"

Mr. McGrath accompanied Max, Barbara, and the Catfish to the precinct station nearest the Library. "Max," he said, after Swearingen

had been removed to a cell, "you look an unholy mess."

Max, some of the enamel still speckling his crewcut, grinned. "I let him get the drop on me," he admitted. "Chief you've got a little pull around Police Headquarters, haven't you?"

"Thirty years, one ulcer, and two Police Combat Crosses swing a little weight," McGrath admitted. "What kind of favor are you fishing for, Max?"

"I've been thinking," Max said. "You're pretty fierce on following regulations, and the Public Library's rules won't allow two people in the same family to be employed together. Since Barbara doesn't want to give up her job right off, I want to take my physical for the Police Department now."

"Did that bump with the paint can jar something lose in your head, Max?" McGrath asked.

"No, sir," Max said, one arm around Barbara Jordan. "It did raise quite a goose egg, though." He winced as Barbara sympathetically fingered the lump on his head. "It's just that I'm five foot eight now, for the first time in my life. I've got to get my height checked before the swelling goes down!"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ROBERT TWOHY**

TITLE: ***Out of This Nettle***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Chief of Police Brandon

LOCALE: Lindenville, United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Nothing serious ever happened in this quiet town, and Chief Brandon liked it that way. Then snoopy Mrs. Grant saw something in the garden next door—something sinister.*

THE PHONE RANG. THE POLICE Chief of Lindenville picked it up and said, "Police Department."

"This is Mrs. Grant. I live at 230 Lockhaven Lane."

"Yes?"

"I . . . I can't tell you on the phone. I'm not sure . . . Could you come out?"

"Come out where?"

"To my house. It will be clearer to you if you see it for yourself. Perhaps you can tell . . ."

"Tell what?" The low, somewhat shaky voice made Chief Brandon a little uneasy. He was a large, comfortable man—not a fool, but easy-going. This was a pleasant suburban community. Nice, middle-class families lived here, the husbands commuting to the nearby metropolis. Nothing seriously criminal ever happened here—an occasional petty housebreaking and youthful acts of vandalism. The routine of being Chief of Police was peaceful. That was the way Brandon had had it for over fourteen years, and that was the way he liked it. But now he heard urgency in the low voice.

"Tell what?" he repeated.

"Whether everything's all right," said Mrs. Grant, "or whether . . . well, whether something could have *happened* to my neighbor."

The Chief drove out in his unmarked sedan. He knew the house

by the address she had given him. It was the old Judge Groler place—a gaunt, two-story frame eyesore, overgrown with weeds and surrounded by sagging weathered fences—a relic of the past in a neighborhood of low-priced contemporary homes. Now and then an artist or some nurses or a young working couple would rent it for brief periods, and then move on.

The Chief had heard that it had been rented again about six months ago. But he had no knowledge of the present occupant, Mrs. Grant.

He pictured her as a thin, quavery little lady, with a watch pinned on a flat satin bosom. Which was ridiculous, of course—even little old ladies didn't pin watches on their bosoms any more. Didn't wear satin, either. Still, he had a picture of just such a woman.

He rather hoped the picture was fairly accurate. An old woman with hallucinations about something serious happening in Lindenville would put the affair in its proper perspective. Nothing serious ever happened in Lindenville.

He pulled up across the street from the Groler place, got out, and strolled across the street. Nobody noticed him. On this street the people—except, perhaps, the new tenant of the Groler place—liked their privacy, and landscaped their grounds carefully so that the houses, each set well back from the street, were all but invisible from the street and from each other.

The Chief climbed the old stone steps to the terraced front yard that was overrun with parched brown grass, climbed some wooden steps, and found, a little to his surprise, a doorbell. He had half expected an old-fashioned knocker.

The woman who answered the door was neither little nor old nor quavery. She was of a nice height, an intermediate age, and possessed of a straight, firm, and pleasantly rounded figure. Her hair had a few touches of gray, but was mostly brown; and her face had a few lines but was mostly smooth. Her eyes were blue and clear, her mouth pleasant. She wore a housedress that was simple, inexpensive, and in good taste.

"Mrs. Grant? I'm Chief Brandon."

"Thank you for coming so promptly."

He allowed himself to be let inside.

She said, "I'm probably a fool." She smiled uncertainly. "I've been debating this with myself for three days. I didn't want to get involved—to start something that might . . ." She shook her head, pressed her lips together, and a vertical line appeared in her smooth forehead. "But after last night . . ."

They were standing in the old, dark sitting room. Brandon made a move toward a chair, but stood by it, waiting for her to sit down. But she said, "Would you mind if we go up to the bedroom?" She

laughed slightly, uneasily. "It would make it clearer to you."

The Chief followed her upstairs. She moved lightly, and he felt heavy, which he was. She looked cool, and he felt hot. Still it was pleasant to watch her. He wondered, vaguely, if she were a widow. He wondered why he had wondered it . . . Of course, she was a widow. There was no sign of a man about the house. And she wore a wedding ring.

The Chief stood by the closed window of the tall-ceilinged, old-style, sparsely furnished but neat bedroom. Through the thin curtain he could see down into the yard next door.

He looked down at a thin, balding man lying in a deckchair. The man wore only an undershirt, wrinkled dirty trousers, and rope sandals. He was about fifty-five. His graying hair was unkempt, and the Chief could see dark stubble on his cheek. He held a glass in his hand. A bottle of whiskey and a pitcher of water were beside him, on the ground. The glitter of numerous empty beer cans, and more than half a dozen empty bottles, showed on the uncut grass.

Mrs. Grant stood beside Brandon, and said, "That's been going on for almost two weeks."

"What, the drinking?"

"Yes."

He rubbed his chin with a large, smooth hand. "That's George Colfax, isn't it?"

"Do you know him?"

"By sight. I know most people in this town by sight." He stared down, his eyes narrowed. "I never knew he was a drinker."

She got a chair and moved it over, and he sat down in it. She sat on the edge of the bed, and he turned the chair slightly so that he could see her, and also glance out the window. He said, "What is it? Why did you want me to see him?"

"I don't know them," she said. Her voice was soft. "I haven't had any contact with them—nor with anyone else on this block, for that matter. People keep to themselves in this town. But I've seen them, off and on, from this window—seen them in the garden, seen how she made him keep the yard just so."

He watched her, his mind suddenly alert. He was easy-going, but not a fool.

"They never drank," she went on. "There was never any liquor. But now . . . for almost two weeks."

"He alone, you mean?"

"Yes."

"And the wife?"

"I haven't seen her for almost two weeks. Not since the drinking started. Nor the dog."

"The dog?"

"She has a little dog, a little white dog. I haven't seen the dog either."

She was quiet for a moment. Her fingers made a small, meaningless design on the bedspread, then she

said, "Once or twice, from the window, when they were in the back yard, with him working with the rake or the lawn mower, and she sitting in the deckchair, supervising . . . once or twice, when she wasn't watching him, I saw him look at her . . ."

"Yes?"

Her eyes had become wide and bright.

"He didn't like her, Chief Brandon. He didn't like her at all. I could tell—by the expression on his face."

After a few moments the Chief said, "You mentioned something about last night. Did something special happen last night?"

"Last night I woke up—it was about 11:00. There was moonlight, you remember. I don't know what woke me—some sound or other. I went to the window. I saw Mr. Colfax standing there, at the back of the yard, by the unplanted flowerbed. He had a shovel in his hands.

"He just stood there—qjite a long time, leaning on the shovel. Then he put the shovel in the earth and turned a little of the earth. Then he just stood there again. And finally he went back to the house."

She got up and went to the window. "That's how he sits, every day. With his liquor. Looking out towards the flowerbed."

She sat down again on the bed and her body slumped. Again her slim fingers began to make a meaningless pattern on the cloth.

Brandon got up and stared down at the man in the deckchair. As the Chief watched, the man's hand dropped down to the glass beside him and raised the glass to his lips.

The Chief said, "They might have had an argument. She might have gone away for a while."

"Of course."

"Visiting relatives," he said. "A vacation, a shopping trip—could be anything." He sighed and turned from the window. "About eight years ago there was a homicide in Lindenville. A man got clubbed with a bottle, down in the section where the railroad workers live . . . I'm not used to investigating serious crime."

He rubbed his jaw a moment. Then he said, a touch of briskness in his voice, "There's no need to go off half cocked. We won't assume anything yet. I'll make some quiet inquiries. The chances are that we'll find it's all perfectly ordinary. After all, this *is* Lindenville."

She went down the stairs with him and to the front door. He said, "Don't say anything, of course. I'll let you know."

Mrs. Grant watched him get into his car. Then she shut the door. She felt on the verge of trembling. At the same time, a great relief flowed through her. The thing had been done. One couldn't just passively wait, and let things happen as they would. One had to act. Whether rightly or wrongly, one had to act.

Now it was out of her hands. Whatever the outcome, she had done what she felt was the right thing to do.

He did some investigating. He was discreet. He checked with the local credit office, the bank, the leading insurance agent. He found that George Colfax was a stable man, quite well off financially, retired, formerly the owner of an apartment house in another city. He had come to Lindenville seven years before. He and his wife were adequately, not spectacularly, insured. A quiet man, and not a member of any local clubs or organizations. But his wife, Ella, was a member of the book-discussion group, a gardening club, and several other clubs for women.

He learned that she had missed her gardening club meeting the past two weeks, and that she had been scheduled to make a report at her book-club meeting last Thursday; but she had not appeared, or telephoned any excuse.

The president of this club told the Chief, "I called her husband. He said she was out of town, on a visit."

"Did he say where?"

"No. I didn't ask him. He sounded, uh . . . ill."

"And you haven't heard from her since?"

"No."

No one, it seemed, had heard from her since.

He called on some people who were acquainted with her through the clubs. He gathered the impression of an opinionated, unpopular woman. Proud of her intellect, although it was run-of-the-mill. Snug in her comfortable home. Devoted to her dog, which was called Mitzi. Punctual at meetings, orderly in her routines. In all, not the type of woman who would vanish suddenly without word.

Brandon got into his car, and drove to the Colfax house. He was filled with gloomy forebodings. This could be a mess. A murder in a barroom was one thing, but here you had people with money and position. Make a false step, a false assumption, and your whole placid, peaceful world could go belly-up.

He parked in Colfax's driveway, went up to the redwood and brick-veneer house, and rang the bell.

It was about 3:00 in the afternoon.

He waited quite a while, rang again, then heard a back door slam, and heard footsteps. The door opened a foot, and the blotched, whiskered face of George Colfax hung in the doorway, with bleary eyes staring at him. A reek of whiskey and stale food breathed into his face.

"Mr. Colfax?"

"Whuh is it?"

The Chief produced his card. "I'm the Chief of Police." He watched Colfax's face. Colfax's red-streaked eyes stared at the card, and

his tongue came out and flicked over his lips. The Chief said, "There's been an accident. I'm investigating it. Is your wife at home?"

"My wife?"

"It's thought that she might be a witness to the accident." The Chief's voice was butter-smooth. "A woman was seen near the accident, walking a white dog. Someone thought it might be Mrs. Colfax. Is she at home?"

"No."

"Well—when will she be?"

Colfax rubbed a hand along his chin. It was a thin, splotched hand, but it looked muscular somehow; and somehow, despite his drooping, middle-age figure, he looked as if he could be muscular. Muscular enough, anyway . . . Brandon gazed at him suddenly, sharply, and saw something that looked like bright fear in his eyes.

"She's gone on a visit. A vacation. She's been gone a couple of weeks. So she couldn't have been the woman." He started to close the door.

The Chief grasped the handle and said quickly, "Just for the record, so we can write it off, you understand—where can I reach her?"

He had a pad out. Colfax looked at the pad. His loose mouth twitched into something of a grimace. "I don' know the address. Hotel or something. In Chicago. She was going to write me later, the address."

"Has she?"

"What? No. Not yet."

"And it's been two weeks?"

"That's right. Almost two weeks."

"The dog," said Brandon. "Did she take the dog with her?"

"The dog? Yes, she . . . Yes."

"Well . . . when she writes, will you let me know? It's quite important."

Colfax took the card the Chief handed him, looked at it blankly, then muttered "Aw right," and shut the door.

The Chief drove off. He cruised around the block. He parked in front of the Groler place, out of sight of Mr. Colfax's windows. He went up on the sagging porch and rang the bell.

He said to Mrs. Grant, as they went up to her bedroom, "He's all nerves and fright. He's saturating himself with liquor. I got a look over his shoulder, into the living room, and it's a mess—bottles, glasses, cigarette butts, dirty plates—the place reeks."

He stood at the bedroom window. Colfax emerged from his back door, a highball glass in his hand, crossed the lawn, and dropped into his deckchair. He said, "Can we sit here tonight?"

"We?"

"A couple of my men. They'll watch the yard. Maybe he'll come out again, with his shovel. Maybe tonight he'll get up the nerve to try to move it."

"Move it?" she asked.

"Maybe," the Chief said.

It was after eleven o'clock that night. They sat in the dark bedroom—the Chief in his blue suit and his two young men, wearing jeans and old shirts. There were shovels in the car that they had quietly parked near the house. The Chief sat in a chair pulled up to the window. One of the young men sat on the foot of the bed. The other sat across the room and smoked a cigarette.

Moonlight fell on the garden next door, and the empty cans and bottles made bright highlights in the grass.

Mrs. Grant opened the door, closed it behind her, and came to the men with a pot of coffee and some cups on a tray. Her face was a splash of white in the dark room.

The man sitting on the bed said, "Maybe he won't come tonight."

The Chief grunted. He drank coffee, and stared out into the yard.

Mrs. Grant left the bedroom, went downstairs to the kitchen, and set the coffee tray down. Her slim hands were shaking a little. She lit a cigarette and breathed in the smoke. The bite of it steadied her.

She went into the parlor and looked at herself in the mirror over the mantel. Her eyes were bright, and her skin had a sheen on it. She passed her hands over her eyes and sighed deeply. She was afraid. She had started something, because she had felt she had to take action—now she wondered how it was all going to end . . .

In the house next door the stooped, seedy-looking man sat at his kitchen table, and now and then he sipped at the cup of coffee in front of him. He was wearing a leather jacket and a worn felt hat. His eyes looked like glittering bits of glass in his drawn, stubbled face.

He looked at the clock above the sink—the hands pointed to 11:30. He gave a quivering sigh, finished the coffee, and got up. He opened a side door of the kitchen and went into the garage. He got a shovel from its place against the wall. He opened the back door of the garage and stepped across the patio to the lawn. He shambled across the lawn toward the unplanted bed of earth at the rear fence . . .

They watched him dig.

Mrs. Grant said, "That's just what he did last night."

The Chief said, "We'd better move in on him."

They went out of the room, the Chief and his two young men. Mrs. Grant remained at the window.

Suddenly the policemen were in the yard, striding across the grass toward him. Colfax whirled, stared at them. Mrs. Grant saw the Chief march up to him. They talked briefly. Colfax appeared bewildered. He laid down his shovel, put his hands on his hips, then spread them, gesturing, arguing.

At length he stood aside, and his long body seemed to hang limply from the two drooping shoulders

as the two policemen in their work-shirts and jeans stepped to the flowerbed and began to swing their shovels, tossing the clods of soft black earth.

Colfax said, "It's that snoop next door, isn't it?"

The Chief said, "We got a tip."

"A tip about what?"

"We want to see why you come out here and dig."

"In my own yard?" Colfax laughed, a wild, sharp sound. "A man doesn't have the right to dig in his own yard?"

He stared at the men, digging slower now. Mounds of moist black earth were piled up around the flowerbed.

Colfax rasped, "What are they digging for? Oil?"

One of the diggers gave an exclamation. His blade began to fly faster. The other digger joined him. The Chief went over. Colfax stood where he was, watching, and then he dropped down, squatting on his heels, a cigarette in his lips.

The object came into view, dirty white in the moonlight, and they dug with care around it. Then the first digger lifted it clear of the adhering earth, and brought it over to the grass. He laid it down, like a fragile treasure. They gathered around it.

Colfax stayed where he was, sucking on his cigarette, watching them with eyes that gleamed like bits of glass.

"Head stove in," said the man who had found it. "Looks like it was done with a shovel, huh?"

The Chief left it, and came over to Colfax.

Colfax didn't look up. "It was a hateful act," he said. His voice was dull. "I didn't have anything against the dog. I went kind of berserk . . . It was hers, you see. I wanted to hurt her by hurting her dog."

"Only the dog?"

"What?" Colfax raised his eyes to the Chief. "Good God," he whispered, "were you looking for *her?*"

The Chief said grimly, "We still are," and he waved to the men.

Colfax watched them go back to the flowerbed and resume their work. He said, "You mean that *she*"—pointing with his chin toward the two-story house next door—"that *she* put you onto that? That she told you I might have—*murdered* Ellie?"

He shook his head, and began to laugh softly. "That damn snoop," he said. "Prying and spying on us from her upstairs window. Always prying and spying . . ."

Brandon said sharply, "But you can't tell me where your wife is."

"No. She left me. Said she couldn't stand it any more—living with a stick like me. I begged her . . . Could she have gone a little—crazy? Could it happen, at her age?"

"I wouldn't know."

"How did I know she wasn't happy? She took a few clothes, her jewels, some money I had—"

"How much?"

"A couple of thousand dollars. Good Lord, it was as much hers as mine! Money was never a problem. I always keep quite a lot in a drawer . . ."

The Chief watched him, a frown wrinkling his brow.

"Thirty years of marriage," Colfax murmured. "Thirty years and suddenly—" He snapped his fingers —a dry popping sound. "Finished. All over. And what do I do now? All alone . . ."

Brandon said, "We'll keep digging."

Colfax shook his head. "That damn snoop . . . We were happy—I thought we were happy. Why should I hurt her? Why should anyone think I'd hurt Ellie?"

Brandon didn't answer. He turned to watch the diggers. But he glanced, once, at the upstairs bedroom window, where he knew Mrs. Grant would be standing. And his face was grim.

He stood on the front porch and stamped earth from his shoes. When she opened the door, he came into the hall.

"I won't sit. I just wanted to tell you . . . You saw what we dug up?"

"The dog?"

"Yes. Wore the men to the nub—all for a dead dog. I should have known . . ."

"Why? Why should you have known?"

"Because this is Lindenville. Things like that don't happen in Lindenville."

"So you believe him? That she just—went away?"

"I believe him. I looked all over the house, the garage—looked all over. Her jewelry is gone, her personal things, suitcases—she's gone."

"Where?"

"I don't know," he said tiredly. "It's a big world."

"Why did he lie to you today?"

"He was ashamed. Didn't want it known that she left him. Still hopes she'll come back. When she runs out of money."

She stepped away from him. Her lips were tight. She shook her head. "It's not in keeping with what you found out. Not in character."

"How do we know what her character is?"

"Why did she leave the dog?"

"She left more than the dog—her home, husband. Made a clean break."

"It's not—"

"It happens," he said. "It's always a surprise. But it happens."

She started to speak. He cut in on her, his voice weary, "I've made a fool of myself, Mrs. Grant, and dug up a man's garden. I'll be lucky if he doesn't sue me. He says he won't, says he'll fill in the garden himself—that it'll give him something to do. He was pretty decent about it. He's going to let it drop. And that's what I'm going to do—let it drop."

"And if you should be wrong?"

"I'll tell you, Mrs. Grant. Bring me some proof, some evidence. Then I'll act. Until then . . ." He shook his head.

She opened the door, saying icily, "You make yourself perfectly clear. Good night, Chief Brandon."

He started down the steps, then paused and looked back. "And perhaps, Mrs. Grant, you might not spend quite so much time at that bedroom window of yours."

She stood by the door until the sounds of his car had died away. Then she shook her head, sighed, and put her hand to her forehead. She felt drained, spent.

She went upstairs to her bedroom. She took off her shoes and opened the closet door. She pushed the clothes aside, reached in past the two expensive suitcases that were on the floor. She brought out a pair of tennis shoes, sat down on the bed, and put the tennis shoes on.

She picked up the phone by the bed and dialed. She let it ring twice, then hung up at the third ring. She went downstairs, through the kitchen, down the back steps, and into the rear yard.

A stunted apricot tree stood there, its trunk choked with weeds. The yard was all weeds, except for one small area near the tree, where weeds were not growing now. This was covered with branches and dead leaves.

She waited by the apricot tree. In a few moments George Colfax came over the fence, with his shovel. They embraced for a few moments, holding each other lightly.

He murmured something, but she said sharply, "Not now!" He nodded and they started to work. They cleared away the dead branches and the leaves, and he dug shallowly. In a little while the body, wrapped in its sacking, was out of the shallow grave.

They struggled to get it over the fence, and let it drop into his yard. It was easier this time—the body was quite stiff, easier to handle than it had been two weeks ago when they had first lifted it over the fence.

She climbed over the fence, careful not to leave any marks of her tennis shoes on the boards; then he climbed over. They half carried, half dragged the body to the flowerbed and pushed it into the deepest part of the hole and worked in the moonlight, covering it with earth.

Finally it was done.

"What a chance we took," he said.

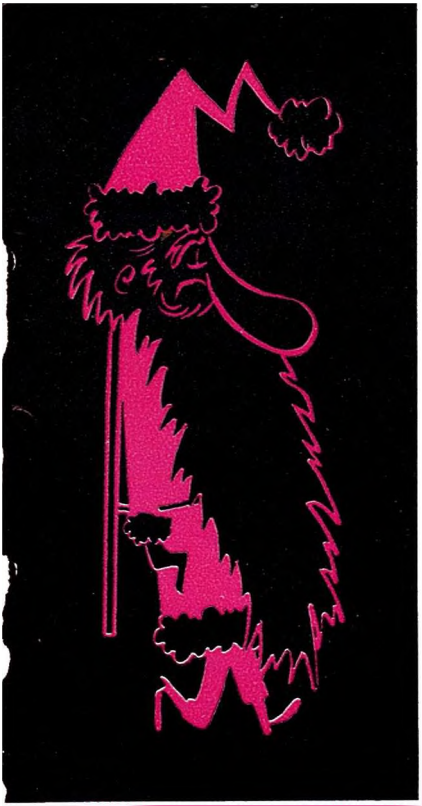
"You have to take chances," she said.

"It seemed crazy," he said. "It still seems crazy. I can't believe it's over."

She gave a thin smile. "Out of this nettle, danger . . . what's the rest of it?"

"Something about plucking this flower, safety."

"That's what we've done," she said, and they clung to each other again, passionately.



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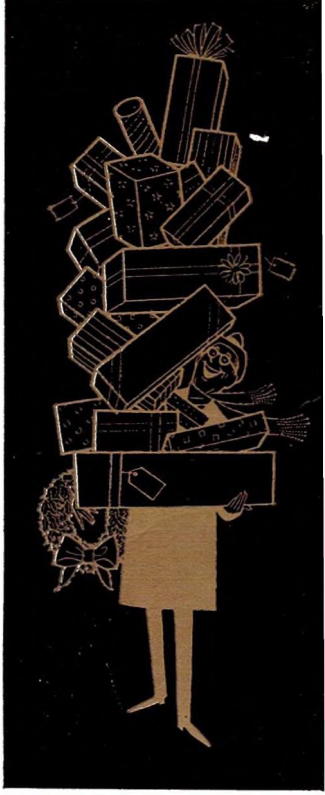

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