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THE saint DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

The Man Who Sang in Church
by EDGAR WALLACE

The Buzzard
by OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

Stained Glass Windows
by LOUIS GOLDING

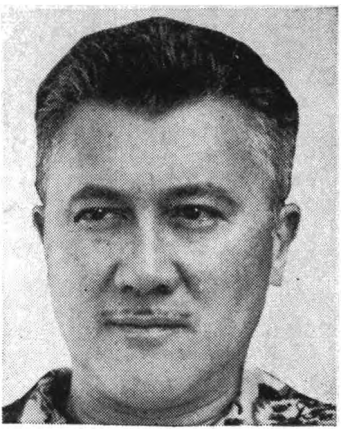
Conversation in Chinatown
by HUGH WILEY

The Five Thousand Pound Kiss
by LESLIE CHARTERIS

STAIRWAY TO MURDER
A NEW NOVEL by RUFUS KING

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

A KING-SIZE PUBLICATION



IF A WRITER is lucky enough to have fans at all, he gets occasional requests for an autographed photo. Just for a switch, I had my first letter some years ago from a lad named Arthur Knight, who was also ambitious to have my picture, but wanted to take it himself. Since at that time he lived about 500 miles away, and I was about to leave on a trip anyway, I couldn't give him much encouragement, and I must admit I was not too unhappy to dodge him and his box Brownie.

But Mr. Knight is an extraordinarily persistent young man, and after he had renewed his campaign several times, even threatening to trail me 3000 miles to Florida, and telling me very nicely but ominously about the other celebrities he had bagged in the pursuit of his hobby, I finally gave up, and when I was in California last summer within only 100 miles of him I told him to come and do his worst. Whereupon he showed up with a carload of the finest gear that any professional could covet, and samples of his muggings (including some of our own contributors) of obvious exhibition class. I sat still for him very meekly after that, and let him add my physiognomy to his trophies.

When he sent me *my* autographed picture, for a change, it made me realize suddenly that not only had I been living with the same face for nigh on half a century, but for four years now readers of this page have had to look at the same version of it. So this month (Oh, frabjous day!) we bring you something epoch-marking; a new view of Charteris, by reader Arthur Knight.

On the inside, Rufus King, in our lead novel STAIRWAY TO MURDER, does a sensational job of verbal portraiture himself, on a most unpleasant woman whose downfall you should be rooting for on tenterhooks. Tricks like this are a cinch for our acrobatic audience. And the way these coincidences keep happening, our recent distinguished recruit Louis Golding does a beautiful restrained probe of another fatal femme in STAINED GLASS WINDOWS.

Lest we should be accused of giving the ladies an unfairly rough time this month, we must point out that Hugh Wiley in Chinatown, and Octavus Roy Cohen in a Carolina swamp, and Edgar Wallace in London, do much to redress the balance in favor of the maleficent male. And in my own revival of THE FIVE THOUSAND POUND KISS, I think the Saint shows that he will never make a very successful misogynist.

Leslie Charteris

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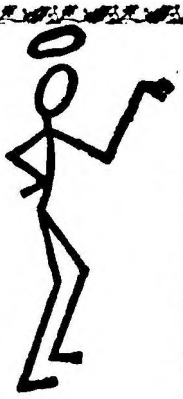

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SD 73

stairway to murder

by . . . Rufus King

Tobacco. An alkaloid of nicotine. Its rapidity is only surpassed by the action of hydrocyanic acid. It can be reduced to a tincture—

THERE would be no sense to this scene unless one were to know the people and the past, the variety of steps that led up to it with their inevitable, slow advance towards murder.

The setting was Broadlands, the fabulous estate on the Potomac outside of Washington belonging to Mabel and Lewis Gervais. More specifically, the scene took place in the living room of Mabel's suite. The year was now.

Towards ten o'clock that night Lewis walked in.

At the right moments Mabel had that rare ability of saying nothing, of selecting silence in preference to any trite locutions such as so-you're-back, or whys. While Lewis closed the door and came towards her Mabel studied him with an unwavering fixity, in a manner that a major artist will criticize his crowning creation.

He was everything that she had hoped for during the winter's evening at the Adirondack chalet in the long gone past. He had aged magnificently. His

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Rufus King, who naturally needs no introduction to anyone who reads mysteries, paints the portrait here of a beautifully unpleasant woman, "freakishly big and ugly" by her own admission, domineering, ruthlessly ambitious.... Mabel Gervais rode roughshod over the dreams of those around her, intent only on the grand objective. No one must stand in her way. No one—not even . . .

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carriage, his manner and appearance were the Crichton of what an about-to-be-appointed ambassador should resemble. And the human touch had remained. You could feel it sifting from him, beyond mere courtesy or correctness: a sincere feeling for and interest in the rights and dignity of others.

No, Mabel decided, there were no flaws. Her job had been well done and nothing was left but to cash in on it, the coveted prize being the Belgian Embassy with an ultimate eye towards the Court of St. James's.

Lewis sank heavily into a chair near her and for a moment closed his eyes.

"I've seen her, Mabel."

"Seen whom, Lewis?"

"Anna Moljinski."

The name stirred. And then it mushroomed in Mabel's memory from the distant years, from that night of Long Island fog in the Jaguar, and the woman who had been struck. It mushroomed with a cloud of strange suffocation, like an extraordinary pillow which appeared from nowhere and pressed as a stopper on her breathing.

She said stupidly, "How?"

"Your devoted chauffeur and slave told me. Harris was listening outside a kitchen window that night when you talked with her."

Mabel's breath continued clotting.

"You say you saw her?"

"Yes. It was very easy. She started a business under her own name with the ten thousand you gave her. Catering. Fine pastries —take-home casserole dishes— you know. She's very successful. She opened in Oyster Bay and then established the main shop in New York. Harris has been keeping track."

"Why should he? What on earth for?"

"Just out of curiosity, he said. Not about her, Mabel. About you. He wondered for years why you had done it, before he puzzled it out." Lewis added quietly, "My bondage. The chains you shackled me with."

The peculiar constriction of her lungs was dissipating and Mabel recovered control over her thinking. She knew this about Lewis: he was a docile man but not a stupid one, nor an insensitive one. There was where the danger would lie, in this sensitivity with all of the word's associations (which were just so much finical prudery to Mabel) such as a delicate sense of moral values and a tiresome punctillio of honor. These were the bread and water that had sustained him throughout the years of her prisoning.

Her frosty look took in the maturity of his body and it baffled her that so much strong, animal maleness could embrace the soggy weakness of so easily

being touched to the quick. Like a silly girl. That under some milksop provocation this sturdy being might even—the phrase popped from heaven knew what dusty cabinet of memory—"die of a rose in aromatic pain."

The deadliest sort of danger to her plans lay in all of those things and Mabel knew it.

"Lewis—"

"Yes?"

"When one is young—"

"Mabel, that just won't wash. You were never young."

"You've always hated me. Admit it, Lewis."

"Hate? No, never. Not even now."

"Have you ever tried to consider, seriously consider, how a woman feels when she's big like me? Freakishly big and ugly? How a girl like that must feel?"

"I suppose," he said, not looking at her, "that it depends a good deal on what she does about it."

"As for that little trick—surely it's so trivial when we look back on it as adults? A thing from the days of impulse, Lewis."

"That trick with the false news item about Anna Moljinski's hit-run death wasn't so trivial, and I guess it would be useless to try and make you realize what it did to me. Do you know that I've always kept the clipping? That it's in my wallet right now? Sort of a hair shirt, I suppose you could call it."

"Lewis—listen to me—you'll get over this. In the morning you'll be able to see it in its proper perspective. I know so, Lewis, because I know you."

He looked at her now, almost with a kindly fascination.

"Mabel, I honestly believe that you think you do."

Then the suddenness, the cheery helplessness of his laughter was a more horrible shock to Mabel than if he had hauled off and smashed her in the face. There was nothing in her experience to contend with it and during the frightening moment while it lasted she wondered whether he had gone stark-staringly mad.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes. Sorry, but I couldn't help it. Mabel, it's very simple. It's just that I'm rid of ever having to be within the feel of you again."

Now that was odd. Harris too had said something like that only yesterday when he had quit his job, something about just wanting to get away from her. Not in the same words, but the flavor was of a part. She shoved aside any speculation on it and brought every power of her will to bear on uncovering the immediate steps which Lewis unquestionably must be planning to take. She felt no special doubts about her ability to cir-

cumvent them once they were exposed, because he was here with her again, right under her eye and thumb and the crushing power of her influence and wealth.

"I wish you'd be clearer, Lewis. I wish you'd say exactly what you are driving at."

"A divorce, Mabel."

The word held a death-knell tone, a fracturing with its simple tinkle to the very ambition of life as Mabel knew it: an embassy squashed dead. A flare of rage choked her in its terrible grip but there was no reflection of it in the calmness with which she said, "I would never divorce you."

"I know you wouldn't. I've thought it out, Mabel. I am going to divorce you."

"That's silly. You couldn't."

"You mean there would be no grounds? You have forgotten the farm, Mabel. That it's located in Vermont."

Well, that was true enough. For heaven knew how many years she hadn't thought about it: the old Gervais homestead, the miserable fields and the petty stone house, and the fact that Lewis owned it. His sole heritage at the time when she had so cleverly bought him. His sole heritage now.

"But—what of it?"

"In Vermont the divorce laws recognize desertion as a ground. Would you be willing to live there with me? Cooped up for the rest of your life? Give up your position of the social and, to an extent, the political arbiter of Washington? Could you stand it? Or would you desert me, Mabel?"

"Lewis, you're insane."

"Possibly. Or else no longer so."

"Cruel."

"I?"

"I suppose you mean by that that I've been. Doesn't everything I've done for you, what I've made of you, stand for something? Did my kindness to your mother in her moment of dire need—in your moment of helpless despair for her life—does that mean nothing to you any longer, Lewis?"

"Mabel, I'm tired. Let's leave it for now at this. I haven't forgotten, and for some things I'm deeply grateful. We will finish things decently. Things here in Washington, I mean. But I'm through. The ambassadorship is out. You'll have to eliminate me from your plans from now on. I guess that means you will just have to give them up. Not necessarily abruptly, but a tapering off. I'll string along while you are doing it. I'll do my best to help you so that your pride won't be hurt. Those gestures I do owe you. Then I'll go. Good night, Mabel."

After Lewis left for his rooms Mabel prepared for bed. For a

couple of years now they had stopped sharing the same apartment so *that* couldn't be it—Lewis's phrase had gone right on nagging her: "within the feel of you again." And so had Harris's "I just want to get away from you," which certainly had had no reference to her private chamber.

Mabel bathed with her customary excess of care, having always felt what amounted to a fetish in maintaining the nicety of her person because of its large surface areas and generous vales. Then, after opening a bedroom window, she got between the sheets.

Lewis's relief-filled laughter sifted through the room's empty darkness. Not for an instant did she consider herself licked. Granting him lost to her and totally out of the picture so far as an ambassadorship was concerned, what of it? Why not herself instead? Appointed as an ambassadress by a grateful and obligated administration and the appointment applauded by an admiring and richly stomach-stuffed (by her) senate?

The solution was electrifying to Mabel in its simplicity and overpowering appeal. Certainly the money and the influence were hers, and certainly there was precedent in both Perle Mesta and Claire Booth Luce. Her brain shot into high. This divorce business, any breath of it, must be killed. Divorce was the unalterable taboo within the State Department and with the governments abroad.

Yet this she knew: Lewis would insist on one.

Lewis alive would insist on one—

Unfalteringly from Machiavelli's *Principe*—her personal bible—she dipped out his cardinal rule of never gagging over dealing with false friends or questionable allies through an arranged death. Lewis must die.

Her thoughts swam lucidly along this common-sense river for snatching victory from defeat. The horrendous properties of murder did not faze her for one compassionate bit. With her decision made, Lewis already had ceased to be a human being, a man whom she had lived with through so many years of doggish companionship and stretches of animal desire. He was altered now into an impersonal obstacle that must be brushed aside.

How?

It is interesting that it should leap into her mind from the long ago: the principal favor for the debutantes who had attended her coming out cotillion. They were gold replicas of the mediaeval *anello della morte,* the poison ring of the Borgias which her mother's social secretary (and now Mabel's) Miss Nest had so aptly labeled as

being nothing short of a deadly concealed weapon. Yet it wasn't so curious, really, that she should have remembered, because she had been thinking about Machiavelli and his conscienceless *Principe.*

As she still had among her souveniers the ring, the weapon was decided upon. The next question was *when?*

By his very precepts of honor and his kindly decision to string along until she could bow herself out of her Washington campaign without loss of face, Lewis had placed himself in the vulnerable position of a sitting duck.

Why not—yes—the party planned for the coming weekend at the Adirondack chalet still could turn out to be the felicitous moment for reaping her great, her precious and deserved reward. Her guest list of V.I.P.s was just as perfect for a camouflage for murder as it had been for its original purpose in popping at long last an embassy into Mabel's bag.

The job must be expertly, openly done. During a square dance? A moment of frivolity extemporaneously arranged for Veronica Olcott, the postmaster-general's wife? Veronica was the ultimate bore in her passion for the more acrobatic aspects of folk lore, being skinny as a rail and lacking the loose poundage so helpful in the mamba.

The scene unfolded in vivid preview: Do-si-do—change your partners—then Lewis's hand swinging towards her and her own hand clasping it. And then the Borgian pressure on the hidden spring to the poison well of the ring.

The shock. The profound and valuable sympathy that would be given her. So many men nowadays were suddenly taken at Lewis's age. Stroke? Heart attack? Embolism? The symptoms would have to be looked up and a proper poison selected to counterfeit them; a poison so swift in its deadly course that beyond, perhaps, one unintelligible cry no words could come from Lewis.

Mabel tentatively sketched out a businesslike program. Make an appointment with that Dr. Beltry whom Lewis recently had been seeing, and check as to the specific nature of Lewis's stomach trouble. Express deep concern and worry about it to the doctor. Locate the poison ring. Determine and get the poison for it. And then test it out. On, say, some little animal.

Small dog?

Small cat?

White mouse?

She shut her eyes upon the chill and the quiet dark, feeling the well-earned peace of a child at the close of a busy day. This idyllic moment lasted no longer than a ten minute stretch.

Crowding her head and her body into a fitful state of renewed wakefulness, bitter in view of its present drastic repercussions, came a clear panorama of the entire Moljinski episode.

Ten years ago, had it been? Fifteen? Anyhow, the number no longer mattered. Lewis, she remembered, had insisted on driving and she was still turgidly enough in love with him so that she didn't care. She knew he had had enough to drink at the Beatons party to make him reckless and give him that Viking attitude which she admired in him, even though it was liable to let the edge show of the deeply hidden disgust that he felt for her.

They were using the Jaguar, and the road home from the Beatons led through the Oyster Bay section of Long Island. The hour was after one, the summer night moonless. Patches of fog were drifting in from the Sound and they should, Mabel thought, be crawling, instead of the pace which Lewis was holding.

The bump was slight but perfectly noticeable, and Lewis said, "Animal?"

"No, it was something bigger, I think. It was on my side. I saw a sort of blur."

Lewis stopped the car, leaving the motor running.

"I'll go look."

Fog swallowed him. He was gone for what seemed a long while and, muffled through the shrouding darkness, Mabel could hear him retching. When he came back his big frame was shaking all over and he took a long drink of bourbon from a silver flask before he said, "She's dead, Mabel. I've killed her."

Then he started to cry, the Viking stage being collapsed and the maudlin having set in. He folded up across the steering wheel in heavy, muscular lumps and passed out cold. Mabel did not stir for several moments. The road was a secondary one and traffic at that hour of the morning was improbable. Apart from her self-indulgent animal passion for Lewis, Mabel had a precision mind and she used it now unhurriedly.

She took a flashlight and walked back until she reached what resembled a discarded bundle on the road's grass shoulder. The woman was small but stockily built and with flattish, Middle-European features. Her clothes were serviceable, ordinary and cheap. She seemed around Mabel's age, which was twenty-seven, and a moaning whisper of breathing denied Lewis's drunken decision that she was dead.

Mabel was a big, heavy, plain woman with no real fat but just solid flesh and strength. She easily gathered the woman up and carried her to the car, put-

ting her in and then shoving Lewis over and herself getting behind the wheel. She drove at a sensible rate through varying densities of fog towards home. Any physical probabilities of the woman's condition, whether she were fatally injured or, with equal seriousness, under syncope from shock did not concern Mabel in the least.

It was Lewis she was thinking of, about his barely noticeable hungry grasps towards independence which with an increasing frequency had been coming to the surface. Like tonight when she had told him to get ready to go home his: "Knock it off, Mabel! We'll go when I'm ready to go." Yes, another turn of the screw did seem to be indicated and this incident, perhaps, could be used to tighten it permanently.

On reaching the house—mansion would be a more appropriate word for the place—Mabel left Lewis in the car. She carried the woman in sacklike fashion indoors, through the massive marble entrance hall with its statuary that papa had brought from Italy, and on back through the service regions into the kitchen where she turned on lights.

She put the woman down in the French chef's lounge chair and shortly revived her with whiffs from a bottle of household ammonia. The staff always left a platter of sandwiches in the refrigerator and Mabel joined the woman in eating them while they talked and drank sherry.

The woman's name was Anna Moljinski. She was unmarried, a recent Polish immigrant, and Mabel's argument was this: if Miss Moljinski were to demand an arrest and sue for damages what would be the result? She would fall in the clutches of some negligible lawyer and the case would be fought against Mabel's wealth, against the smartest legal talent and, if need be, be carried through the appellate courts. And all this pother would result in Miss Moljinski ending up with but a pittance for herself or conceivably even being in debt to her cheap attorney.

Mabel shrewdly never underpaid for anything. She could afford not to. From a wall safe she took ten thousand dollars, gave the money to Miss Moljinski, and had her sign a full release.

Miss Moljinski was not only satisfied but stunned into speechlessness. To her, in her unenviable niche of static cash meagerness, in her hand-to-mouth present, past, and undeviating future, this money was more than just the chance of a lifetime. It was a miracle. And this woman (no longer an ugly grotesque) was a saint.

Mabel drove Miss Moljinski to the farm house where she had a room and board. It was a mile outside of Oyster Bay where her job was doing pastries in a bake shop from which she had been walking home when Lewis had struck her.

"I shall expect never to see or hear from you again," Mabel said. "That is understood, Miss Moljinski?"

"Yes, madam. Never."

It was nearing three o'clock before Mabel again reached home, with Lewis continuing as a wetly snoring clump on the seat. As she made the turn to the porch she saw a lighted window over at the garage in an upper room that was occupied by her chauffeur, Harris. Being still absorbed in the full current of her plotting she attached no significance to it, and certainly no future importance.

The panorama of memories did not stop there. It ran on through the clinching of Lewis's bondage.

Mabel, as a starter, had contrived the appearance and the atmosphere of flight, a whisking-away of Lewis from the hit-run charge of manslaughter. She had gone inside and packed a bag for herself and one for Lewis. In her own she put a large flask of bourbon. She left a note for Mrs. Bisbeck, the housekeeper, that they would be at the chalet in the Adirondacks for an indefinite period. Then she placed the bags in the car and drove off with Lewis.

She deliberately kept Lewis in a stuporish fog throughout the long, endless hours of the trip, feeding him bourbon while she drank quantities of black coffee. This resulted in his never being quite aware of her, or of himself, or of the swift, steady flight.

But Mabel was constantly aware of him.

When they had passed through Keene Valley (it was there that you took the cut-off for the sanitarium where mama was being forgotten) the memory of how she and Lewis had met on that January morning three years ago had come flooding back in hot, physical waves.

Mama then had only recently been committed as an alcoholic (a state brought on through shocked despair over papa's unfortunate death) and Mabel was making the dutiful, tiresome gesture of staying for a few days at the sanitarium until mama was emotionally adjusted to the unfamiliar surroundings.

There were some personal things which mama wanted from the chalet: a baby clipping of papa's hair trapped between the dual glasses of a locket—a small, ivory-bound copy of the American Book of Common prayer that mama had carried

to her first Anglican Communion—and a bottle of yellow chartreuse that papa had bought during their honeymoon in France to be kept until their golden wedding anniversary. Naturally, his death had canceled that but mama had gone on keeping the bottle unopened, sentimentally, for an occasion.

As the roads were largely precarious except for sledding, Mabel had taken a train when she had gone to fetch these mementos of mama's pre-alcoholic days. She had stayed overnight at the clubhouse at Lake Placid in order to have an early start during the short winter daylight for the ride by cutter to the chalet. It was roughly a distance of fifteen miles and about all that a horse could possibly manage during the zero weather.

The club arranged for a cutter, and its driver was Lewis.

Throughout the drive, with each breath being icily lung-biting, Lewis was nothing but an ear-flapped, mufflered segment of a face with a frosty nose and a pair of eyes that were a dark, winter-sky blue under thick brows. But when he uncrated himself in the chalet, which they reached towards dusk, it was a different thing.

The chalet had unspellably been named by papa Oeschinensee after that lovely Swiss lake mirror for the snowy Blumlis Alp. It was a roomy, timbered square built of 6-inch-thick planks and had a projecting upper storey that was balconied and boiling over at fever heat with intricate bracket treatments.

The chalet's caretaker, Hyacinth Dubois, was another one of Mabel's purchases.

Hyacinth's grand passion lay in writing *habitant* verse, and inasmuch as Mabel had wanted Hyacinth for an unuprootable fixture in the chalet she had paid a Mr. Sellingsby, the politely bemused owner of a small press near Plattsburg, to print a limited edition of the poems. The hysterical joy of seeing his words, his brain flowers, his cascading precious stones in print made Hyacinth her slave—and got Mabel a manacled guide and cook. The money she paid Mr. Sellingsby all but made that gentleman her slave, too.

Lewis, unswaddled and ruddy in the glow of birch log firelight, fresh with ozone and a good Spanish Castile soap scrubbing, struck Mabel with the assured impact of a bullet from an elephant gun as being the answer, the very key to unlock the gates to her lifelong obsession. This fixed idea lay in her decision that the solution to her bodily lack of attraction rested in the diplomatic corps.

She had arrived at this decision during her Court presentation in London. The remarkably

well-preserved Cynthia, Marchioness of Knoyle, had sponsored her, as previously she had sponsored mama. Mama had been by then too far gone to do the job herself. The ceremony's smooth deceptiveness convinced Mabel that the polished rigidities of protocol were her answer to living, for within its regimented bounds a woman's looks meant little whereas her official position meant everything. She could be as ugly as sin and still live brilliantly. She could even, Mabel had decided grimly, be as ugly as herself.

Under the crush and glitter and stateliness of the presentation, dimly, far off in the future she could vision her canonical security as the wife of an ambassador at a major embassy. At first subconsciously, then consciously this had become her life's goal, rooting itself so deeply that it grew into a cancerous obsession, its pervasive virus gripping her with undiluted strength right through the future years to the tragical end.

The mechanics of this dream had required a husband, of course, and here, magnificently perfect in the lambent firelight stood Lewis. Mentally, Mabel added a score of years to his appearance. She replaced his boots, britches and lumberman's shirt with striped pants, a morning coat, a black homburg. The resulting vision almost made her call him Your Excellency to his face.

During the evening meal of Hyacinth's black bean soup, a saddle of venison, and a sebago pudding she laid the foundation for having Lewis wrapped up.

Mabel's dear mother was in a sanitarium and Lewis's dear mother was in one, too. Check.

It was the reason for her being here now: to fetch poor mama's little souveniers of sentiment. These were lingered on by Mabel lovingly and harrowingly and bravely.

It was the reason why Lewis was driving cutters at Lake Placid instead of completing his graduate degree at the University of Vermont: both to be near his mother in *her* sanitarium and to earn as much money as he could to keep her as comfortable as he could.

What a remarkable coincidence, what a strange, odd bond it formed between them (this was Mabel); why, when you came to think of it, the mutual link was positively prophetic. And what, dear Lewis, was the trouble with Lewis's dear mother?

The need for Mrs. Gervais's operation then had come out, and the extravagant hopelessness of ever having it done. Montreal's Sir Harry Dolkins, the celebrated tumor specialist, offered the sole chance, and even apart from the impossibility of

meeting his fee he would offer but a problematical success at best.

Well, Mabel could attend to that.

She certainly did.

The wedding had been a quiet one, coming as it had on the heels of Mrs. Gervais's death. It was mellifluously conducted by the Reverend William Tooch at the chalet, with Lewis being an automaton stunned into complaisancy by grief—an emotional condition that resulted in the ceremony being the only one on local record at which it was the groom who burst into tears.

So kind, Lewis—so considerately kind—so willing had Lewis been—

So grateful.

At the chalet, at the termination of the "flight" from Long Island, Mabel kept Lewis drunk for a solid week. During it there were flashes of torture for Lewis whenever a lucid remembrance of the accident would come and of the woman who, in the version Mabel gave him of it, he had killed. Also, during this week, she went to see Mr. Sellingsby at his press near Plattsburg.

He couldn't have been more pleased. At once he envisioned an expensive second edition of Hyacinth's primitive outgushings, but Mabel abruptly put him straight. What she wanted, she said, was for him to print an item that would look as though it had been clipped from a New York newspaper. Could it be done?

"Of course, Mrs. Gervais. A little joke, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. I will pay you one hundred dollars for the job."

"Oh but that's ridiculous. It's far too much."

"Not on the understanding that you do the typesetting personally. And privately, Mr. Sellingsby."

Mentally, Sellingsby rang up the cash, with a side-nod of superior gratitude towards all quirks of the crazy rich.

"Have you the copy with you, Mrs. Gervais?"

"Yes."

He read the typed sheet. It was professional, just as everything Mabel turned her mind to was professional. He saw that it concerned a hit-run accident in the Oyster Bay section of Long Island. Victim, a woman—unidentified — poor — presumably alone in the world—a migrant immigrant worker—left lying dead—heartless motorist—one of those irresponsible drunken drivers—medical aid at moment might have saved the woman's life—police investigating but frankly admit that total lack of clues or witnesses probably would throw the case into the unsolved category.

"I shall want this to be

authentic looking," Mabel said. "I've brought a column from yesterday's *Times* and suggest that you use it for the reverse side of my copy."

"Very well, Mrs. Gervais."

"I shall drive over and pick it up tomorrow morning."

Towards the middle of the following week Mabel permitted Lewis to begin tapering off. Naturally, he developed the shakes, was wretchedly ill both physically and mentally, and his nerves were shot to pieces. During this miserable period while his mind and his moral resources were at their lowest ebb Mabel stamped home her version of the accident and showed him the clipping that Sellingsby had printed.

His first coherent decision was just what she had expected it would be: he wanted to give himself up. Mabel's success in talking him out of doing so was largely made possible because Lewis's character was incurably spongy and malleable. It was a weakness caused not by any basic lack of moral fiber but by the fact of his having since childhood been so dotingly woman ridden—first by his mother and then through his mother's know-best-routine having so instantly, so adroitly been taken over by Mabel.

It smothered him under a species of kindly bondage from which he simply had no compassionate implements for escape.

Mabel used her usual strategic opening of pretending to agree.

"You are right, Lewis. Ethically it is the decent thing to do. Or rather it would be so if it would do any good, any real good, Lewis, to balance the terrible consequences."

"I've thought about them. Something like ten or twenty years, isn't it, for manslaughter? Well, even that wouldn't be as bad as feeling like a sinful coward for the rest of my life. Mabel, I—"

"Yes, Lewis?"

"I couldn't expect you to wait for me, Mabel. I mean there are several states that will grant a divorce on the grounds of felony—or there is always Paris, Mabel."

She gave him one hard, probing look, testing the suspicion of an almost eagerness in his suggestion of divorce. Then she cut loose her heavy guns.

Difficult as the feat is to believe, Mabel actually managed to look pathetic, nobly resigned, and brutally stricken unto death. She asked Lewis quietly whether he hadn't failed to realize there could be no Paris for her, or anywhere else. Because she would be thrown into prison, too, as an accessory after the fact. Because of her silence. Because in her deep devotion and protectiveness she had ar-

ranged his escape from the scene of the crime, had willingly jeopordized her own freedom, her position in society, and had risked the stigma of jailbird rather than have him penalized for what basically was but an act of fate.

She repeated, "And if giving ourselves up would do any *good,* Lewis."

He was blasted to the very core at this ill-omened picture which, as a matter of honest fact, had never occurred to him for an instant. His gentle soul revolted at the notion of this saintly woman (his mother had said so) being repaid for her unselfish goodness in such bitter coin.

Lewis was sunk. But deep inside him a fester of shame was rooted and would stay with him for good. It was the shame of moral cowardice, and what griped him most was that never-to-be-forgotten phrase in the newspaper clipping about medical aid at the moment of the accident possibly having had the ability to save the woman's life. It seeded a nightmare that would recur for years on end.

Worst of all it curiously established an unbreakable linkage of himself to Mabel, a partnership in criminal silence, a strange, compelling necessity on his part to shield her forever from any suffering through his wretched act. It was a shackle with far greater strength than the chains of gratitude and one from which Lewis never, advertently, would shake himself free.

The hours of the sleepless night moved on. The panorama changed, moving the scene to Washington, then to Broadlands, from the palatial halls of which Mabel's politico-social progress had embraced a series of ruthlessly calculated steps, each leading her successively higher on the stairway to her goal. The one that was possibly the cruelest of them all had involved Jenny, the motherless daughter of Senator David Briggs Heatherwing, and it offered a good example of Mabel's Machiavellian technique.

When she had fallen within the baleful tug of Mabel's orbit Jenny Heatherwing was eighteen. A friendly, open hearted girl with a refreshing absence of enameled sophistication, she presented the exact opposite to everything that Mabel had been at a similar age. She had beauty. It was of the sort that suggested Kansas mornings, while still escaping any touch of the milk fed. She liked people, for the simple reason that she just couldn't help liking them. She worshipped her father and was positive with a blind assurance that his career would end up in the White House.

He, Senator Heatherwing, was an implacably rigid party-machine politician, no matter how prettily coated with an aura of passable statesmanship. He belonged to the influential corn belt and Mabel, with her uncanny felicity for the long-range view, had spotted him as a dark horse of the most promising tinge. She was unique among the social overlords in forseeing this and Heatherwing never got over his doglike loyalty to her because of it. Not even after the tragic crash. ("Her brain must have snapped," he said. "The pace was too much.")

Jenny gradually was absorbed by Mabel as a protege. Painlessly so, under the chloroform of little kindnesses. The senator went in for a good deal of shuttling about on various missions such as fence-mendings among the home constituents, committee snooping junkets in Europe, and occasional good neighbor affronts upon the patient courtesy of Mexico and South America.

As a result of these parental absences, Mabel ultimately moved Jenny bag and baggage into a suite at Broadlands, thus making her to all purposes a daughter of the house. And thus, equally, enmeshing her straight in the heart of the web. There had been no altruism in this gesture whatsoever. Jenny's beauty was a useful foil, a deliberately startling offset to Mabel's ugliness and, what was of special importance, Jenny proved a strong magnet for the junior (and not so junior) striped pants among the State Department and the embassies.

At the outset there had been one conceivably bothersome fly in the ointment: a young man in Jenny's home town. He, Aaron Stone, and Jenny had grown up as neighbors and had gone to school together. So far as Mabel could gather, it was the old, old story. Love, yes, but nothing spectacular along the purple passion order. No fireworks, just an abiding acceptance that each would end up by spending the rest of life with the other, and it never occurred to either of them to believe otherwise.

But it did occur otherwise to Mabel, because she was already developing the use she would make of Jenny and had started to incorporate the girl as a valuable pawn in her campaign. However, she decided it was safe to let the Aaron menace rest on ice. Later, if it should show signs of stirring into annoying activity, she would then decide how to deal with it.

There was an almost inhuman irony in the fact that Senator Heatherwing himself gave her the weapon.

Heatherwing physically was a stolid, earthy looking six-footer. He televized magnificently and

his radio voice during interviews was like the handshake of your best friend. Morally, except for one miserable lapse, his record was as clean as any sensible politician possibly could keep it and still manage to stay in office. Naturally, he was anything but a chump and yet, like a chump, he took his trouble, this single blunder, to Mabel to ask her to help him out. He did so because by that time he had come to think of her as the staunchest sort of a friend, as the one person among the cabals and rat races of Washington he could surely trust.

Mabel caught the nervous tension in his voice when he telephoned Broadlands and asked whether he might see her privately. She evaluated to a drawn line the haggard quality of his face when he joined her in the living room of her suite.

"You need a drink, Dave."

"I do."

"Over there—the cellarette."

"You, Mabel?"

"No."

Heatherwing poured a stiff one and drank it straight.

"I'm in trouble."

"Tell me."

It was money, of course: the result of that ageless temptation that comes in the lives of a good many otherwise prudent men to make a shady financial killing on the market. The details were mechanically trite—a confidential knowledge of a proposed presidential legislative request to Congress that would shoot a certain commodity sky high—Heatherwing's plunging all his money, plus all he could borrow, through a masking dummy on the Exchange—then a last minute shift in administration policy, and the bust.

"It's the borrowed money that is frightening you, isn't it, Dave?"

"Yes."

"Dave—Dave, you idiot, why didn't you come to me?"

"I couldn't. You know that. With you being what you are to Jenny, like a mother. You know I couldn't have, Mabel, let you know about it. But now I've got to. I'm sick, Mabel. Sick straight through."

"Threats?"

"Yes."

"Who loaned you the money?"

Heatherwing mentioned the name of one of the more notorious of the percentage boys. There was, he said, a time limit. He had to fork over by tomorrow or the stench of the deal would be loosed to the Washington columnists and commentators.

"I don't mind it killing me," Heatherwing said. "I mind it killing Jenny."

"How much?"

"It's—thirty thousand dollars."

Mabel went to a desk and took out her check book.

Two weeks later, when the cancelled voucher came back to her, Mabel swung a framed Renoir on its hinge and tucked the voucher into a small wall safe where she kept her more serviceable mementos of future worth.

Some months and several ladder steps later the final fish that Mabel had been angling for was hooked. By this time, of course, her parties at Broadlands had struck their stride in the glittering galas that crowned her as first hostess among the political and diplomatic camarillas of the town.

As a further bulwark to these champagne-and-caviar free-loadings her campaign contributions were huge and were managed with an adroitness that loopholed them smoothly through the Hatch Act. Her compulsion towards her goal had degenerated into a foetid disease, and her success as a manipulator of such congressmen and key national figures whom she wanted to bag was such that she began to believe herself invincible.

The hooking of Alden Habling of the State Department convinced her that the job was set and that the moment was ripe for throwing her Sunday punch —the one designed to land Lewis in the Brussels embassy.

Jenny was the bait that Mabel had used to gaff Habling, in spite of the fact that he was a widower and Jenny's senior by a good twenty years. You could give him the edge on this, however, because apart from having kept himself physically fit (handball, tennis, polo) his lean, unmustached face had refused to accept middle-age. He was far too keenly interested in life. His background, as a matter of course, embodied wealth, Groton, and Harvard.

After several months of squiring by Habling had made Jenny think of him as a most delightful companion and fond friend, he had said one day to Mabel, "I'll be grateful to you all my life for this. Whenever you want the moon just tell me, Mabel."

The moon promptly metamorphized itself into the embassy at Brussels. Yes, at that particular point in time, Mabel's luck was going full blast and she was ready to cash in on it with the most important party she had ever thrown—its climax to be the betrothal announcement of Jenny and Habling, the clinching delivery of the dew-dabbed beauty into his generous and anxious hands.

The party was not to be one of her lush extravaganzas. Anything but. The job, in its jewel box intimacy, was scheduled to take place during the coming

weekend at the chalet for the opening of the Adirondack deer season. Five days away. Only five days before the last-act curtain would go up and suddenly, peculiarly, some sixth sense had begun to nag Mabel into being nervous about it. That she should feel this disquiet about any of her plans (plots) was without precedent. There seemed no reason.

No cloud lay visible on the clear horizon, and all the preliminary moves were scientifically cooking in a slow oven. Lewis at the moment was in Georgia as the guest of Senator Downsberry, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. The two other members of this party were the postmaster-general, Terrence Xavier Olcott, and Habling.

Jenny's father had originally been included but a strep throat, aggravated by a general nervous breakdown, had popped him into the hospital. There was nothing critical about his condition, but he did need a rest and a good overhaul.

And this coming weekend the same group were to be at the chalet for a deer hunt, the only difference being that Mabel would be with them, and Olcott's wife, and Downsberry's wife, and Jenny—both sexes being highly diverted (they were pathetically eager to be so) at such an unorthodox female intrusion on the he-man's last stand.

Truly the setup was perfect, and yet there existed this odd state of nervousness, and Mabel held a sober respect for premonition. Historically she was not lone in her viewpoint when you considered the superstitions common to many Titans of the past —Caesar with his omen-stuffed gods—Napoleon with his touch of orientalism and fetish for his "star"—Hitler and his mystical glorifications and moody forebodings.

The worrisome tocsin had persisted through a stupid luncheon with a stupid Cabinet wife in the Mayflower Lounge. Mabel could not shake it off, so while Harris drove her back to Broadlands she examined her bastions, searching for an avenue no matter how obscure along which danger could approach to attack them.

Lewis? Absurd. As the angler had been complete to Isaac Walton so Lewis by now was the complete puppet to herself. The attrition of rich living had smoothed him handsomely through the years, and the strings she jerked to activate his movements had attained the soft quality of non-irritating silk. No danger there. Nothing but a valuable lump of distinguished looking putty in her hands.

Jenny? Mabel brushed the notion aside as child's play. She

intended to talk with the girl before they left for the chalet, and the line she would take was already formulated: motherly, wise—surely you must see, my dear, that Alden Habling is the real answer rather than that childhood, schoolgirl crush. Then, if words were to fail, if the menace of Aaron Stone were to be dusted off, there remained as a club the hinged Renoir and the wall safe and its incontrovertibly persuasive contents.

Mama?

It was fantastic, Mabel thought, that right out of the blue she should suddenly think about mama, and ridiculously so in any terms of threat. As a matter of fact it was even more fantastic that mama, persistently, still lived. If you could call it living, and Mabel supposed that technically you had to. No, no danger, never from mama.

Who then? What then? From where?

It was in this prickling frame of mind that Mabel found a telegram awaiting her at Broadlands. The wire was from the chalet, from Hyacinth. This was unusual, and in her special nervous state of mind it was startlingly so. During the fleet moment while her eyes skipped from the signature to the start of the message proper Mabel's thoughts were of fire: a burnt-down chalet—no deer hunt for the weekend—the neverfailing setback attendant on any last minute cancellation or change in a vitally cardinal plan.

DEAR MADAM PREPARE YOURSELF FOR UNSPEAKABLE ASTONISHMENT AND SURPRISE (This Mabel did.) An ESTABLISHMENT OF HUGE PRESTIGE IN KITCHENER ONTARIO HAVE A PURPOSE TO PUBLISH THE ELITE AMONG MY POEMS. A MIRACLE. A MATTER OF NATIONAL FAME. NOTHING LESS COULD HAVE PERSUADED ME TO ABSENT MYSELF FROM THE CHASE FOR THE COMING WEEKEND. IT IS A SUMMONS FROM A FATE MUCH TALLER THAN OUR MORTAL BODIES. I MAKE HASTE BY MOTORBUS TO PUT MY SIGNATURE UPON THIS EVENT. BE CALM. ALL IS PREPARED. TO SERVE THE COMFORT OF YOUR FASHIONABLE GUESTS I HAVE INSTALLED MY DEAR COUSIN ETIENNE. HE IS A GOOD COOK BUT FOR HIS PUDDINGS AND IS A WITTY FELLOW WITH HIS VIOLIN. ALWAYS GAY. WHEN NEXT I FACE YOU IT IS AS A MAN OF DISTINCTION SUITABLE TO THE FAITH YOU HAVE PUT IN ME. BANISH ALL FEARS BUT THAT THE DEDICATION TO THIS

VOLUME OF TREASURE IS AN HONOR RESERVED FOR YOUR SAINTED SELF ON PAGE ONE. A FINE REWARD FOR YOU TO REAP AT LONG LAST. WITH A RESPECT AND A GRATEFUL EMOTION THAT SHALL KNOW NO DEATH I AM

HYACINTH DUBOIS

With true French economy this brochure came Collect.

Mabel's first reaction was one of shattering relief that the chalet was not a charred crisp, but the feeling was promptly supplanted by a slow rage. The very essence of the chalet was Hyacinth. He offered the ineluctable something that translated the place from being just any plush hunting lodge into a special effect.

Furthermore, the guest who, next to Habling, principally was to be cozened was Senator Downsberry with his invaluable influence as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. The rub was that in addition to being a paralyzing bore he fancied himself as a poet. His cute couplets and lengthier doggerel were the bane of every Washington hostess as well as of Capitol Hill.

To clinch the deadliness of the situation, Mabel already had given Hyacinth's poetics a big buildup with the senator. She had painted him as a throwback to the days of minstrelsy, and Downsberry, in consequence, was keenly looking forward to lobbing back and forth a few stanzas with this "original," this character, this unspoiled bard of the timbered hills. (The senator's words, not Mabel's.)

And therefore, Mabel decided as she went upstairs to her living room, come hell or high water, a Hyacinth would Senator Downsberry meet.

She summoned Miss Nest, the same Miss Nest who had been mama's social secretary and who kept right on being Mabel's. There wasn't much of her left. A wispy woman to begin with, she was now, in her sixties, wispier still with translucent flesh over bones that still managed courageously to be strong, with the same *pince nez* chained to a spring-brooch on her imperceptible breast and with a hemline that had never budged above her instep.

"Read this wire, Miss Nest, and call the Chamber of Commerce in Kitchener, Ontario. Ask them what publishing houses are in town. I imagine that there won't be more than one. Then put through a call to its manager."

Twenty minutes later a rich, Irish-Canadian voice flowed into Mabel's ear with Gaelic unstopability: "Mrs. Gervais? I am Larry Connor. You're calling

about Hyacinth, aren't you now? Well, I'm expecting him in the morning and any message you want to leave for him I will see that he gets it immediately. I can relish right now how he will appreciate your congratulations and good wishes for success."

"Mr. Connor." Mabel spiked the name home. "I have phoned because I want to talk with you."

"Oh?"

"Will you tell me, please, how you happened to know of Hyacinth's poems? Did he send a copy to you?"

"That he did not. I am a friend of the Sellingsby who prints them, and it just so happened that he spoke about them and I thought I might take a flier at publishing. And I am."

"Seriously, Mr. Connor, just what induced you? After all, you must have read them."

"Oh come now, Mrs. Gervais, they're not so foustie as your tone implies."

"Certainly they are. I utterly fail to see what makes you think they have commercial possibilities."

"I'll tell you why, and it's not a gamble. It's a sure thing. It's your dear, dear American tourists, bless their clutching little hearts."

"You mean the souvenier idea? Like hooked rugs and those dusty balsam pillows?"

"You are as smart as myself, Mrs. Gervais, and you have struck it instanter. The copies will be planted in every tourist trap from here to the Gaspé, and I'm giving it to you straight that particularly in the Province of Quebec they will sell like hot cakes. A gold mine."

"Just how big a gold mine, Mr. Connor?"

"I—beg pardon?"

"Flatly, how much do you expect in net profit?"

"Well now really in all politeness, Mrs. Gervais, I fail to understand just what—"

"It is my business, Mr. Connor, because I intend to make it worth your while *not* to publish Hyacinth's poems."

For a moment this even dammed up the Irish.

"Mrs. Gervais, why?"

"Are my reasons essential? Or will the sum of ten thousand dollars deposited through my bank to your account in Canada be sufficient to make them unnecessary?"

A longer, a deader stillness.

"Ten thousand. I did hear correctly?"

"You did."

"I—it will be a bit difficult to explain it to him. I'm assuming you won't want your name to enter into it?"

"Naturally not."

"You see—after all, Mrs. Gervais, the poor chap is as high as a kite over it. He feels he's hit Heaven."

"Mr. Connor, the one way to handle a Gordian knot is to cut it. Simply express your regrets and tell him that after reviewing the matter you have changed your mind. You have been advised that the time, the public, are not ready. Surely as a publisher you must have a dozen stock excuses."

"True, that we have. But with a man like him it would kick the Santy Claus right out of his heart."

"I shall see that he loses nothing by your decision. I would further appreciate your arranging airplane transportation for his immediate return to the chalet. Charter a private one. Please tell him I shall be there when he arrives."

After a businesslike discussion of the money-transfer angle Mabel hung up. She prepared to go into further instructions to Miss Nest when something about Miss Nest's expression checked her. It was so bleak except for the eyes and they, although swimming, did suggest an impossible combination of pleading, shocked anguish and—surely this must be a mistake—disgust.

"Oh Mabel no! Just a message saying you needed him would have been enough. This way it's like a revenge."

"Nonsense. Revenge is always a waste of time and a stupidity. This is a matter of discipline. Later I'll buy him that gun he wants."

"You're hard, Mabel. Very hard, and I simply cannot let this drop. All his life Hyacinth has had his dream of someday being publicly recognized as a poet. Well, his dream has come *true* for him, Mabel, and I really don't know what this dreadful disappointment will do to him. It's what he's been living for. It's funny the things that keep people living on, people who are placed in unimportant positions in life, the kind that are difficult to rise from."

Queer, Mabel thought, that this incident of Hyacinth's defection should have ripped the veil from Miss Nest's lifetime role of being a handy robot. She asked with a genuine curiosity, "What's yours, Miss Nest? What keeps you going on?"

"Why your mother, of course. She was kind to me and I love her. I'm still close to her, in a sense, when I am with you and maybe that makes her happy. I like to think that she recognizes me when I visit her at the sanitarium during my vacations."

Mabel was annoyed, sharply so, almost to the point of affront.

"So that's where you spend them."

"Yes. There is quite a nice little boarding house very near it. I go and sit with her and then say good-bye until the next time."

There was something treacherous about this. It was understood that mama was never talked about. Almost literally nowadays she just didn't exist, and certainly no one in Washington knew about her endless durability. The genuineness, the warm, heartening strength of Miss Nest's feelings about mama were beyond Mabel's appreciation. It was impossible for her to understand how anyone could truly love someone who was old and useless, who had no value left—a body so unneeded and unwanted except for Miss Nest's mawkish wanting, which surely must be little other than an established pose. A pose mired in the nostalgic, like liking Parma violets.

Miss Nest was off again, only now on a diversionary tack, "Jenny asked me to say she would not be here for dinner, Mabel. She said something about having heard from an old hometown friend. Then she left for the airport—"

"Stop distracting me, Miss Nest. Call Harris. Tell him I want to start for the chalet at once."

Mabel broke the journey at Scranton, which they reached at eight, staying overnight at the Jermyn. She managed a six-o'clock start in the morning, which was cloud-thick and murky with the depressing color of dirty pewter. Critically she wondered whether the storm area would extend far enough north to delay Hyacinth's chartered flight from Ontario. They made a stop for breakfast in Binghamton and reached the chalet towards midday under a sky still vicious with threat.

A state trooper lounged on the porch.

His face held the grave imperturbability that seems to be a hallmark of the service, suggestive of an isolationism in some frozen preserve that is very strictly, very courteously barred to the general public. He walked over to the car as Harris opened the door for Mabel to get out.

For a strange, almost a premonitory moment the three simply stood there caught in a rapt stillness under the cold, lonesome splendor of the mountains, with a bank of storm clouds crowding the peak of Ampersand.

"I am Sergeant Catt, Mrs. Gervais."

"Yes?"

"It's about your caretaker, Hyacinth Dubois. An accident."

"To the plane? It crashed?"

"No, the plane's all right. He's dead."

"Oh *no*!" It could have been accepted as a cry of shocked pity, of grief, any of the decent reactions, but it was not. Contrary almost to credence Mabel continued strictly true to form. It seemed to the calculating ma-

chine that housed her emotions as though death, with its obstinate finality, had personally gone out of its way to bilk her. She said, "Was it a stroke?"

"No. There are some puzzling features, Mrs. Gervais."

Mabel's stomach gave her a danger-signal, gripping twist.

"What are they?"

"The plane was a Canadian charter job with a passenger cabin separated from the cockpit. Mr. Dubois occupied this compartment by himself. The pilot says that somewhere between Mount Morris and Coreys—that would be the stretch of timbered country just to the southwest of here, Mrs. Gervais—"

"Yes, I know."

"Well, the pilot heard Mr. Dubois cry out. A despairing sort of cry, he called it. He went back to investigate and found the cabin door open. This could have been accidental, maybe a mistake on Mr. Dubois' part, and the windslip might have sucked him out. Or it could have been on purpose and he just stepped."

"But that's stupid. How could you even consider it?"

Catt drifted his look across the ugly, the granite caking of Mabel's imperiously arrogant face.

"The pilot told us that a Mr. Connor, a Canadian publisher, had arranged for the plane's charter. We called him up."

"Well?"

"Mr. Connor wasn't easy to understand. From the way his voice sounded he must have been hitting the bottle. We figured this because he broke out sobbing when he learned about Mr. Dubois."

"Men drink. There are crying jags."

"I know that, Mrs. Gervais. But you see we finally pieced together some sense from what he said. He claimed he had felt a premonition that this might happen. Then he added something not quite understandable about the death being the result of your having bribed him not to publish Mr Dubois' poems."

"Bribed? What drunken rot."

"Yes, we figured it that way, too. Especially when he said that the airplane business was nothing but a dismal anticlimax—because Mr. Dubois was already dead when he had walked out of the office."

"Then why—why this, Sergeant?"

"To clear the record, Mrs. Gervais. Can you think of any reason that would have made it suicide? Did you ever notice any signs of emotional instability while he was in your employ?"

"I should not have kept him if there had been."

"No, naturally, but perhaps some showed up just recently?"

"We have not been here since early summer. I suggest that his

cousin, a man named Etienne, would be a better source."

"Yes, I've talked with Etienne. He's badly broken up. Hysterical type, in a way. Incoherent. He said that Mr. Dubois left here yesterday in the 'highest of happiness' after a little celebration party they had thrown. Then he broke his neck beating it from the lodge to join in the hunt."

"Hunt?"

"For the body."

"Of course, the body." Mabel's case-hardened mind flew to the nearing weekend. "There must be an inquest, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Here?"

"In the lodge? No, at Saranac, Mrs. Gervais."

"Naturally I shan't be expected to attend it. There is no personal connection whatever."

"Perhaps it won't be necessary."

"Why perhaps, Sergeant?"

"The Kitchener, the publishing angle, rather the not-publishing angle. Because of its possible effect on Mr. Dubois' feelings. A good many French-Canadians are pretty emotional, you know. The coroner will want the record as straight as he can get it —accident or suicide."

"All that is entirely in Mr. Connor's province. Frankly, I did persuade him, begged him, really, not to publish Hyacinth's poems. They were childish, stupidly crude, and I did not want Hyacinth to be publicly, critically hurt. Mr. Connor was planning the edition as a stunt, a cheap stunt along the souvenier line for tourists. I am certain that Mr. Connor will make a lucid deposition after he sobers up."

"We will keep you informed, Mrs. Gervais."

Catt touched his brim and went to a motorcycle that stood parked against clumped cedar trees. Almost with a contrived sort of symbollism its explosive pops soughed low under an earsplitting counterpoint of ugly thunder.

There was nothing singular in the fact that so far as Mabel's apperception of him was concerned Harris had been blanked out during her talk with Sergeant Catt. He continued, as he had been for the years in her employ, just a part of the furniture. She was insensible to the hard unblinkingness of his look as she passed him on her way into the chalet, where she went directly to a telephone in the lounge and put through a call to Connor.

She had no trouble with him when the connection was made. Although brutally hung-over, Connor's business brain was once more as sober as a cake of ice. He had made up his mind to expect the utmost trickery on

Mabel's part and an attempt through some devious litigation to get back her money, the transfer of which had gone through shortly before noon.

He imagined that this telephone call was intended to put on the opening bite, but it did not. The woman (Mabel) could not have presented a more gratifying example of decorously patrician common-sense and he wondered however on earth he could so basely have misjudged her. It seemed little enough that she wanted, and definitely no part of the money returned. Under the assuaging effect of this golden relief he accepted in toto her prevent-the-souvenir version of the deal as she had given it to Sergeant Catt, and assured her that any deposition he might be called upon to make would religiously follow the version's laudably noble lines.

With this irksome bother settled, Mabel bestowed a lady-of-the-manor look on the room's fusty points of disorder. These included several empty wine bottles on a hearthside table, two residue-caked tumblers, odd spills of cigarette ash, one violin very dead looking on the rug (Cousin Etienne's, no doubt), also some homeless lumps of bread and cheese. In short, a pig pen.

These relics of Hyacinth's and Cousin Etienne's simple celebration over the sandbag effects of imminent literary fame shot Mabel's managerial efficiency into high. The actual running of the chalet for the decisive weekend would be taken care of by a picked handful from Broadland's staff, headed by its twenty-five-thousand-dollar a year chef. Accompanied by hampers of lucullan vittles, liquors and wines, they were scheduled to arrive and take over on Thursday.

They were important in the sense of basic machinery that would insure the party's operational smoothness, but they could not insure its flavor, and flavor was paramount. An immediate call to Lake Placid resulted in a mutually satisfactory arrangement with the club's steward by which he guaranteed Mabel a Canuck quartet—complete with engaging patois—of expert guides to handle the venison potting capers.

On hanging up the receiver she grew conscious that Harris had come into the lounge and was standing like a shadowy boulder over at the door. The room's murky storm-light left his expression indecipherable—not that Mabel was remotely interested—and everything about him seemed cumbrously vague. She was on the point of telling him to clear up the room's mess when she experienced a curious reaction from the manner in which he slowly began to move

towards her. The softness and delicacy with which he advanced one big solid foot in front of the other, the on-egg-like pattern of his stepping, gripped her in an hypnotic species of mild fascination.

He halted this process of singular locomotion at the desk and then, with the pregnant deliberation of a dubious second-act curtain, placed the keys and the car registration down on it. Mabel, still mute, sat observing this standard gesture of polished abandonment and it further curdled the hot stew of gripes that had been simmering within her since yesterday.

"Put those back in your pocket."

"I've quit, Mrs. Gervais."

Mabel damped the blistering blast that tipped her tongue and, instead, asked reasonably, "Why?"

"There wouldn't be no use in telling you. It's—I just want to get away from you."

She stayed moveless, still remote in her secure and powerful citadel of wealth and prestige, and digested the pungent ingredients hidden in this very odd statement.

They were rather unpalatable in the sense of their possible repercussions. There was a cohesion of gossip among the different plateaus of the Capital servants and Mabel did not underrate it. It offered a ripe source for the columnists' more muddy items, flakes either of moral or monetary indiscretions or (worse) of ridicule that had kicked the props from under a good many careers. One damnable thing was that Harris knew all about mama. She thought it important to know the full scope of the wormwood that all of a sudden he was finding it impossible to stomach.

"Is it Hyacinth?"

"You could call that the clincher."

"There is more, then?"

"Little stuff. Years of it. He's just the worst, I guess."

Mabel remained baronially patient.

"Do you mind being reasonable? You heard my explanation to the state trooper. My motives were kind, almost altruistically kind. If there were any burden of blame, and there is none, it would rest with Mr. Connor."

"Look, Mrs. Gervais, this gets us no place. I talked with Miss Nest when she ordered the car and she was crying and she asked me to try and influence you on the drive up here and a fat chance I would have or anybody would ever have of influencing you." Harris gave her a good looking-over. It was of an impersonal spectator sort, like looking at a big deadly specimen in a zoo's snake house through a guarding glass. He said, "Well, you got what you wanted.

You got Hyacinth back all right."

He started to walk away and Mabel stopped him with, "About your salary, Harris. I've been thinking for some time that with your years of faithful service, a very substantial increase—"

"No. No, Mrs. Gervais. I like money, but I've got it. I've never been a spender and you might say I am set. I'll call a cab from the phone in the garage to take me into Placid."

The room, being fireless, was cold from seepage of the storm's tumult and in spite of the fur coat so warmly enveloping her Mabel felt a chill spread through her body and bones. It grew acute while Harris had the porch door open on his way out and the wind's great power went yelling around the room until he had closed the door behind him.

Faintly, on the bare perimeter of thought, Mabel indulged in a curt brown study of the trivial, of the truly damnable whip-hand it could exert. She skimmed a few of the more obvious examples such as the kingdom ironically lost by the third Richard for the frippery want of a horse, the hand-sized cloud that rose with such crack of doom consequences from the sea, and the unpleasant results of chain-reaction in general—like the modest detonator that baloons into hydrogen holocaust.

But these notions were simply pinpricks and she sensibly slapped their irritating faces, thus reducing Hyacinth and Harris to what they were—nothing but a couple of servants no longer in her employ. Her eyes settled on the ashy fireplace and she was damned if she was going to freeze to death. The paper problem was solved by a weekly Essex County newssheet and there were logs stacked in the saddle-leather woodbox that papa had had made in Italy.

But kindling?

Under the impulse of some slippery vindictiveness her eye was drawn to Cousin Etienne's violin lying in its corpselike apathy on the rug. Although she was far too massive a woman to say that she pounced, she certainly gave the effect of doing so by the swoop with which she snatched up the fiddle and swung it back in order more viciously to splinter it against the stone fireplace.

A strangled howl that was almost feral in its intensity checked the swing and held Mabel, to say the least, transfixed. What she saw, when she finally turned around, was a button-eyed mahogany face, sprouted over with a growth of stubble and topped by an incoherent cascade of black hair. This what-have-you effect was attached to a chunky body

clad in a blazing reefer, less torrid britches, and calf-high boots. Thanks to the storm the whole thing was, of course, soping wet.

What Etienne first had seen upon entering the lounge had been his violin, which was his heart, on a midair passage towards demolition in the clenched talons of a sable-wrapped monster. Hence his understandably poignant bellow.

He was as simple a soul as could be. Invariably he looked on the sunny side of life and was trustfully ready to believe that everybody else was kindly, too. His opinion of Mabel had been indoctrinated in him by Hyacinth. As a result he was fortified to accept her as the finest among women, a demigod-like earthling whose goodness was of a parallel bigness to her great physique.

The onslaught of the storm had stopped his search for the body and had driven him back to the chalet and the staggering view of Hyacinth's beatified Mabel doing Indian-clubs with his darling violin. It was confusing. It was impossible. But no—

Etienne's gentle, subsuspicious soul swiftly reconciled the anomaly when he noticed a film of tears that shone on Mabel's eyes. That they were the wet salt of a seething rage never struck him for a minute and he accepted them at his own evaluation of deep sorrow. In regard to the fiddle's interrupted voyage into kindling, could it not be thought that the instrument in some complicated female fashion must have symbolized Hyacinth (through cousinship with himself) and that the sight of this inappropriately gay memento had been more than this wonderful woman's grief could endure?

"Do not explain this thing to me, dear Madame Gervais. The dope presents itself fully revealed. It grieved you to portray in your mind a vision of the joys Hyacinth discovered when I fiddled. You loved him, too."

It took Mabel several seconds to get this, but she did, and she seized on this moist object's fortuitous interpretation of her tantrum to bind him to her as an ally through any possible local backwash from Hyacinth's suicide.

"I shall never forget your dear cousin," she said with truly remarkable restraint, "as long as I live."

The following day a man, hired from Placid, drove Mabel back to Washington. They reached Broadlands at six. She returned the murmured greeting of Jellman, the butler, and said, "See that that driver is taken care of and have Miss Nest pay him tomorrow—fifteen dollars

plus traveling expenses back to Lake Placid."

"Yes, madam."

"Did—has Harris returned?"

"He was here last night. To pack. Miss Nest gave him his final check this morning."

"Has she replaced him?"

"The agency sent over a man named Walters. His last position was with Mrs. Emerson Ogden Stokes. For about fifteen years, I understand, until her death last month."

"Mr. Gervais is home?"

It was an idle question, purely automatic, because Lewis would have had her wire that she would be home for dinner and that the evening would be devoted to his detailed report on the Georgia duck shoot at Senator Downsberry's.

"No, madam. Mr. Gervais left for New York shortly after breakfast."

This peculiar news flash initially brought Mabel a feeling of bewilderment. It was so utterly irrational. She never doubted the constancy of Lewis being under her thumb, but during this critical period she also wanted him under her eye.

"Did Mr. Gervais say when he would return?"

"Not that I know of, madam."

Mabel went to the lift and pushed a button for the second floor. She felt the need for an iceberg calmness, a clear, gelid control over every immediate calculation and deduction to be made. Precisely what was in the air she couldn't conceive, but she didn't like it and it surged around her with a dangerous breeze.

Her suite occupied Broadlands' west wing and to reach it meant passing the one assigned to Jenny. The door to Jenny's living room stood open and Mabel glanced in as she came abreast. She saw in a chair beside Jenny a young man with the build of a star football player, with black hair in a blizzard cut and with blue eyes that looked with polite interest straight into hers.

The young man murmured something and stood up, and Jenny stood up, and they were coming towards Mabel with Jenny's lovely face in a condition known as glowing, and to clinch the matter they were coming towards her hand in hand.

"This," Jenny said, "is Aaron."

Secured within the bastion of her suite Mabel rang for Miss Nest and then went into her dressing room and took off her wraps. She felt satisfied that the skirmish just passed had been in perfect key, pitched at a gracious cordiality to one of dear Jenny's dear old friends.

Behind this velvet window dressing she had erected a steel

front against any on-the-spot gush of confidences. She had tossed them a frothy announcement of the migraine the day's long motor run had given her, the touch of sheer exhaustion, and the plea that surely Aaron would understand her asking him to release Jenny from any plans they might have made for the early part of the evening. She wanted Jenny to join her during a light supper in the seclusion of her rooms, when Jenny could tell her all, and after which Jenny could rejoin Aaron.

In brief, Mabel hadn't given either of them a chance to open for one second their respective mouths.

That blister being pricked, Mabel returned her full attention to the infinitely more disturbing and curious matter of Lewis. She said, when Miss Nest came in, "Did Lewis leave a message for me?"

"No, Mabel. I looked for him after your telegram came, but Vincent said he had just left."

Vincent was Lewis's valet.

"Did you ask Vincent whether he gave any explanation?"

"Yes, I did, and Lewis didn't. He just asked Vincent to telephone for a reservation on the next flight to New York." Tears flooded Miss Nest's eyes. "Oh Mabel, I knew, I simply knew that Hyacinth—"

"That will be all, Miss Nest."

"Have they *found* him, his—?"

"I said that would be all."

After Miss Nest had moistly gone, Mabel put through a New York call to the Plaza where she and Lewis always stayed. He had not checked in. He was not checked in at his club. She called Jellman on the house phone, asking him to send up dinner for herself and Jenny.

Then she stood for a while at a window in her living room as a lingering twilight brought its chiaroscuro to a garden that spread in costly formality to the bank of the dark Potomac, tasting an acid bitterness in the twilight from a Wagnerian connotation that had jumped into her head, his *Twilight of the Gods*.

Everything was in abeyance. This absenting of Lewis made it seem as though a fundamental cornerstone were missing, leaving herself and the edifice of her megalomaniacal purposes afloat in midair. In comparison, the sudden appearance of Jenny's Aaron was an irritant but of no true concern. But Lewis, how deeply desperate, how true could be that concern.

After Jellman had served and gone, Mabel said, "Jenny, dear, now tell me what brought Aaron."

It was, Jenny said, a most remarkable thing, hinging on an uncle of Aaron's from whom

neither he nor his father had heard in over twenty years. Until a letter last week from his uncle's lawyer with its death notice and the staggering news that Aaron had fallen heir to thirty thousand dollars.

This was somewhat tougher than Mabel had expected. It almost certainly indicated a hauling out of her most brutal artillery and giving this girl, with her love-bright eyes, the full treatment. Mabel veiled the cruel traps that lay in her own cold eyes.

"This inheritance, I suppose Aaron feels it removes any obstacle to an immediate marriage?"

"We both do. I can make a home, a good home for him to go on with his studies in, to come back to from his work. One with no distractions of money worry or care."

"Are your plans as yet definite, dear?"

"Pretty much so, yes. Neither of us wants a big wedding. Just father and you and our old close friends at home."

What a curious light, Mabel reflected, love seemed to bathe across the face of the young. A haze, in a fashion. She found it faintly repellent.

"Just how is your father, dear?"

"He says he is coming along fine, and that Dr. Morris tells him he may be able to leave the hospital by the end of next week."

"Then he *does* still require treatment."

"Oh yes."

"Strange—they never can quite touch it. The nervous system, I mean. Strain, any breakdown of the heart. Always the hovering threat of some sudden relapse. The danger of a shock—the possible fatal result of a shock—"

Mabel's slanted eye caught the drench of anxiety that replaced the stuffed-peach look on Jenny's face.

"Please—is there something you know? Something Dr. Morris has been hiding from dad or me?"

Mabel emptied her coffee cup. She touched a napkin against her thick, coarse lips. As a result of her tutor's (Machiavelli) contempt over half-measures she never dallied in coming to a decision. She saw it was no use. Jenny's mind was set, rendered mulish by that most unknown of all emotions to Mabel—love.

"Yes, dear," she said. "There is something that I know."

She shoved her chair back and stood up. With the fastidious lightness of the heavily-built she moved towards the Renoir which concealed, behind its subtle sensuality and fine plastic sense, the safe set in the wall.

And towards ten o'clock that night, which now was this night,

Lewis had walked in with his knowledge concerning Anna Moljinski and his declared determination about a divorce.

Towards dawning as the panorama of remembrance reached its close, Mabel slept. She awoke at nine on a morning that showed promise of good crisp fall weather and, relaxed against the bed pillows, she inspected the breakfast tray her maid brought her with pleasurable zest.

She polished off a broiled kidney while testing the oddity of her present emotion towards Lewis. It was so very vacant, like a slate from which all scribbling had been rubbed. Almost it seemed that the very decision she had reached to poison him now filled her with an enormous indulgence, a wanting to be kind and to arrange that his final days should be agreeable, in the fashion of that last-meal for the irrevocably condemned. Not exactly, though, because in Lewis's case he wouldn't be entertaining the faintest notion that he *was* condemned.

Through the balance of the day she marshalled her steps towards murder. A session in the public library with medico-legal texts resulted in her rejecting the mineral poisons because of the certainty with which they could be identified in a dead body, and choosing among the vegetable poisons instead. Among their list she found, to her quiet pleasure, that one of the most effective was also the simplest to concoct on a home basis, and that its ingredients were readily at hand.

Tobacco.

An alkaloid of Nicotine.

And about it:

Its rapidity (she read) *is only surpassed by the action of hydrocyanic acid. It can be reduced to a tincture, without any decomposition, as simply as you can boil down a strong broth, and then a final clearing through the evaporation of an alcohol bath. . . . The fatal dose when injected would approximate the minute quantity of 0.05040 mil.*

Well, the poison reservoir of the ring was more than ample to contain such an amount. Then with an interest that was purely clinical, one that was divorced from any human relationship with Lewis, Mabel digested the poison's effects in its passage towards death.

Nicotine, after absorbtion, acts first as a stimulant and then as a paralysant to the central nervous system, causing muscular weakness, colonic convulsions, tetanic spasms, twitchings, vertigo and mental confusion. If, however, the pure alkaloid is injected (as Mabel had every

intention it was going to be, via the poison ring) *death may occur in a few seconds with its swift course exhibiting the pupils dilated, the pulse feeble, the face pale and the extremities cold.*

In other words to all normal appearances—and certainly so to the inexperienced eyes of the country general-practitioner who would be called in—a plain stroke.

As for the concocting of this witch's brew the kitchen of Broadlands would offer a special security, the majority of its staff having already embarked on their journey to the chalet.

The first snowfall of the season had brought its cake-icing beauty to the somber evergreens and woodland carpeting of russet leaves when Mabel, Jenny and Lewis reached the chalet by late Friday afternoon. Even nature (Mabel thought) is with me. For the snow added the final charming atmospheric touch.

While Lewis and Jenny went directly up to their rooms to change, Mabel paused in the lounge and gave it a General's eye. She said to Etienne, who was hovering with his jet-bead eyes just level with her heavy shoulder, "Has he—has your dear cousin's body been found?"

"Alas!"

Mabel gave him a tempered look.

"Does that mean yes or no?"

"The search moves on and I have ceased to join it only that I may be here to serve you. As Hyacinth would wish."

Etienne's face, Mabel decided, needed correction. Its present cast could put a damper on a state fair.

"This is a hard thing to ask of you, Etienne, but I want you to be brave about our tragedy before our guests. Even gay." She clutched at Pagliacci and managed to get out: "The laughter that hides the tears."

"Ah so!"

"I may even ask you to play your violin for square dancing. Can you call the sets?"

That he was able to do so, he assured Mabel, was of a certainty. He could call them with *impressement* both in English and in French and among his own immense social circle his mastery of the art was a matter of disputeless fame and now that he came to think about it there was a message for Madame Gervais.

This snapper on the tail of Etienne's self-appreciation pastoral flicked Mabel with a scorpion touch. There was no message that she expected, nor was there cause for any unless the cause were a bad one. The State Police or the coroner about Hyacinth? A defaulting guest?

She said with the force of a

back-fire, "From Washington?"

"That it did not disclose. It is from your Miss Nest and you are to talk back to her by calling the Essex exchange and putting yourself in communion with its Operator Number Three."

The quick and the dead and in the midst of life we are in—mama — the Essex exchange could mean nothing but the sanitarium. The little hot pebbles of anger and confusion bounced about in Mabel's stomach. Just why in the dear name of Heaven should it be *now*? Her hand was curiously shaken as she lifted the receiver from the telephone.

Miss Nest's voice was a reed so thin as to be virtually inaudible.

"You will have to talk louder," Mabel said.

"—couldn't catch you while you were en route so I flew up here myself, Mabel—Mabel?"

"Yes, you did perfectly rightly, and you must speak louder. I'm only catching half you say."

"—sinking, sinking fast, Mabel—lucid moments—come to her bedside—"

"Miss Nest, pull yourself together! There have been false alarms such as this before. Now tell me, did she, has mama asked for me, and I mean specifically?"

"No, not really, Mabel. It was me she asked for but she's your *mother*, Mabel."

"Miss Nest, you must control yourself and listen to what I have to say. It is out of the question that I leave here before Monday, and you have proved the very point I'm trying to make. *You* are the important one—it is *you* she needs, not me—yes—yes—and should you telephone again you will please make certain that you talk with nobody but me."

Etienne, already semi-dissolved with sympathy, asked after Mabel had hung up, "A matter of tragedy, Madame Gervais?"

"No. There are moments when Miss Nest lacks balance. It is a matter of no importance."

That night, after dinner was over, after the people in the chalet and when even the world itself seemed bedded down, Mabel tried out the poison ring.

Among the many of Hyacinth's simple pleasures had been the maintenance of a small zoo that occupied a series of comfortable cages beneath a stand of pine trees to the rear of the chalet. Having had to form an admiration-society-of-one over each fresh addition Mabel was thoroughly familiar with it, and Etienne, since Hyacinth's suicide, had fondly taken over its care.

Its current occupants embraced one irritable muskrat with an appetite for fish and frogs, an interminably breeding family of meadow mice whose

stomachs were ever eager for green stuff, a waddling mother woodchuck with her brood of five cubs (father was dead), and a de-glanded Eastern skunk possessed of a fine taste for grasshoppers. All were well fed. All were tame. And all enjoyed the secure feeling of being in a safe, protected home.

The woodchuck cubs were about a month old and with their round, heavy little bodies had the beguiling clumsiness of very young pups. There was plenty of fat under their soft, warm pelts and neither the mother nor any of them raised a row when Mabel reached and selected a cub at random from the litter. They were far too stuffed with sleep and good green vegetables to care.

Snow had again started falling at midnight and Mabel was glad to have its masking curtain added to the darkness, as a further masking of the pinpoint gleam of her pencil torch. She wasted no time. She pressed the poison ring against the cub's soft belly and released its death-dealing spring.

Very quick.

She returned the small body to its place among the litter, and, once more in her bedroom, she refilled the reservoir of the ring.

The fateful Saturday opened, for Mabel, with a gratifying telephone call from Miss Nest that mama, obligingly, had rallied a little during the night, although there remained no real hope.

If she would only hold out until Monday. Mama *must* hold out until Monday. You could understandably, even laudably, shelter an unfortunate parent in a sanitarium from the eyes of the world, but you could not go ahead with a high jinks party while simultaneously absenting yourself from the bier of a dead one.

For Etienne the day started with a mystery of sorrow. It seemed unreasonable that the woodchuck cub, who had been just as healthy a little bugger as the other four, should have decided during the night to expire. But there it was. An act of the good, determined, best-knowing God. He hoped that at some moment during the exacting schedule for the busy day he could snatch out time for a decent burial. In the meanwhile he wrapped the body in one of the chalet's best towels and, first dumping out a dozen cans of the chef's supply of clear green turtle soup, laid the cub at temporary rest in the emptied cardboard carton.

To Lewis the day offered itself as nothing special one way or the other. Simply an automatic continuance of the tiresome social grind to which Mabel had inured him and from

which, thank heaven, divorce would within reasonable time limits offer a grateful release. He saw that Vincent had laid out his hunting clothes and boots. He put them on.

In a sense there was no beginning of the day for Jenny because, except for fitful moments, she had not slept. Almost she wished herself dead. She was not an innocent in the tricky chessboard of politics and knew very well that the average senator's income was generally inadequate for campaign expenses and for a proper maintenance of position, once elected.

She found nothing disgraceful in the practice of outside financial help because (she was positive about this in her father's case) it went toward the ultimate good of the nation by making it possible for men of such fine caliber to serve. But a personal check for thirty thousand dollars was pretty stiff. It was beyond reason really unless you accepted the corrupt reason Mabel had given her, and that Jenny still was unwilling to do without first having heard her father's side of the story.

Therein she was hogtied. His deep, recent worries had not passed unnoticed and Mabel's implication about the fatality of shock had scared Jenny stiff. She simply did not dare think the risk advisable of going to him openly and putting the cards on the table. It was a risk her love would not permit her to chance.

Her hate of Mabel was now as deep as her affection previously had been. She saw the woman for exactly what she was, and there seemed no answer but to play the game out along the lines Mabel had drawn.

The hunt breakfast, after the VIPs had arrived and changed into clothes for the chase, was more in line with Long Island than with the normal rugged board set for such meals in the north-country. The Scotch ran neck and neck with the coffee.

Mabel was at her heartiest best. Not a sign of the intricate machinery that was causing the party to run showed in the chalet's warm, atmospheric charm. And certainly there was no sign of her conscienceless, murderous intent. Etienne, too, was going across with a bang, serving the hot dishes at the buffet, attending to the highballs, in constant liason with the kitchen for a replenishment of crusty gold popovers, and dispensing enough quaint Canuck patois now and then to stamp the affair as being authentically north woods.

With a carnival shattering of precedent the hunt was a matter of couples, each with one of the four guides. It was automatic that Jenny would be paired with Habling, whereas Lewis was teamed up with Senator Downs-

berry's wife, Wilma, while the senator had Postmaster-General's Veronica.

Olcott, Mabel reserved for herself.

In his late fifties, Olcott was a large, very well fed, balding man with deceptively ingenuous eyes and there wasn't a single thing about Washington or national politics that he didn't know. He was just as aware as Mabel of the goal she had been working towards and was prepared (now that the Brussel's post was vacated) to let her reach it.

He sincerely admired Mabel, even liked her, and heaven knew she certainly had come across with enough cash and back-stage help by now to have paid for what she wanted. Lewis was all right, too, although Olcott knew perfectly well that Mabel would be the power behind the embassy throne. Which was good. He bagged, in the early afternoon, a six-point buck.

In his elation he lost his usual strict caution and administration protocol and blurted out to Mabel, "I don't mind telling you Brussels is set. Lewis will be asked to come to the White House—shouldn't be spoken of until then—but I'm happy as a kid, Mabel, and I want you to be happy, too."

At their stand on the run where their guide had stationed them, Alden Habling and Jenny had had no shot and neither cared. The hours of proximity in the snow-hushed cold beauty of the forest, in their little world of total isolation, had been hell for Jenny, and she had played the role that she had been bludgeoned into by Mabel under an understandable surface tension.

It was not a good job and for a while Habling had been puzzled by the change in her, this tension quality that had come over the warmly exciting young woman whom he so deeply loved and who (Mabel only this morning had practically told him so) in return loved him. There was a miracle in the fact, that life once again was offering him a new and wonderful happiness.

One that but for Mabel never would have come his way. Could he ever repay her enough for having been the deus ex machina who had brought about this blessed state?

Yet this change that he felt in Jenny, it wasn't any sudden shyness or reserve—and then of course the explanation struck him. Mabel (again Mabel) had remarked on the touch-and-go condition of Senator Heatherwing in the hospital. Naturally enough her father's critical health would be a constant prey on Jenny's mind and would account for the change.

An overwhelming tenderness of wanting to shelter and bring

her comfort, right now, this instant, in this cold austere copse of pines and cedars, knocked Habling from his State Department poise. He set his gun against a fallen log, did the same with Jenny's and then, to her frozen surprise, took her in his arms.

The visor of his red hunting cap ricochetted his tender kiss from its intended target to a patch of cold cheek below her left ear but Habling corrected this by snatching off the cap and then managed to land squarely on her pressed, icy lips. The blindness that love brings did not miss hitting him. His own emotion was so solid, and so bolstered by Mabel's reassurances, that it masked the reluctance of Jenny's response, or rather lack of response, because a Stoughten bottle couldn't have been more stodgily unlimbered in his arms.

"Jenny—you will marry me? It's yes?"

Her voice was suffocated.

"Yes, Alden. It's yes."

Candlelight and the glow from lazy logs were homelike and kindly over the dinner table and the dinner itself, which was just reaching the dessert stage, had been superb. Mabel, at the other end from Lewis, felt drugged almost to the point of letdown with the success upon which her fortunes rode.

It would be done tonight.

With Habling and Jenny settled (he had confided the engagement to her) the square dance could be suggested shortly after dinner. There were two reasons for speed, for Lewis's silence to be swiftly arranged.

Firstly, Olcott already was mellowly half-potted and had his official back hair down to the point where he was giving his pet rendition of the Vodka Boatman. Mabel knew that in this mellowness he was thoroughly capable of letting Lewis know that the Brussel's embassy was an accomplished fact, and Lewis's reaction to the news—probably an outright refusal of the proposed ambassadorship—was too problematic to be risked.

Secondly there was mama. The thing must be done before any final bulletin should come through about mama, because then there naturally could be no thought of square dancing with its splendid opportunities for clasping, in the most natural manner in the world, Lewis's hand.

She appraised the well fed, chattering group. There had been enough cocktails, enough wines with the different courses, to bring on a jovial contentment without taking the edge off zest. An enormous sense of superiority breathed in Mabel, one that transcended these food-and-

drink stuffed pawns and reached out further to encompass Fate itself.

She stood up, with a full champagne glass in her hand.

"Darlings, I have an announcement to make, and then a toast. In the role of foster mother to Jenny, and with her dear father unable to have been with us, I feel I've the right to let you know the wonderful, the happy news that she and Alden . . ."

Etienne was exerting his loyal utmost to put his heart into his fiddling and his calling of the sets. It was a tough thing to have to do and he was appalled at the amount of unhappiness that lay beneath his forced surface gayety like lumps.

Also, he was bewildered, and had been from the arrival of Mabel's guests of importance. He was aware of their esteemed position in government, in the Society of this great nation's great capital, and he had been looking forward to something special, a genteel reserve in whatever unbending would be done, and certainly not this ungainly cavorting to which he was a witness.

Only Habling fitted the picture Etienne had been looking for. Habling had happened upon him when, shortly before dinner, he had been burying the woodchuck cub. Habling's courteous interest and appropriate cool dignity during an operation that commanded respect had left nothing to be desired, nor had his quiet, attentive air of interest while Etienne had been relating his unspeakable astonishment at the cub's untimely end.

So patient had Habling been that Etienne had trespassed even further upon this exalted man's ear and had given him a complete account of Hyacinth's tragic departure and of his, Etienne's, inconsolable despair that Hyacinth's body still lay lonesome and unfound.

The set had reached that point where Etienne's call demanded a chain effect of changing partners, with considerable whirling on the part of the ladies, and a wide swinging and clasping of hands. He was observing them engage in the movement cumbrously and with a steamy amount of laughing confusion, a veritable kaleidescope of unseemly, flushed buffoonery, when Mr. Gervais fell.

Inasmuch as Mr. Gervais exhibited no palpable intention of regaining his feet, Etienne bowed some conclusive notes and lowered the fiddle from his chin.

It was the skinny, meatless woman (he later decided) who had screamed.

Mabel now stepped confidently into the crowning dramatic performance of her career. A triumphant exultation blazed its

warmth beneath her surface job of staggered, thunder-stricken shock. Lewis and the ring had both come across very well. He was dead in a matter of ten seconds, with no more than a garble of vocal sounds that had lacked the understandability of speech.

With the timing of a Sarah Bernhardt she permitted Senator Downsberry to guide her solicitously to a chair and then force on her a slug of straight Scotch, while Habling and Olcott with Etienne's assistance lifted Lewis from the floor and stretched him on a couch, while Jenny telephoned Saranac for a Dr. Busby, and while Wilma and Veronica accomplished a lot of utterly headless darting.

Mabel then allowed herself to regain her magnificent control. Her personal shock and grief retired before her position as a great hostess, a woman of unshakable poise, one who could rise above any emergency no matter how grave. To wit: to the impeccable stature of an ambassadress.

The scene moved on according to plan with its banalities of sympathy, its hushed conjecturings, its recalling of similar fatal strokes. ("You remember that colonel—Wilson? Williams?—something like that, who simply sat down at his desk at the Pentagon and leaned forward and was dead?") There were other examples dusted off, some old, some more recent, but all of a unified trend.

Even Dr. Busby when he arrived filled the bill of Mabel's expectations. A man in his early sixties, he was the prototype of all hard-worked country practitioners. His blood pressure was criminally out of bounds but there was little he could do about it; he just didn't have the time. His manner was gravely bluff and decisive, the more so to cover a slight inferiority complex that helplessly beset him whenever, rarely, he was called in to treat any of the region's visiting big shots.

His capable, humanitarian hands and brain went at once to work on Lewis. Dead, certainly, and swiftly so according to the answers to his brief questioning. Poleaxed, you might say, by a clot or by one of those unpredictable revolts of the heart—after a strenuous day in the woods, a heavy meal and a tub of liquor, topped with the idiotic folly of the gymnastics of square dancing. During his long years of practice there had been cases such as this, and there was no thought in Dr. Busby's brotherly mind but that death had struck from some such natural cause.

Mabel then moved onto the closing facet of her role. She had established her ambassadorial poise and now decided it would be wisely necessary to exhibit for this country doctor the reac-

tions he would expect to be present in a grief stricken widow. While the others grouped in a low voiced, manikin tableau before the fireplace and fortified their nerves with highballs, Mabel sadly and with tears held barely under control withdrew with Dr. Busby to the corner of the room.

There were, he said, some details he would have to have—her husband's full name, his father's, date of birth—things like that. While she answered he was aware of her shaken condition (Mabel was doing it well, neither overplaying nor underplaying the part) and decided that bed was the immediate prescription for her, and an injection that would insure sleep. He had seen these big, strong women—Lord, how ugly she was!—collapse like babies on his hands.

"About now, Dr. Busby? I mean, what do we do?"

"There will have to be a few formalities, Mrs. Gervais. You will understand—any unattended sudden death. Don't think about them. They mean nothing but a gesture to satisfy the legal requirements. Leave everything to me. I want you to get right into bed and sleep."

"Sleep? I couldn't."

"I'll arrange that you will."

Before going upstairs with her, accompanied by that nice looking young girl and the two women, he put through a call to the state police.

Habling, Olcott, and Downsberry were left a quorum by the fire. (Lewis's body had been removed to the game room.) They were skirting the fringes of conjecture from the viewpoint of their ever important political skins. There would be national publicity of course as soon as the news broke. Well, there could be nothing unfavorable about it. Certainly nothing scandalous. But it was too bad about this autopsy-and-trooper business. That stuff was never, never good.

"How about this?" Olcott said. "How about taking the edge off by giving it a little schmaltz? Spike any chance of it hitting the columns as being the result of a liquored-up razzmataz?"

Both Habling and Downsberry looked attentively bleak.

"How?" Habling asked.

"I'll call up the White House around breakfast and get an official okay on releasing the Brussels dope. Then hand out a press release that we were up here to sound out Lewis—and—by God yes! Drop a strong hint that Mabel will be offered the post in his place. Turn the spotlight full on her. Boys, it's got everything. I'm pooped. I'm going to bed. Coming?"

Downsberry said he was coming, but Habling said he'd wait by the fire for Jenny, that she'd

told him she'd be back down.

Olcott gave a jaw busting yawn.

"In that case we will leave the troopers to the doctor and you."

"An embolism is my guess," Dr. Busby said when he came downstairs and joined Habling.

"Too bad about the post mortem. It's always upsetting to the ones who are left."

"I know. There ought to be more leeway. There's no more necessity for this one than a cow."

The porch door opened and both men looked up, expecting to see the state police, but it was a woman who came inside. A small woman, wispish looking in spite of being bundled and mufflered against the cold. She walked directly over to them. Her face was desperately tired and strained.

"I am Miss Nest, Mrs. Gervais's secretary, gentlemen."

"Habling, Arthur Habling," Habling said, "and this is Dr. Busby."

"Mr. Habling, oh of course. Dr. Busby, has Mrs. Gervais retired? If you both will excuse me I must go right up to her."

"I've given her an injection," Dr. Busby said. "Nothing could wake her, Miss Nest, before morning."

Habling took another look at Miss Nest's frailty.

"Let me have your things, Miss Nest, and then I suggest you sit down. You look tired, and you have run into a tragedy. Mr. Gervais is dead. Suddenly. A stroke."

Miss Nest was already too cluttered with sorrow, too bone weary to be affected much further by any shock.

"I am sorry," she said, "truly sorry. Lewis was a kindly man. It is odd it should have occurred so closely."

"Drink this sherry," Dr. Busby said.

"Thank you."

Habling studied her thoughtfully.

"So closely on what, Miss Nest?"

"Mabel's mother passed away this evening, too. Just as the stars came out."

"Did you say—mother?"

"Yes, Mr. Habling. It's not strange that you never heard about her. Nobody has, really, ever since she was placed in the sanitarium, oh so many sad years ago, so shortly after her husband's terrible, pitiable death. Mr. Appleson burned up. It was all so terrible."

Just what *is* this, Habling wondered while a chill, premonitory hand clutched the political section of his heart. A sanitariumed dead mother—insanity? alcoholism?—a burnt up father—the sainted fields of the State Department seemed brushed with an ugly wind. Not, thank

heaven, that anything was as yet official or in the hands of the press.

"Mrs. Appleson was under treatment for her—nerves, Miss Nest?"

"Well no, not honestly, although in a way yes, because basically it was her nerves that caused her to overdrink. To help her to forget. You see, it was right out here on the lake in the naptha launch they had those days when Mabel was just a little girl. Such a terrible thing."

"No, I'm afraid I don't quite see?"

"It was all so pitifully useless, just because of a doll, one that Mr. Appleson had brought Mabel from Paris and she was so awfully, so possessively fond of it. I myself was standing on the dock when the launch burst into flames, and I could hear Mabel from across the waters screaming that Lucy must be saved. Lucy was the name she had given the doll."

"Those old naptha launches were positive fire traps."

"I know. Well, Mr. Appleson shoved Mrs. Appleson and Mabel overboard and then—there was nothing, *nothing* he had ever denied Mabel, principally, I think, because he was always trying to make it up to her for not being pretty—at any-rate, he dashed back into the cabin to get the doll for her and that was when the tank of naptha exploded."

Miss Nest (she had never in her life been so choked up with grief or so tired) simply could not suppress her tongue. A confused urging seemed impelling her to explain clearly to these gentlemen that Mrs. Appleson had been placed in the sanitarium through no fault of her own, that no taint should rest on the name of this woman whom she so earnestly had loved.

"Surely you must understand, Mr. Habling, how such a moment never really could be effaced—the terrible picture, after I had helped Mrs. Appleson and Mabel onto the dock, of the wind blowing the launch over towards us, very charred and sort of skeletonized by the fierce heat, and the glimpse of something that we felt was Mr. Appleson through one of the cabin windows. They were large and square, you know, with silk curtains—oh Jenny, my dear, I never realized you had come."

Jenny kissed Miss Nest and said, "I've been here for several minutes. You've had a trying time."

"In a way it was very peaceful. She just closed her eyes. There was no pain about it. It was a lovely way to die, and she had the little things she loved where she could touch them. These, dear."

Miss Nest opened a capacious lizzard handbag and placed on a coffee table beside her chair the souveniers of sentiment that Mabel had gone to fetch for mama when mama had entered the sanitarium and when Mabel thus had met Lewis.

"This locket," Miss Nest babbled helplessly, tenderly on, "contains a baby clipping of Mr. Appleson's hair, and this is the prayer book that Mrs. Appleson carried to her first Anglican Communion. And this poison ring is one of the cotillion favors for the ladies when Mabel made her debut. I never did understand why Mrs. Appleson would wish to keep it near her, and I remember how horrified I was when Mabel not only insisted on their being the favors but also insisted on their being perfect, working replicas of the mediaevel *anello della morte*—those deadly rings that the Borgias went in for—poison wells and everything. Actually, the whole concept of the debut was outrageous but Mabel was a terribly headstrong girl. Perhaps it was a deliberate gesture to capitalize on her lack of good looks, but the theme for the cotillion was a bal masque based on the chamber of horrors in Madame Toussaud's Wax Works, and Mabel went as the Man in the Iron Mask."

In the manner that ice will form thinly, fearfully cold, paralyzing into a set shape the facial muscles and the entire body, such was the effect that Miss Nest's soft narration was having, first on Dr. Busby, then on Habling, and on Jenny, too. Whereas until this instant there had been no tiniest thought of such a thing, the word was now loosed to spread its filaments of suspicion and black doubts. Poison. And the ring.

Habling had idly noticed its replica on Mabel's finger during dinner, both because of its oddity of design and its foreignness to the blaze of her usual jewels. He was beginning to feel as though a battering ram had just pumped him one in the stomach. There was that woodchuck cub that Etienne had been burying, with its inexplicable sudden death—no—no—with all his trained nerves Habling wanted to shove the baleful thought away. Not for Mabel's sake, but for his own.

With the chameleon ease of a first-fiddle diplomat his acute sense of self-preservation transformed his interest in Mabel and his liking for her into a bland limbo where, while still straddling the fence, he didn't give a continental hoot about her fortunes one way or the other. He wanted no chance association (however innocent) of any notorious murder scandal to fringe upon the silken luster of his career.

Even his love seemed remarkably to shrivel under the scorch of this problematical, lurid publicity. Jenny herself was starting to loom in his eyes no longer as a desirable, dewy flower but more unhappily as the protege, the unofficially adopted daughter when you came right down to it, of a conjectural murderess. Never of such picky stuff had Caesar's wife been made.

Yes, shortly it might be wise to have a kindly talk with her, perhaps utilizing the disparity in their ages and making its tenor a paternal one, first about withholding their engagement from the press because of the tragic surrounding circumstances and then—his well-bred heart did bleed a little—he would see about sliding completely out from under.

Jenny also had noted the ring's replica during dinner when Mabel had announced the engagement and proposed the toast, and again just recently when they had been sympathizing her into bed. It was a sickly thing, Jenny thought as she touched her own cheek, how clammy and cold your face could get so suddenly. Just from a thought.

It was while giving Mabel the injection that the ring had come to Dr. Busby's attention, on the middle finger of the right hand that lay so grossly on the counterpane. He had thought it an interesting ring and odd. Damned odd, he now said to himself. He stood up, saying nothing to the others, and went upstairs. Habling's eyes followed him unhappily. There was little use, he guessed, in even hoping for the best.

"So I felt it wiser," Miss Nest was saying, still clenched in her unstrung tiredness, "not to leave them lying around. It isn't that one doesn't *trust* the nurses or attendants in an institution but there is always the souvenier idea, like taking spoons from hotel tables. And these little mementos so preciously now belong to Mabel."

What a wretchedly ironical way of putting it, Habling thought. That precious ring could be capable of heading Mabel towards the chair, or at the least she would be corked up for the rest of her life in jail. He considered the picture with an absent detachment. It would kill her in time just as definitely as she had killed Lewis, *if* she had killed Lewis.

"And then when Mr. Athcote arrived to take charge, Mr. Deston Athcote—he served as attorney for both Mrs. Appleson's and Mabel's affairs—I engaged an automobile and was driven directly here. I must be with Mabel when she goes to the sanitarium chapel where her mother will rest until the funeral arrangements, and also take

care of the secretarial work that is required during these moments of sorrow." She noticed Dr. Busby returning down the stairs and said as he joined them, "How is Mrs. Gervais, Doctor?"

"Sleeping."

"When she wakes in the morning will she be able to travel?"

He looked at her strangely and with, for herself, great kindliness.

"Yes, I think it is almost a certainty, Miss Nest, that she will."

This, Mabel thought, must be the way the Count of Monte Cristo had felt. The world was hers. She stretched and yawned luxuriously, padding the elbows of her heavy arms and exposing widely the strong, uncavitied teeth that were all her own. She admired the morning's clarion splendor as sunshine streamed towards her bed from the windows.

Her eyes were beguiled by four folded notes that her maid had placed on the breakfast tray. She drank some coffee before unfolding the topmost one. It covered with an unfamiliar, difficult script the best part of a sheet of engraved chalet stationery.

"I am absented, my dear Madame Gervais, from your service for the morning hours. Sergeant Catt who on this instant has arrived instructs me that the body of our kindredly beloved Hyacinth has been found and is en route to the Clatus Duffy Funeral establishment in Saranac Lake. I am on fire to be by his side and in respectful haste I sign my name, Etienne."

Mabel crumpled the paper and dropped it on the carpet. What niggling fools. What silly and inconsequential fools were the little people. She packed in more coffee before picking up the next note and recognizing Wilma Downsberry's sprawling hand. How very odd that Wilma should write—

"Mabel darling—the stupidest thing, but God knows *you* know how Washington works and Jimsey's head always *has* been the perfect sieve—" (Jimsey was Wilma's detestable pet name for the senator.) "—a closed committee meeting for tonight and my dear he had *forgotten all about it!* Alden has chartered a plane and is giving us all a lift and everybody's been awfully nice about our leaving but of course, as Alden pointed out, they would always know where to find us, and isn't it simply marvelous the power there is in official pull? Good-bye now, darling—they're simply screaming for me to rush—"

A vein started throbbing in Mabel's temple. She set the note aside and picked up the next,

which was from Veronica Olcott and curtly, typically frank.

"Mabel, my own rat's tail is joining the rest of them in the stampede down the hawsers. V."

The throbbing in her temple was really growing quite painful, and Mabel shut her eyes for a second before going on to the last note, which was signed by Alden Habling.

"I know how well you will understand. With the foreign situation in its delicate balance over the wretched Suez Canal contretemps—when no remotest approach of unfortunate publicity must be opened towards the Department—but you are far too clever to require me to specify. As Jenny herself will tell you, even my deep fondness for her has had to be sacrificed for the Department's good. Frankly, she seemed almost too agreeable to my suggestion that we mutually release one another, and I suspect a likelier, shall we say a less ripened suitor in the offing. From one remark made by her I received the impression that his name might be Aaron Stone. I know, we all know that you will want to retire from the social and public scene until this unhappy hour shall have blown over. We shall respect, Mabel, your privacy."

Possibly an aspirin would relieve this damning ache that not only was pounding her head but submerging her into a sulphurous ocean of bewilderment. She went into the bathroom and swallowed two tablets, and the cold water seemed to refresh her.

Fact, in its naked enormity, still evaded her and her mind delicately touched on only such outlying tendrils as it could rationalize. Habling's note when translated from its diplomatic gobbledegook apparently was to let her know that her Washington ambitions were squashed. But why? What difference now from the sympathetic cordiality of last night? And the bust-up with Jenny? The others? The Olcotts, the Downsberrys, the rude, callous flight, the stampede (as Veronica had put it) of rats from a sinking ship. Sinking—She? Mabel?

Ah—a thought—could Miss Nest have telephoned earlier in the morning and one of them—Habling? Downsberry? Olcott? —have taken the call because of Etienne's absence and so have discovered about the sanitarium and mama?

They would naturally suspect the worst—lunacy—alcoholism —whatever—taints to be shuddered at like the plague by those in the electorate or appointive limelight. A shuddering, yes, but surely not a fire-alarm exit. Surely no sufficient cause for that guillotine brutality which was (as Mabel knew from frequently having used it) Washington's most favored technique.

She let the water run in the tub to that modest level which was sufficient to accommodate, without overflow, her big body-displacement. She lowered herself into its warmth.

The relaxation did wonders for her, and while she dressed Mabel again began to feel more her natural self. Revenge. A devouring hate flared through her. If the guillotine were to be used she too would use it. Lavishly. Her crackling eyes envisioned a Washington strewn with heads. Ah the power and the strength that lay in great wealth! Nobody, nothing could take that weapon from her. Never.

She went downstairs in a state of militant arrogance. Her eye first noted Sergeant Catt and Dr. Busby over by the fireplace. How solemnly they watched her. Then she found herself stopped dead by the sight of Miss Nest.

Miss Nest came towards her. Miss Nest said, "Mabel, your mother is dead."

"Why are you here?"

Oddly, Sergeant Catt was at her side and holding some objects in his hand.

"She came, Mrs. Gervais," Catt said, handing them without any apparent reason to her, "to give you these."

All right. Through her confusion Mabel recognized them for what they were. And so mama was dead.

"When?" she asked Miss Nest.

"Last evening, Mabel."

"You left her?"

"Mr. Athcote came."

"I see."

Mabel walked towards a chair by the hearth and sat down, moving not with her customary coordinated lightness but heavily, as though these things of mama's were weighting her down. They were on her lap. The ivory bound prayer book, the locket, the—

Confusion deeped. The poison ring had not been among the mementos she had fetched for mama from the chalet. It must be the one that mama had received as a cotillion favor and mama had kept it, heaven knew why, among the other little things she cherished.

Mabel's cold, bewildered eyes moved to the third finger of her right hand and studied its bareness. Had she removed the ring last night? She didn't remember doing so. So busily had she been wrapped in playing her nerve-shaken role for Dr. Busby's benefit that she recalled but little of anything up to the point when he had put her to sleep, and of course from then on she recalled nothing at all.

Was this the ring—

"How did this get here?"

"Miss Nest brought it," Dr. Busby said. "I removed its replica from your finger last

night. This one of your mother's had made me curious. After Miss Nest had described it."

She looked at him frostily (it was a clammish frost, one that had its origin in the bitter marrow of her rigid, icing bones), looked searchingly into the pitiless fixety of his eyes.

"Why?"

"I wanted to have it examined. I wanted to smell it."

"Smell?"

"We found a noticeable odor of nicotine. Some of the alkaloid had remained in the poison well. They are retaining that ring as evidence, Mrs. Gervais. Also the body of the woodchuck. Etienne was puzzled by its death and had asked me whether I had an opinion that could explain."

"No trace—"

"On the contrary. The tests will be even more conclusive than will Mr. Gervais's autopsy because of the animal's small body. Far less diffusion, greater concentration, as I feel sure you will understand. And as Sergeant Catt has pointed out, the woodchuck will add decisively to the proof both of intent and premeditation."

Mabel did understand. In fact hardly ever before had her brilliant and learned mind been working as clearly. So these keepsakes of mama's—she gathered the prayer book and the locket of papa's hair and the ring in the grip of one powerful hand.

A thunderbolt of fury screamed its blasting torture through her body as she hurled the trifles blindly into the hearth's leaping flames while the fury went right on riding its scream astride the clangor of her voice—

"Mama—damn you, oh damn you! You've killed me."

Mabel was, as usual, quite right.

MISTAKE

A man was shot dead on the South Side the other day. The rather heavy-set man, a little too nattily dressed to be a drifter, lay crumpled where he'd fallen, eyes staring into the dirty grey sky. There was the usual crowd around the body, morbidly curious all of them, chattering away to each other about how they'd seen the man fall and knew right away it was one of "them there gang killings." . . . Patrolman Casey noticed a quiet little man, an almost inconspicuous little man, edge his way through the crowd until he stood close enough to look down on the body. The little man was staring glumly at it—Casey thought for a moment there was a flicker of disgust on the little man's blank face—and then he lost sight of him in the excitement of Homicide's arrival.

The little man was muttering to himself as he walked on down the street, one hand on the reassuring bulk in his pocket. "Again! Damn it—I've *got* to get glasses! I can't afford these mistakes!"

the five thousand pound kiss

by . . . Leslie Charteris

The game was worth playing for its own sake, to him; the prizes weren't everything....

IT HAS BEEN said that Simon Templar was a philanderer; but the criticism was not entirely just. A pretty face, or the turn of a slim waist, appealed to him no more—and not a bit less—than they do to the next man. Perhaps he was more honest about it.

It is true that sometimes, in a particularly buccaneering mood, as he swung down a broad highway leading to infinite adventure, he would sing one of his own inimitable songs against the pompous dreariness of civilization as he saw it, with a chorus:

But if red blood runs thin with years,
By God! If I must die,
I'll kiss red lips and drink red wine
And let the rest go by, my son,
And let the rest go by!

But there was a gesture in that, to be taken with or without salt as the audience pleased; and a fat lot the Saint cared. He was moderate in nothing that he said or did. That insurgent vi-

This story is, frankly, a sequel to our offering of two months ago, THE EXPORT TRADE. *Here Simon—in a return match—meets a talented lady who shares his interest in the "imperial" Mrs. Dempster-Craven, owner of the much advertised "Star of Mandalay," in the company of a couple of even more devious operators.*

From: THE BRIGHTER BUCCANEER
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tality which made him an outlaw first and last and in everything rebelled perhaps too fiercely against all moderation; and if at the same time it made him, to those who knew him best, the one glamorous and romantic figure of his day, that was the judgment which he himself would have asked for.

These chronicles are concerned mainly with episodes in which he provided himself with the bare necessities of life by cunning and strategy rather than daring; but even in those times there were occasions when his career hung on the thread of a lightning decision. That happened in the affair of Mrs. Dempster-Craven's much-advertised pink diamond; and if the Saint philandered then, he would have told you that he had no regrets.

"The idea that such a woman should have a jool like that keeps me awake nights," he complained. "I've seen her twice, and she is a Hag."

This was at dinner one night. Peter Quentin was there; and so was Patricia Holm, who, in those days, was the lady who held the Saint's reckless heart and knew best how to understand all his misdeeds. The subject of the "Star of Mandalay" had cropped up casually in the course of conversation; and it was worth mentioning that neither of Simon Templar's guests bothered to raise any philosophical argument against his somewhat heterodox doctrine about the rights of Hags. But it was left for Peter Quentin to put his foot in it.

Peter read behind the wistfulness of the Saint's words, and said: "Don't be an idiot, Simon. You don't need the money, and you couldn't pinch the Star of Mandalay. The woman's got a private detective following her around wherever she goes—"

"Couldn't I pinch it, Peter?" said the Saint, very softly.

Patricia saw the light in his eyes, and clutched Peter's wrist.

"You idiot!" she gasped. "Now you've done it. He'd be fool enough to try—"

"Why 'try'?" asked the Saint, looking round mildly. "That sounds very much like an aspersion on my genius, which I shall naturally have to—"

"I didn't mean it like that," protested the girl frantically. "I mean that after all, when we don't need the money— You said you were thinking of running over to Paris for a week—"

"We can go via Amsterdam, and sell the Star of Mandalay *en route,*" said the Saint calmly. "You lie in your teeth, my sweetheart. You meant that the Star of Mandalay was too much of a problem for me and I'd only get in a jam, if I tried for it. Well, as a matter of fact, I've

been thinking of having a dart at it for some time."

Peter Quentin drank deeply of the Chateau Olivier to steady his nerves.

"You haven't been thinking anything of the sort," he said. "I'll withdraw everything I said. You were just taking on a dare."

Simon ordered himself a second slice of melon, and leaned back with his most seraphic and exasperating smile.

"Have I," he inquired blandly, "ever told you my celebrated story about a bob-tailed ptarmigan named Alphonse, who lived in sin with a couple of duck-billed platypi in the tundras of Siberia? Alphonse, who suffered from asthma and was a believer in Christian Science . . ."

He completed his narrative at great length, refusing to be interrupted; and they knew that the die was cast. When once Simon Templar had made up his mind it was impossible to argue with him. If he didn't proceed blandly to talk you down with one of his most fatuous and irrelevant anecdotes, he would listen politely to everything you had to say, agree with you thoroughly, and carry on exactly as he had announced his intentions from the beginning; which wasn't helpful. And he had made up his mind, on one of his mad impulses, that the Star of Mandalay was due for a change of ownership.

It was not a very large stone, but it was reputed to be flawless; and it was valued at ten thousand pounds. Simon reckoned that it would be worth five thousand pounds to him in Van Roeper's little shop in Amsterdam, and five thousand pounds was a sum of money that he could find a home for at any time.

But he said nothing about that to Mrs. Dempster-Craven when he saw her for the third time and spoke to her for the first. He was extremely polite and apologetic. He had good reason to be, for the rakish Hirondel which he was driving had collided with Mrs. Dempster-Craven's Rolls Royce in Hyde Park, and the glossy symmetry of the Rolls Royce's rear elevation had been considerably impaired.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said. "Your chauffeur pulled up rather suddenly, and my hand-brake cable broke when I tried to stop."

His hand-brake cable had certainly divided itself in the middle, and the frayed ends had been produced for the chauffeur's inspection; but no one was to know that Simon had filed it through before he started out.

"That is not my fault," said Mrs. Dempster-Craven coldly. She was going to pay a call on the wife of a minor baronet, and

she was pardonably annoyed at the damage to her impressive car. "Bagshawe, will you please find me a taxi?"

"The car'll take you there all right, ma'am," said the chauffeur incautiously.

Mrs. Dempster-Craven froze him through her lorgnettes.

"How," she required to know, "can I possibly call on Lady Wiltham in a car that looks as if I had picked it up at a second-hand sale? Kindly call me a taxi immediately, and don't argue."

"Yes, ma'am," said the abashed chauffeur, and departed on his errand.

"I really don't know how to apologize," said the Saint humbly.

"Then don't try," said Mrs. Dempster-Craven discouragingly.

The inevitable small crowd had collected, and a policeman was advancing ponderously towards it from the distance. Mrs. Dempster-Craven liked to be stared at as she crossed the pavement to Drury Lane Theatre on a first night, but not when she was sitting in a battered car in Hyde Park. But the Saint was not so self-conscious.

"I'm afraid I can't offer you a lift at the moment; but if my other car would be of any use to you for the reception tonight—"

"What reception?" asked Mrs. Dempster-Craven haughtily, having overcome the temptation to retort that she had three other Rolls Royces no less magnificent than the one she was sitting in.

"Prince Marco d'Ombria's," answered the Saint easily. "I heard you say that you were going to call on Lady Wiltham, and I had an idea that I'd heard Marco mention her name. I thought perhaps—"

"I am not going to the reception," said Mrs. Dempster-Craven; but it was noticeable that her tone was not quite so freezing. "I have a previous engagement to dine with Lord and Lady Bredon."

Simon chalked up the point without batting an eyelid. He had not engineered that encounter without making inquiries about his victim, and it had not taken him long to learn that Mrs. Dempster-Craven's one ambition was to win for herself and her late husband's millions an acknowledged position among the Very Best People. That carelessly-dropped reference to a Prince, even an Italian Prince, by his first name, had gone over like a truck-load of honey. And it was a notable fact that if Mrs. Dempster-Craven had pursued her own inquiries into the reference, she would have found that the name of Simon Templar was not only recognized but hailed effusively;

for there had once been a spot of bother involving a full million pounds belonging to the Bank of Italy which had made the Saint forever *persona grata* at that Embassy.

The chauffeur returned with a taxi, and Mrs. Dempster-Craven's two hundred pounds of flesh were assisted ceremoniously out of the Rolls. Having had a brief interval to consider pros and cons, she deigned to thank the Saint for his share in the operation with a smile that disclosed a superb set of expensive teeth.

"I hope your car isn't seriously damaged," she remarked graciously; and the Saint smiled in his most elegant manner.

"It doesn't matter a bit. I was just buzzing down to Hurlingham for a spot of tennis, but I can easily take a taxi." He took out his wallet and handed her a card. "As soon as you know what the damage'll cost to put right, I do hope you'll send me in the bill."

"I shouldn't dream of doing such a thing," said Mrs. Dempster-Craven. "The whole thing was undoubtedly Bagshawe's fault."

With which startling *volte-face,* and another display of her expensive denture, she ascended regally into the cab; and Simon Templar went triumphantly back to Patricia.

"It went off perfectly, Pat! You could see the whole line sizzling down her throat till she choked on the rod. The damage to the Hirondel will cost about fifteen quid to put right, but we'll charge that up to expenses. And the rest of it's only a matter of time."

The time was even shorter than he had expected; for Mrs. Dempster-Craven was not prepared to wait any longer than was necessary to see her social ambitions fulfilled, and the highest peak she had attained at that date was a week end at the house of a younger son of a second viscount.

Three days later Simon's mailbox yielded a scented mauve envelope, and he knew before he opened it that it was the one he had been waiting for.

118, Berkeley Square,
Mayfair, W.1.

My dear Mr. Templar,

I'm sure you must have thought me rather abrupt after our accident in Hyde Park on Tuesday, but these little upsets seem so much worse at the time than they really are. Do try and forgive my rudeness.

I am having a little party here on Tuesday next. Lord and Lady Palfrey are coming, and the Hon. Celia Mallard, and lots of other people whom I expect you'll know. I'd take it as a great favor if you could manage to look in, any time after 9:30, just

to let me know you weren't offended.

I do hope you got to Hurlingham all right.

Yours sincerely,
Gertrude Dempster-Craven.

"Who said my technique had ever failed me?" Simon demanded of Peter Quentin at lunchtime that day.

"I didn't," said Peter, "as I've told you all along. Thank God you won't be going to prison on Thursday, anyway—if it's only a little party she's invited you to, I don't suppose you'll even see the Star of Mandalay."

Simon grinned.

"Little party be blowed," he said. "Gertrude has never thrown a little party in her life. When she talks about a 'little' party she means there'll only be two orchestras and not more than a hundred couples. And if she doesn't put on the Star of Mandalay for Lady Palfrey's benefit I am a bob-tailed ptarmigan and my name is Alphonse."

Nevertheless, when he suggested that Peter Quentin should come with him there was not much argument.

"How can you get me in?" Peter demurred. "I wasn't invited, and I don't know any princes."

"You've got an uncle who's a lord or something haven't you?"

"I've got an uncle who's the Bishop of Kenya; but what does Mrs. Dempster-Craven care about South African bishops?"

"Call him Lord Kenya," said the Saint. "She won't look him up in Debrett while you're there. I'll say we were dining together and I couldn't shake you off."

At that point it all looked almost tediously straightforward, a commonplace exploit with nothing but the size of the prize to make it memorable. And when Simon arrived in Berkeley Square on the date of his invitation it seemed easier still; for Mrs. Dempster-Craven, as he had expected, was proudly sporting the Star of Mandalay on her swelling bosom, set in the center of a pattern of square-cut sapphires in a platinum pendant that looked more like an illuminated sky-sign than anything else. True, there was a large-footed man in badly fitting dress clothes who trailed her around like a devoted wolfhound; but private detectives of any grade the Saint felt competent to deal with. Professionals likewise, given a fair warning—although he was anticipating no professional surveillance that night. But he had not been in the house twenty minutes before he found himself confronting a dark slender girl with merry brown eyes whose face appeared before him like the Nemesis of

one of his most innocent flirtations—and even then he did not guess what Fate had in store for him.

At his side he heard the voice of Mrs. Dempster-Craven cooing like a contralto dove:

"This is Miss Rosamund Armitage—a cousin of the Duke of Trayall." And then, as she saw their eyes fixed on each other: "But have you met before?"

"Yes—we have met," said the Saint, recovering himself easily. "Wasn't it that day when you were just off to Ostend?"

"I think so," said the girl gravely.

A plaintive baronet in search of an introduction accosted Mrs. Dempster-Craven from the other side, and Simon took the girl in his arms as the second orchestra muted its saxophones for a waltz.

"This is a very happy reunion, Kate," he murmured. "I must congratulate you."

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"When we last met—in that famous little argument about the Kellman necklace—you weren't so closely related to the Duke of Trayall."

They made a circuit of the floor—she danced perfectly, as he would have expected—and then she said, bluntly: "What are you doing here, Saint?"

"Treading the light fantastic, drinking free champagne, and watching little monkeys scrambling up the social ladder," he answered airily. "And you?"

"I'm here for exactly the same reason as your are—my old age pension."

"I can't imagine you getting old, Kate."

"Let's sit out somewhere," she said suddenly.

They left the ballroom and went in search of a secluded corner of the conservatory, where there were armchairs and sheltering palm trees providing discreet alcoves for romantic couples. Simon noticed that the girl was quite sure of her way around, and said so.

"Of course I've been here before," she said. "I expect you have, too."

"On the contrary—this is my first visit. I never take two bites at a cherry."

"Not even a five thousand pound one?"

"Not even that."

She produced a packet of cigarettes from her bag and offered him one. Simon smiled, and shook his head.

"There are funny things about your cigarettes that don't make me laugh out loud, Kate," he said cheerfully. "Have one of mine instead."

"Look here," she said. "Let's put our cards on the table. You're after that pendant, and so am I. Everything on our side

is planned out, and you've just told me this is your first visit. You can't possibly get in front of us this time. You took the Keilman necklace away under our noses, but you couldn't do it again. Why not retire gracefully?"

He gazed at her thoughtfully for a few seconds; and she touched his hand.

"Won't you do that—and save trouble?"

"You know, Kate," said the Saint, "you're a lovely gal. Would you mind very much if I kissed you?"

"I could make it worth a hundred pounds to you—for nothing—if you gave us a clear field."

Simon wrinkled his nose.

"Are there forty-nine of you?" he drawled. "It seems a very small share-cut to me."

"I might be able to make it two hundred. They wouldn't agree to any more."

The Saint blew smoke-rings towards the ceiling.

"If you could make it two thousand I don't think you'd be able to buy me off, darling. Being bought off is so dull. So what's the alternative? Am I slugged with another sandbag and locked up in the pantry?"

Suddenly he found that she was gripping his arm, looking straight into his face.

"I'm not thinking about your health, Saint," she said quietly. "I want that pendant. I want it more than I'd expect you to believe. I've never asked any other man a favor in my life. I know that in our racket men don't do favors—without getting paid for it. But you're supposed to be different, aren't you?"

"This is a new act, Kate," murmured the Saint interestedly. "Do go on—I want to hear what the climax is."

"Do you think this is an act?"

"I don't want to be actually rude, darling, especially after all the dramatic fervor you put into it, but—"

"You've got every right to think so," she said; and he saw that the merriment was gone from her great brown eyes. "I should think the same way if I were in your place. I'll try to keep the dramatic fervor out of it. Can I tell you—that the pendant means the way out of the racket for me? I'm going straight after this." She was twisting her handkerchief, turning away from him now. "I'm going to get married—on the level. Funny, isn't it?"

He glanced at her doubtfully, with that mocking curve still lingering on his lips. For some reason he refrained from asking whether her other husbands had been informed of this plan: he knew nothing about her private life. But even with the best intentions a modern Robin Hood

must get that way; and he did not know why he was silent.

And then, quite clearly, he heard the tread of leisurely feet on the other side of the clump of imported vegetation behind which they were concealed. Instinctively they glanced at one another, listening, and heard a man's fat chuckle beyond the palms.

"I guess this new plan makes it a lot easier than the way we were going to work it."

Simon saw the girl half rising from the settee. In a flash, he had flung one arm round her, pinning her down, and clapped his other hand over her mouth.

"Maybe it'll save a little trouble, anyway," spoke the second man. There came the scratch of a match, and then: "What are you doing about the girl?"

"I don't know. . . . She's a pretty little piece, but she's getting too serious. I'll have to ditch her in Paris."

"She'll be sore."

"Well, she ought to know how to take the breaks. I had to keep her going to get us in here, but it ain't my fault if she wants to make it a permanency."

"What about her share?"

"Aw, I might send her a coupla hundred, just for conscience money. She ain't a bad kid. Too sentimental, that's all."

A short pause, and then the second man again:

"Well, that's your business. It's just a quarter after eleven. Guess I better see Watkins and make sure he's ready to fix those lights."

The leisured feet receded again; and Simon released the girl slowly. He saw that she was as white as a sheet, and there were strange tears in her eyes. He lighted a cigarette methodically. It was a tough life for women—always had been. They had to know how to take the breaks.

"Did you hear?" she asked, and he looked at her again.

"I couldn't very well help it. I'm sorry, kid. . . . That was your prospective husband, I suppose?"

She nodded.

"Anyway, you'll know it wasn't an act."

There was nothing he could say. She stood up, and he walked beside her back to the ballroom. She left him there, with a smile that never trembled; and the Saint turned and found Peter Quentin beside him.

"Must you keep all the fun to yourself, old boy?" pleaded Peter forlornly. "I've been treading on the toes of the fattest dowager in the world. Who's your girl friend? She looks a stunner."

"She stunned me once," said the Saint reminiscently. "Or some pals of hers did. She's

passing here as Rosamund Armitage; but the police know her best as Kate Allfield, and her nickname is The Mug."

Peter's eyes were following the girl yearningly across the room.

"There ought to be some hideous punishment for bestowing names like that," he declared; and the Saint grinned absentmindedly.

"I know. In a story-book she'd be Isabelle de la Fontaine; but her parents weren't thinking about her career when they christened her. That's real life in our low profession—and so is the nickname."

"Does that mean there's competition in the field?"

"It means just that." Simon's gaze was sweeping systematically over the other guests; and at that moment he saw the men he was looking for. "You see that dark bird who looks as if he might be a gigolo? Face like a pretty boy, till you see it's just a mask cut in granite. . . . That's Philip Carney. And the big fellow beside him—just offering the Dempster-Craven a cigarette. That's George Runce. They're two of the slickest jewel thieves in the business. Mostly they work the Riviera—I don't think they've ever been in England for years. Kate was talking in the plural all the time, and I wondered who she meant."

Peter's mouth shaped a silent whistle.

"What's going to happen?"

"I don't know definitely; but I should like to prophesy that at any moment the lights will go out—"

And as he spoke, with a promptness that seemed almost uncanny, the three enormous cut-glass chandeliers which illuminated the ballroom simultaneously flicked out as if a magic wand had conjured them out of existence; and the room was plunged into inky blackness.

The buzz of conversation rose louder, mingled with sporadic laughter. After trying valiantly to carry on for a couple of bars, the orchestra faded out irregularly, and the dancers shuffled to a standstill. Over in one corner, a facetious party started singing, in unison: "Where — was — Moses — when — the — lights — went — out?" . . . And then, rising above every other sound, came Mrs. Dempster-Craven's hysterical shriek:

"Help!"

There was a momentary silence, broken by a few uncertain titters. And Mrs. Dempster-Craven's voice rang wildly through the room again.

"My pendant! My pendant! Put on the lights!"

Then came the sharp vicious smash of a fist against flesh and bone, a coughing grunt, and the

thud of a fall. Peter Quentin felt around him, but the Saint had gone. He started across the room, plunging blindly among the crowd that was heaving helplessly in the darkness. Then one or two matches flared up, and the light grew as other matches and lighters were struck to augment the illumination. And just as suddenly as they had gone out, the great chandeliers lighted up again.

Peter Quentin looked at the scene from the front rank of the circle of guests. George Runce was lying on the floor, with blood trickling from a cut in his chin; and a couple of yards from him sat Simon Templar, holding his jaw tenderly. Between them lay Mrs. Dempster-Craven's priceless pendant, with the chain broken; and while Peter looked she snatched it up with a sob, and he saw that the Star of Mandalay was missing from its center.

"My diamond!" she wailed. "It's gone!"

Her private detective came elbowing through from the back of the crowd, pushing Peter aside, and grabbed the Saint's shoulder.

"Come on, you!" he barked. "What happened?"

"There's your man," said the Saint, pointing to the unconscious figure beside him. "As soon as the lights went out, he grabbed the pendant—"

"That's a lie!"

Philip Carney had fallen on his knees beside Runce, and was loosening the man's collar. He turned round and yapped the denial indignantly enough; but Peter saw that his face had gone pale.

"I was standing beside Mr. Runce." Carney pointed to the Saint. "That man snatched the pendant, and Mr. Runce tried to stop him getting away."

"Why weren't you here, Watkins?" wailed Mrs. Dempster-Craven, shaking the detective wildly by the arm. "Why weren't you watching? I shall never see my diamond again—"

"I'm sorry, madam," said the detective. "I just left the room for one minute to find a glass of water. But I think we've got the man all right." He bent down and hauled the Saint to his feet. "We'd better search this fellow, and one of the footmen can go for the police while we're doing it."

Peter saw that the Saint's face had gone hard as polished teak. In Simon's right hand was the Star of Mandalay, pressed against his jaw as he was holding it. As soon as the lights had gone out he had guessed what was going to happen: he had crossed the floor like a cat, grasped it neatly as Runce tore it out of its setting, and sent the big man flying with one well-directed left. All that he had been

prepared for; but there were wheels turning that he had never reckoned with.

He looked the detective in the eyes.

"The less you talk about the police the better," he said quietly. "I was in the conservatory a few minutes ago, and I happened to hear Mr. Carney say: 'I'd better see Watkins and make sure he's ready to fix those lights.' I didn't think anything of it at the time, but this looks like an explanation."

There was an instant's deadly silence; and then Philip Carney laughed.

"That's one of the cleverest tricks I've ever heard of," he remarked. "But it's a bit libellous, isn't it?"

"Not very," said a girl's clear voice.

Again the murmur of talk was stifled as if a blanket had been dropped on it; and in the hush Kate Allfield came into the front of the crowd. George Runce was rising on his elbows, and his jaw dropped as he heard her voice. She gave him one contemptuous glance, and faced Mrs. Dempster-Craven with her head erect.

"It's perfectly true," she said. "I was with Mr. Templar in the conservatory, and I heard it as well."

Carney's face had gone gray.

"The girl's raving," he said; but his voice was a little shaky. "I haven't been in the conservatory this evening."

"Neither have I," said Runce, wiping the frozen incredulity off his features with an effort. "I'll tell you what it is—"

But he did not tell them what it was, for at this point a fresh authoritative voice interrupted the debate with a curt "Make way, please," and the crowd opened to let through the burly figure of a detective sergeant in plain clothes. Simon looked round, and saw that he had posted a constable at the door as he came in. The sergeant scanned the faces of the group, and addressed Mrs. Dempster-Craven.

"What's the trouble?"

"My pendant—"

She was helped out by a chorus of bystanders whose information, taken in the mass, was somewhat confusing. The sergeant sorted it out phlegmatically; and at the end he shrugged.

"Since these gentlemen are all accusing each other, I take it you don't wish to make any particular charges?"

"I cannot accuse my guests of being thieves," said Mrs. Dempster-Craven imperially. "I only want my diamond."

The sergeant nodded. He had spent twelve years in C Division, and had learned that Berkeley Square is a region where even policemen have to be tactful.

"In that case," he said, "I think it would help us if the gentlemen agreed to be searched."

The Saint straightened up.

It had been a good evening; and he had no regrets. The game was worth playing for its own sake, to him: the prizes came welcomely, but they weren't everything. And no one knew better than he that you couldn't win all the time. There were chances that couldn't be reckoned with in advance; and the duplicity of Mr. Watkins was one of those. But for that, he would have played his hand faultlessly, out-bluffed and outmaneuvered the Carney-Runce combination in a fair field, and made as clean a job of it as anything else he had done. But that single unexpected factor had turned the scale just enough to bring the bluff to a showdown, as unexpected factors always would. And yet Peter Quentin saw the Saint was smiling.

"I think that's a good idea," said the Saint.

Between Philip Carney and George Runce flashed one blank glance; but their mouths remained closed.

"Perhaps there's another room we could go to," said the sergeant, almost genially; and Mrs. Dempster-Craven inclined her head like a queen dismissing a distasteful odor.

"Watkins will show you to the library."

Simon turned on his heel and led the way towards the door, with Mr. Watkins still gripping his arms; but as his path brought him level with Kate Allfield he stopped and smiled down at her.

"I think you're a great gal."

His voice sounded a trifle strange. And then, before two hundred shocked and startled eyes, including those of Lord and Lady Bredon, the Honorable Celia Mallard, three baronets, and the aspiring Mrs. Dempster-Craven herself, he laid his hands gently on her shoulders and kissed her outrageously on the mouth; and in the silence of appalled aristocracy which followed that performance made his stately exit.

"How the devil did you get away with it?" asked Peter Quentin weakly, as they drove away in a taxi an hour later. "I was fairly sweating blood all the time you were being stripped."

The Saint's face showed up in the dull glow as he drew at his cigarette.

"It was in my mouth," he said.

"But they made you open your mouth—"

"It was there when I kissed Kate, anyway," said the Saint, and sang to himself all the rest of the way home.

the buzzard

by . . . Octavus Roy Cohen

It was the eyes which inspired fear, for in those eyes was Death itself. And then Ernie Morton understood....

AT FIVE o'clock in the afternoon, when the sun of South Carolina midsummer yet blazed down upon the little town of Karnak, the Merchants & Planters Bank was robbed.

The citizenry of the gray, desolate county seat quivered under the impact. The town was riven by gossip, by wild conjecture. The thing had been readily understandable when the tiny banks of the county's smallest hamlets had been looted, but now that Karnak's financial Gibraltar had been held up, and in broad daylight. . . . Bank after bank in the county had been visited by a mute holdup man, a man always masked, businesslike and terrifying efficient. Karnak had seized upon the first holdup as a choice morsel for gossip. The second keened the interest. The third aroused genuine excitement. The fourth was staggering. And now the daring effrontery of this robbery in the county seat itself at an hour of the day when the single dusty street of the little town

The Merchants and Planters Bank in Karnak has been robbed in broad daylight, and the community in the South Carolina swamp country quivers under the impact. Bank after bank, throughout the county, has been visited by the mute holdup man, masked and terrifyingly efficient. Octavus Roy Cohen, whose name has been part of American letters so long, tells the story of the holdup man.

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was congested by traffic, was cataclysmic.

At five o'clock there was no one in the bank save the acidulous maiden lady who was employed as teller and actually did the cashier's work. The ground-glass front door was closed and locked. The heavy, spherical safe stood open. The stranger entered through the back door of the little frame structure, flourished a revolver under the maiden lady's nose — and that worthy woman promptly fainted.

No one saw the arrival of the stranger. The manner of his departure remained a secret. An attack of wild hysteria on the part of the elderly teller when she roused from her faint gave first tidings to the town. Investigation disclosed the fact that more than six thousand dollars in currency had been removed from the safe.

In that respect the robbery was akin to the others which had shaken the country and well-nigh destroyed its economic fabric. Liberty bonds and other paper—readily negotiable—had been left untouched. Only money had been stolen. The group of masculine hens who cackled on the veranda spanning the front of Simpson's Drug Store decided unanimously that the series of holdups was the work of a single man.

Counter to that theory ran the fact that in each robbery the person present at the time of the holdup had furnished a different description. The first time it was a tall, broad man wearing puttees, a black mask, a gray flannel shirt open at the throat. The second time it was a short, slender man who wore the garb of a farmer. The person who had rifled the Merchants & Planters Bank was described as a man of medium size whose face was covered by thick, black whiskers.

Disguises! That was the community idea. Of course each robbery might have been committed by a different man, but the similarity in the method of each. . . . Still, the success of the first could have implanted the idea in the brain of another man. It was unlikely; yet the descriptions of the holdup man's physique varied.

Ellery Simpson held forth exhaustively upon the subject of hysterical inattention to detail at times of such excessive stress. The porch club at his drug store was well satisfied with its solution of the series of bank robberies within the county. Yet it was not content to drop the subject. Each member of the voluble gathering had a few words to add to the speech of the last man, while the attenuated druggist sent his nasal, unpleasant voice rasping out upon the eardrums of all. Ellery Simpson

was by way of being a cosmopolite and his words carried weight utterly unjustified by their substance.

Passers-by were attracted to the little store. Women paused that they might miss no oracular word of this long, lean spellbinder. Men and women alike hovered on the outskirts of the tongue-wagging crowd, venturing no comment, yet listening avidly. And shuffling diffidently toward them from the direction of the railroad station, came Ernie Morton.

Ernie was a tall, furtive, ill-shaven man whose yellowish complexion and poorly fitting dust-covered clothes blended with the desolate background furnished by Karnak's single street.

He approached the sacred precincts of Simpson's store in his habitually apologetic manner, narrow-set eyes focussed on the worn toes of his enormous shoes, watching the little dust spurts which arose with every step. And he hovered on the outskirts of the forum, eyes fixed intently on the ground as he grunted response to a few curt greetings.

Ernie Morton was, at the present moment, in distinctly bad odor in Karnak, for Ernie had been haled into court on a criminal charge—and had been convicted.

From the day the town constable took him up for breaking and entering to the day when the county solicitor proved to the satisfaction of a jury that Ernie *had* intended to rob the store into which he broke, Karnak was quite certain of Ernie's guilt. But despite that certainty Karnak did not ostracize the lean, gangling swamp angel. Nothing short of legal stigma could affect a man's social status in Karnak—and that not at all in the case of a virile offense against the laws and statutes of the State of South Carolina.

Assault and battery, even to the shooting of a man in the back, might be tolerated. But conviction for breaking and entering was too mean and petty even for Karnak to stomach. An acquittal would have absolved Ernie, even though the community knew perfectly well that he was guilty. Or, when convicted before the Court of General Sessions and sentenced to a fine of one thousand dollars, Ernie could have saved his social face by prompt payment of the fine.

But Ernie didn't pay the fine. He had never seen a thousand dollars in one place in all his drab life, save through the grating of a bank teller's cage. Instead of paying the fine he induced his lawyer to appeal the conviction to the Supreme Court and, pending appeal, Ernie was out on bond. That was all which

saved him from becoming an outcast. A man out on bond, however guilty, can be tolerated. It is only the miserable wretch who is forced into jail who is placed in community coventry.

Of course Ernie had never been a leading figure in the sodden, unimaginative life of the bankrupt county. He was merely a swamp angel, a person who existed from week to week in the malarial wastes of Death Hole Swamp; that gloomy, monotonous expanse of water-soaked muck and decaying vegetation which comprises the eastern third of Karnak County.

Yet trouble had come to Ernie Morton hot on the heels of the sudden access of daring which prompted him to attempt burglary and frightened him away before he had succeeded in adding theft to his offense of breaking and entering. Before, his wants had been immediate and not at all imperative. Now they were not so immediate but decidedly imperative.

The judge ironically had sentenced Ernie to pay a fine of one thousand dollars, the statute reading that the crime of which Ernie had been convicted was punishable by fine, or imprisonment, or both. And the judge knew Ernie and knew that he could not pay the fine and would therefore have to serve out the amount in hard labor. Ernie knew it, too, and he was playing a well-nigh hopeless game in attempting to devise a way of raising the one thousand dollars before the Supreme Court affirmed his conviction—as it would inevitably do.

And now he hovered on the fringes of the crowd about Ellery Simpson's, absorbing the story of the latest bank looting. And Ernie's single-track mind was working slowly, laboriously, in channels which were peculiar to his present predicament.

Ernie felt no shame at having attempted a burglary. But he was shamed by being caught. And double ashamed by his conviction. Could he raise sufficient money to pay the thousand-dollar-fine and the court costs, he felt vaguely that he could once again face the community with shoulders back and eyes as nearly level as it was possible for them to be.

Ernie's life had narrowed down to the problem of acquiring that thousand dollars, and now as he heard the crowd discussing the series of bank robberies, he quivered jealously. His brain struggled laboriously with the problem in mental arithmetic and gradually he realized that the bank-robber had become illegally possessed of approximately eighteen thousand dollars in currency.

The sum was staggering. Ernie felt himself gripped by

fierce envy. He wished that he had possessed sufficient foresight to rob a bank. Then he broke into a cold sweat at the very thought. Dull, plodding, unimaginative, conscienceless; he yet knew that he could never have summoned sufficient courage. Breaking and entering was his limit.

He had no ethical objections to bank robbery; his aversion was frankly and flatly based upon physical fear. He even found himself thinking of the proposition of robbing a little bank or a store where he knew there was a considerable sum of money, and, even as he thought, realizing the thing was impossible.

He couldn't do it. And he envied the man who could.

He shuffled away from the crowd, shambling along the dusty street toward the rickety shed where his raw-boned mule had been left. He hitched the mule to a rattletrap buggy, climbed to the driver's seat and lashed the beast into unwilling action.

They progressed slowly down the street in the direction of Death Hole Swamp; plodded past Simpson's once again, past two general stores, past the town's new brick-veneer garage and so on by the depot and across the railroad tracks. The mule settled down to a tired walk; the hatchet-faced driver slumped in the uncomfortable seat.

For a half mile he drove between fields of sturdy cotton, then into the shadows of huge live oaks which canopied the road: mammoth trees festooned with great, clinging bunches of gray Spanish moss. Eventually he turned from the main highway and struck out along a corduroy road which was water-soaked. And now there were few of the kingly oaks and a great number of rigid pines rising from a never ending thicket of scrub underbrush.

On either side of the road stretched the vista of unutterable desolation. The very appearance was unhealthy. Dusk settled over the swamp, deepening the grayish aspect. Lusty-throated frogs raised their raucous chorus to the pines and a visible miasma appeared. About the ears of Ernie Morton droned countless mosquitoes, most of them of the deadly, malaria-carrying anopheles variety. But they attained little success against his yellowed, leathern skin. Only once, when the warning crackle of a rattler set the mule aquiver, did Ernie rouse himself from the lethargy which had come to him in contemplation of the bank-robber's affluence. Then he settled again into a half-doze: plugging on and on, deeper into the swamp,

closer and closer to the log cabin which he called home.

He reached it finally, long after the black velvet of starless night had settled like a pall over Death Hole Swamp. He illuminated the interior of the squalid abode with a single kerosene lamp, a lamp with a sooty, cracked chimney. He lighted a fire and prepared a meal of cold corn-bread and cracklins, washed down the viands with tepid water which he had drawn from a well close by the house. Then he threw himself upon an unspeakably filthy cot. And he slept.

His dreams that night were of glorious achievement. He saw himself as a bank-robber: daring, bold, hard-riding—and above all, successful. He counted his booty and gloated over the eighteen-thousand-dollar total. When he waked it was to swear vilely because it had been merely a dream.

Ernie Morton was genuinely grieved that he was not the bank-robber.

All day long he loafed around the cabin, save for a couple of hours, when he half-heartedly hoed a weed-ridden cotton patch. And always with him was the futile passion for the thousand dollars which could save him from the penitentiary.

He knew that he could not acquire that thousand dollars by honest means. And the dishonest methods which might bring it to him required more physical courage than he possessed. He had expended much effort in Karnak since the filing of his appeal, and the sum total of almost superhuman endeavor was concealed in a stocking under his mattress—precisely one hundred and nineteen dollars. A pitiful tithe of the needed sum.

Never in his monotonous existence had Ernie Morton desired anything so keenly as he craved the money which would keep him out of jail. It had become a monomania with him; it gnawed upon him while awake and preyed upon his brain during the hours of fitful sleep. One thousand dollars more—one thousand—freedom—

Two days later it rained. Ernie had started hopelessly for Karnak when the skies were rent by jagged lightning. Then came the flood. Tiny streams became boiling torrents within the half hour; stately pines bent pitifully before the howling blast; the vile road was converted into a miniature river. It was with difficulty that Ernie returned safely to his cabin.

Once there he put the mule in the leanto which did duty as a barn, and ploughed through a sea of sticky mud and the driving torrents of rain to his cabin door. He flung it open, then

slammed it against the howling blasts.

And even before lighting the lamp he knew that he was not alone in the cabin.

For a few seconds he stood rigidly at the door, petrified with stark terror. Then he tried to speak, but the words did not come. And to his ears there came through the gray light of the room a quavery voice; an unnatural, inhuman, penetrating voice:

"They ain't never got me. They ain't a-gonna get me—"

Ernie Morton found his tongue. Sheer horror loaned strength to his demand: "Who are you?"

Silence: Silence broken only by the howl of the gale outside and the sloshing of water on the shingled roof. Summoning courage, Ernie struck a match, found the kerosene lamp and lighted it. Then discerned the visitor and dropped back with an exclamation of mingled loathing and relief.

It was the figure of an old man which greeted his eyes: a bony old man of less than medium height: narrow of shoulder and chest, gray of hair, beardless. The stranger appeared decrepit; wild, flashing eyes shone like living coals from a fever-ridden face.

It was the eyes which inspired fear in the breast of the swamp angel; for in those eyes was Death itself. The old man was seated on Ernie's miserable cot and he was babbling, chattering, and the unwilling host saw that he was shivering violently. And then Ernie Morton understood.

He had seen malaria before; malaria in the advanced, uncared-for, virulent stages. And he knew now that the old man before him was at the threshold of the Great Adventure. There was no mistaking the symptoms.

Harmless, of course. Yet the delirium had set the tongue of the helpless old man to talking strangely. He was gibbering about the bank robberies. Ernie scarcely heard him as he babbled.

"Never are gonna git me, they ain't— Held up all them banks, I did. Got money in my pocket— Oh, God—my head! More money hid away—in that big ol' lightnin'-struck oak near the cabin where Mart Farnam useter live. Right in there I've hid it all— Thousands. Got money in my pockets, too. Gittin' it all from banks— O-o-o-oh! my head—"

The lips of Ernie Morton twisted into a sneer. The bank-robbing story was on the lips of everyone. He looked disdainfully upon the fever-ridden figure of the little old man who babbled bravely of robbing banks and hiding the loot. But what was that he said about having money on his person? That was some-

thing immediate and tangible. Ernie approached his visitor and spoke soothing words, words which appeared to quiet the old man.

Ernie knew malaria, was familiar with every symptom. And he had seen more than one death from its ravages. He pressed the old man down on the cot, removed the soaked shoes. But when he would have removed the coat, two bony fists crashed into his face; the stranger leaped to his feet, those terrifying eyes gleaming like the orbs of death.

"No, you don't. Let that wallet alone! Money—heap of money— Han's off that wallet or I'll kill—"

The coat flung back momentarily and Ernie saw the wallet. It was a cheap leather affair, but it bulged—bulged with bills, Ernie believed. His eyes glittered covetously.

A wallet stuffed with bills: more than a thousand dollars there, that appeared certain. Ernie felt his heart pounding at thought of the proximity of a thousand dollars. He scarcely heard the old man's raving: "Robbed all them banks. Hid the money in the trunk of that ol' dead lightnin'-struck oak near where Mart Farnam useter live. In the trunk of that ol' oak. Never gonna git me for them robberies—"

Ernie seated himself on a stool and stared at the emaciated figure which tossed restlessly on the cot, babbling ceaselessly. And for once he thought, thought intensively — thought until his head ached with the strain of it.

The old man was dying. He had in his pocket a wallet filled with money— "Easy a thousan' dollars." But until he died Ernie knew that he could not get that money. It wasn't so much that the stranger was strong enough to withstand an assault from Ernie, but rather that Ernie did not possess the courage to attack the demoniacal old man. There was something supernatural in those flaring eyes, the emaciated frame.

Ernie would cheerfully have killed the old man had he possessed the mettle. But murder was not in the man. He had no scruples; he simply could not bring himself to the point of taking human life, because he feared the consequences.

In his cabin was a stock of powerful whiskey and much quinine. Whiskey and quinine might cure the old man's malaria. Ernie shivered. If the stranger recovered from the attack all chance of acquiring that stuffed wallet would be gone. The old man would depart; would take his money with him. The very thought of it appalled Ernie Morton. Here was the money within his grasp. He

must have it. He knew that he must have it. It meant Ernie's social salvation—the thought of jail was abhorrent.

He couldn't kill the stranger. The cold sweat stood out upon him at the bare thought of such a thing. He wished that he might have a divine assurance that he would not be caught; as it was, the chances were too great.

But—

Suddenly Ernie Morton rose to his feet and strode to the single window of the little cabin, where he stood staring out into the storm-tossed blackness. The trees bent before the gale. The wind shrieked eerily around the log cabin, howling with fiendish glee at its own havoc. The rain swished viciously against the window and seeped in through the shingling of the roof.

And as he stared into the storm a new thought came to Ernie Morton. Vivid in his mind's eye there stood out a picture of the vermilion placard posted in the court-house, the placard announcing that one thousand dollars reward would be paid for the arrest and conviction of the bank-robber.

One thousand dollars—again the sinister amount. Ernie glanced briefly and speculatively upon the tossing figure of the old man. The stranger yet babbled of robbing banks. Perhaps—

Ernie was tempted. Of course he knew the old man was not the bank-robber; the very idea was absurd. But the man claimed, in his delirium, that he was. Therefore the idea came to Ernie Morton that he might carry the stranger into Karnak, turn him over to the sheriff and collect the thousand-dollar reward: not because the man was the robber but because he claimed to be.

Then the swamp angel shook his head in negation. His plan was untenable. Should he deliver his visitor over to the sheriff, the chances were that a doctor would be called, the stranger treated; and then would come the end of the delirium. In which case the harmless old man could prove that he was not the bank-robber. And Ernie would not only lose the thousand dollars reward, but all chance of obtaining the coveted wallet which reposed in the old man's pocket would be gone.

And even supposing that he delivered the man over to the authorities as the robber. The man was delirious. And the offer was specifically worded that the thousand dollars would be paid for the arrest and *conviction* of the criminal. They would not convict upon the ravings of an unbalanced mind. Either way, Ernie would not get his

thousand dollars. And he dared take no chance of losing the money which the stranger had upon his person.

When Ernie turned back from the window a sardonic smile played about his thin lips. He had finally and definitely reached a decision, and that decision involved the taking of human life.

Ernie Morton could not kill the old man. But Ernie Morton could allow him to die!

The decision was characteristic of the man, requiring, as it did, action that was merely negative. And he convinced himself that there was no crime involved in allowing nature to take its course. He intended to do no harm to the old man, not to hasten the inevitable end by any positive act. His conscience was clear. If the old man died, as he could not fail to do, it was no business of Ernie's. He had not infected him with the malarial germ; he had no hand in the seeking of sanctuary in his cabin. But, of course, once the old man died, Ernie intended to possess himself of that wallet.

And that night there started a weird vigil which lasted for nearly six days: Ernie, long and lean, his buzzard-like face saturnine as he hovered over the bedside of the dying man, watching the delirious, hopeless fight for life; listening to the incessant babble of the tireless tongue.

"Robbed them banks, I did. Hid the money—every cent of it—in that ol' dead lightnin'-struck oak near the place where Mart Farnam useter live. They ain't never gonna catch me—Water!" The voice rose to a shriek. "Gimme water—*water!*"

But Ernie Morton gave the stranger no water. During the six days which passed he moved neither hand nor foot to help or hinder the progress which the old man made toward death.

Ernie himself existed in a mental state which was near to coma. All thought had been banished from his puny brain. He sat for hours at a time, eyes riveted on the tossing figure of the old man, his ears deaf to the stranger's chatter, always mindful of the coat which contained the coveted wallet. Three times in the six days Ernie attempted to steal the wallet. On each occasion he was fought back by a rain of blows from the skinny fists and chilled by a stream of vituperation. Each of the trio of attempts left him shattered of nerve; it was as though he had been in physical clash with a corpse. The thing was too much for him. He drank heavily.

"Took all that money, I did." The old man never roused from his delirium, save during the occasional snatches of sleep, which

happily anesthetized the pain-wracked body. "Took it from them banks an' hid it in the ol' dead lightnin'-struck oak down near where Mart Farnam useter live— Oh, my God! I hurt all over! But they ain't never gonna catch me—"

Night came, then dawn, then night again. The frogs chorused; mosquitoes hummed and droned. The song of the swamp fell upon ears which heard not and ears which could not hear. Ernie paid it no heed; the sick man could not.

And came, too, hot weather: stifling, well-nigh unbearable; making the atmosphere within the cabin fetid, horrible. Ernie prepared food for himself, and drew warm, nauseous water from the well, and sat and watched — watched tirelessly — and thought only of the wallet which was soon to become his.

The proximity of death did not frighten him. He gave himself over to his obsession, the passion for the wallet. He sat silently, motionless for hours on end. He slept fitfully, dreamfully, awakening with a scream as each new nightmare came to him. His nerves were shattered, but he did not know it. His horizon was that wallet, and the wallet could not be his until the old man died.

The end came at five o'clock on the morning of the sixth day. The babbling ceased; the emaciated form twitched, gasped and was still.

Ernie Morton touched the stiffening figure. Death had visited there. And Ernie, fingers trembling, withdrew the wallet. He opened it, eyes glittering as he saw that it was stuffed with bills.

He counted it, counted it twice, thrice. Then he hurled the empty wallet from him as he crammed the bills into his own pocket; hurled the wallet across the cabin and cursed horribly.

The wallet contained a trifle less than four hundred dollars!

Ernie Morton drank deeply from a stone jug in the corner. Artificially strengthened, he left the cabin, dropped the empty wallet into his well, hitched up the mule and started toward Karnak.

His sense of values had been dulled during the hideous vigil; there was now, in his mind, only a sense of stupefied disappointment which amounted to physical agony. It had all been for nothing. The four hundred dollars helped him not at all. Yet he did not retain sufficient energy to curse. He had done his evil best, fruitlessly.

Into Karnak now, to report that on the previous night a stranger had stumbled into his cabin, had been cared for, and had succumbed to malaria. The

coroner must know that. Ernie felt easy; there could be no doubting the fact that the little old man had died a natural death. And no one could know of the wallet.

Ernie Morton had more than five hundred dollars, but he knew that he must go to jail. This last opportunity was gone, the only opportunity. He felt a sense of resentment against the corpse. Why couldn't he have mentioned the amount of money in the wallet? Jail— Ernie Morton in jail; branded— He shuddered as all hope departed and the terror of imprisonment returned in hundredfold strength.

He clattered across the railroad tracks and ploughed through the dust of Karnak's single street. He alighted from his buggy and tied the mule to a hitching post. And then he noticed the squat, bulky figure of the coroner in a group massed about the veranda of Ellery Simpson's drug store.

He received but scant, curt greeting as he shouldered his way through the crowd, himself oblivious to the tenseness of the gathering. It was not until he sensed the words of Ellery Simpson, whose high-pitched, penetrating voice rose supreme above the chatter, that his attention was distracted from his own thoughts.

"Yes, sir," declared Ellery Simpson, "the sheriff was a-tellin' me that they've just counted it up an' almos' ev'ry cent of it is there. 'Most ev'ry nickel that's been stole from these here Karnak County banks; an' of course they've withdrawed the offer of a thousan' dollars reward. Ain't gonna pay no reward now when they've got the money back."

Ernie became rigid. He felt himself gripped by a premonition of disaster.

"What's that ye're sayin', Mr. Simpson?"

"Ain't you heard, Ernie? The sheriff says they've found 'most ev'ry cent of the money that bank-robber stole. They ain't 'specially int'rested in catchin' the robber now; even went an' withdrawed the reward on account of findin' the money—"

Ernie Morton's voice was harsh and unnatural:

"Where—where did they find it?"

And Ellery Simpson answered:

"Eighteen thousand dollars they found—eighteen thousand in cash money. It was hid in that ol' lightnin'-struck oak down near where Mart Farnam useter live."

ARE YOU READING OUR COMPANION MAGAZINE—FANTASTIC UNIVERSE?

stained glass windows

by . . . Louis Golding

"— for within the hollow crown that rounds the mortal temples of a King, keeps Death his court...."

KATHRYN LENNIER had been in love with Dennis Wetherby a long time before she had met him in the flesh. But what young woman of our generation has not been in love with Dennis Wetherby? (I am speaking, of course, of Dennis Wetherby, the actor.)

One day they went to the same party, and were introduced to each other. It was odd they had not met before, because Kathryn was an actress herself, and a fairly good one. But there it was. They met for the first time, and were introduced. At once Kathryn walked away, because she was trembling at the knees and blushing down to the collar-bones. She didn't want to make a fool of herself. But the odd thing was that Dennis was blushing and trembling, too. And heaven knows he had met enough pretty girls in his time.

Well, in two months they were married. It was one of those marriages that look as if they've been planned in heaven a long time ago. He was hand-

Dennis Wetherby had been a great actor. Kathryn Lennier had never been a great actress, but she was charming, and she had a great deal of money. It had proved a happy marriage, and Kathryn was heartbroken when he died. She married again—and then a third time—still treasuring the long-gone hours of happiness. Louis Golding, author of "Magnolia Street," one of the great names in English literature, describes this woman whose husbands had *been useful....*

some, she was lovely. He was a great actor; she was not a great actress, but she was a charming person, and she had a lot of money. He had a flat in town, and she had "Lechlade," an enchanting house in the country. They got married in the thousand-year-old parish church a mile away from the house.

Their marriage was a joy to themselves and their friends. They spent most of their time in "Lechlade," when Dennis was not acting. As for Kathryn, she gave up the stage the moment they got married. Really, it was a little "much" to go on being an actress, when you were married to Dennis Wetherby. She remembered with horror the pallid tenacity of certain stage ladies in her situation.

By and large Kathryn was kept very busy. First there was Dennis, then there was the house and the grounds. And there were always people around the place, not only for the week ends, but all week. All the year round, for that matter.

The guests were artists, usually actors in or out of a job, painters, poets, musicians. She always had a soft spot for artists. Besides, Dennis had to be away from her a good deal, what with his stage-plays, his work in the studios, and his travels abroad on location.

She had a particularly soft spot for Jimmy Brennan, a painter, rather of the old-fashioned sort, but a pleasant fellow to have around the house. Jimmy had known Dennis for years, and was devoted to him. He became just as much devoted to Kathryn. He would do anything in the world for either of them; and for anyone else, for that matter. He was a poppet. That's what everybody called him. They often called him a poppet to his face and he didn't like that, really. It's one thing to be a poppet, and another to be called it to your face. To put no fine point on it, poor Jimmy was treated rather contemptuously by everybody, and above all, by Dennis, who treated him shamefully. He would get him to fetch and carry and do tricks, just like a poodle. But, as so often happens in cases of this sort, the more Dennis vilified Jimmy, the more Jimmy adored him. He did everything but get down on all fours and lick Dennis's boots for him.

Perhaps the high point of Jimmy's adoration for Dennis was his portrait of Dennis as Macbeth gripping the dagger. As usual, the idea was a bit old-fashioned, but the paint was put on magnificently. The colors, the high-lights, were almost worthy of the great Dutchmen. Dennis had never looked more regal, or more murderous. There were touches which you would have thought Jimmy totally in-

capable of—the modelling of the pulled muscle on the side of the mouth, the tiny point of red flame in the eyeball, and the dagger, all of it, the treatment of the steel, the flicker of the green enamel inlaid in the pommel. It was a remarkable picture.

"Well done, poppet!" approved Dennis Wetherby. "Sir John Millais himself couldn't have done any better!" It was no mean praise, at that, but it wasn't meant as praise. Jimmy wagged his hind-quarters with pleasure. Kathryn, too, thought well of the picture; so well, in fact, that it became a sort of eikon to her. She did everything but light tapers to it. She would have liked to carry it about from room to room, but it was far too big for that. Failing that, the bedroom would have been a good place for it; you spend a good solid part of your life in your bedroom. But Dennis wouldn't hear of it. So she put it up on the landing above the hall. It was rather difficult from then on to miss Dennis Wetherby as Macbeth.

Dennis Wetherby as Dennis Wetherby was another matter. He was home at "Lechlade" a good deal less nowadays. There was probably nothing in the rumors that connected his name with this actress and that society woman, and it was obvious whenever he returned to "Lechlade," he still adored Kathryn. But he was hardly ever at home. He was an extremely busy man.

So Kathryn and Jimmy consoled each other for the absence of Dennis. I don't mean that they had an affair. One did not have an affair with Jimmy Brennan. The idea was grotesque. But they talked to each other about Dennis. How they talked: They talked about his face, and his voice, and his acting, and his table-tennis, and his neckties. They became rather a bore about him. But it didn't do anybody any harm, after all. You could develop a sort of deaf spot on your eardrum to chit-chat about Dennis. So they went on talking about him, and people kept on coming down to "Lechlade"; above all, Jimmy of course. He became almost as much of a fixture as the cocktail-bar, or his own painting of Dennis as Macbeth.

The next episode that is to be recorded in this story is a tragic one. In fact, it is the death of Dennis Wetherby. The verdict returned by the coroner was Death by Misadventure, and there was no reason to doubt the justice of the verdict. It happened about two years after his marriage. Dennis had come back to "Lechlade," hoping to give himself a respite for a week or two, between a play he had just finished and a film he was

scheduled to begin. He was heading for a breakdown, if he had not already got there. Everybody could see it plainly, including Dennis himself. So he was looking forward to his little rest immoderately. So was Kathryn, of course. Although she was miserable to see him such a bundle of nerves, for her part she was looking forward to mothering him as she had never been able to mother him before, for till now he had had the constitution of an ox.

But alas, he had been home for no more than a couple of days when Kathryn found him stretched out beside her in a coma. It was only too grievously obvious what had happened. He had his phial of sleeping tablets beside him, and he had taken an overdose. There was absolutely no reason to suspect suicide or any other sort of foul play. The coroner said sourly the doctors should see to it that their patients were only allowed access to their sleeping draughts a pill or two at a time. You get up in the middle of the night. You are aching for sleep, but your eyes are like gravel. You forget what your dose is. You take four, six, eight tablets, still thinking you are taking only two. You are done for.

More dead than alive, Kathryn dialled the bedside housephoné. There was no reply. The servants were in a dead stupor; perhaps they were drunk. She managed to drag herself to the door, and give the alarm. Some of her house-guests were the first to reach her. They feared they would have two corpses on their hands, not one. The household was awakened, the doctor was summoned. There was no helping Dennis, but they managed to bring Kathryn round. It was feared for a time she would never recover from her shock.

What made things worse was the fact that little Jimmy Brennan was away from "Lechlade" that week end, the first week end that that had happened for a long time. He had had to go up on urgent family business to Northumberland, but he came back posthaste the moment he was contacted. He was invaluable. Never had he been so superbly a "poppet." It is unthinkable what would have happened to Kathryn if there had been no Jimmy Brennan. The Northumberland business went by the board. Jimmy devoted himself entirely to Kathryn.

He was particularly helpful over the stained-glass window that Kathryn put up to the memory of Dennis in the ancient parish church where they had been married. There must certainly have been some beautiful glass in the windows centuries ago, but it had been destroyed by the Puritan zealots, and the windows were now either bad mod-

ern stuff or plain glass. It was touching to see Kathryn and Jimmy side by side on their knees, their eyes fixed adoringly on the Dennis Wetherby window. It was enough to bring tears to your eyes.

When they were not on their knees looking at Dennis, they were at "Lechlade" talking about him. For Jimmy had loved Dennis devotedly, only just less than Kathryn herself. So the old routine started again. Dennis, Dennis, Dennis! It became necessary once again to develop that deaf spot on the eardrum.

After all, there comes a time when you should stop boiling up the bones of your dead husband (or wife) for soup.

Then, at long last, Jimmy woke up one morning to find that the Dennis numbo-jumbo had become too much for him, too. He suddenly realized he had disliked Dennis for a long time, deep down. He began to remember things he had resolutely kept out of his mind; for instance, how it was Dennis who had first called him a "poppet." He ground his teeth with rage. Of course, he didn't let Kathryn know about his change of heart. He told one or two of his closest friends, or he would have exploded, but he did not utter a breath to Kathryn. She relied on him too much. He would sooner have shot himself than let her down.

For, of course, he was in love with Kathryn. He had been in love with her all along. Within a year of the death of Dennis, he had proposed to her, and she had accepted him. She married him because he, too, loved Dennis. (Or so she thought.) He was a bouquet of flowers on his grave.

Jimmy had several reasons for wanting to marry Kathryn, some of which were obvious. One was less obvious. It was his way of getting his own back on Dennis. Of course, he continued to do lip-service to the dead man. He got more fun out of it that way. Dennis was dead, as dead as a crushed black beetle. He, Jimmy, might not be as handsome, or clever, as Dennis had been. But he was alive, alive from crown to toe. Sometimes, in the privacy of his own bathroom, he would laugh his head off. Every night when everyone else had gone to bed and he thought he was unobserved, he would shake his fist at the face he had once painted so devotedly, and stick his tongue out at it.

An eikon, someone had once called the Macbeth portrait. The sacerdotal note became even stronger, now that Dennis was dead. For Kathryn had a huge oak chest installed on the landing, just under the picture, and crammed it with all the costumes

she could collect that Dennis had worn in his most famous parts—Dennis as Richard the Second, Dennis as Cyrano, as Macbeth, as Oedipus. It was a regular reliquary. Jimmy was small, and he could not reach up to spit at the face in the portrait. But he could spit on the oak chest. It was not an edifying spectacle.

Of course, it got around how Jimmy was behaving. Everybody got to know sooner or later, excepting, apparently, Kathryn. No one would have dreamed of telling her. It would have distressed her horribly, and it would have done little Jimmy no good at all. People used to peep behind curtains or through the chinks of doors to catch a view of Jimmy doing his nightly hate. Some people said the very picture was becoming aware of Jimmy's performance. They said the red flame in the eyeball glared more malevolently, and the knife gleamed as if it was real steel, poised to strike. But that was absolute nonsense, of course.

Then, early one morning, the house was awakened by a crash of falling crockery and one loud prolonged scream. Then there was silence. When people got to the landing they found two inert bodies. One belonged to a parlor-maid, and was surrounded by the debris of an early morning tea-tray she was bringing up. The other belonged to Jimmy Brennan, fully-clothed, lying on his face, the enamelled handle of a dagger sticking up between his shoulder blades. It was the Macbeth dagger, the one that had been painted so cunningly by the same man that now lay transfixed with it. The blood from the wound mingled with the spilled tea from the broken tea-pot. The weapon had been abstracted from the property chest under the portrait. The other contents had not been disturbed.

It was a wretched business, for everyone in the house was under suspicion. It might, of course, have been done by an outsider, for no doors were locked and no windows bolted in that happy-go-lucky house. There were quite a few people outside "Lechlade" who knew where that dagger was kept. But what was the motive for the crime? Who hated Jimmy so much as to murder him? No clue was found, not a fingerprint, not a footprint, nothing. It was one of those uncanny murders. You could almost persuade yourself that the murderer was Dennis Wetherby himself, or rather his ghost, getting his own back on the living man who had mocked him and spat at him, thinking him safely dead. But it is a hefty sort of ghost that can plunge a dagger up to the hilt between a man's shoul-

der-blades. A verdict was returned of "Murder by a Person or Persons Unknown."

This second tragedy very nearly took Kathryn to her grave. She refused to see anybody but an old aunt for months and months. Nobody had realized how tremendously fond she had become of little Jimmy; how fond they only realized when she put up a second stained-glass window in the parish church in memory of her second husband. For months and months that was the only outing she allowed herself, to go down, heavily-veiled, to the village church, and get down on her knees, and contemplate the two sad windows.

The process of recovery was slow, but soon after the beginning of the second year following Jimmy's death, she began to let people come up again for week ends at "Lechlade." It took a long time for anything of the old sparkle to return, but gradually things began to liven up. Kathryn was, after all, still a young woman, and a hospitable one, with a good deal of money to dispose of somehow. She could not go on wearing widows' weeds for ever. In the autumn of that year she married again, Geoffrey Colegrave, the poet, a big-boned, amiable fellow, with blonde hair and blue eyes, rather the Newfoundland type. He was devoted to Kathryn, he was partial to old brandy, and he wrote delicate little nature-poems. The marriage was as successful as any of their friends dared hope. He flatly refused to go and kneel in the church, in an ecstasy of contemplation of the two stained-glass windows dedicated to the memory of his predecessors. When Kathryn went down, he would stay behind and sip brandy. But apart from that he was wonderful to her.

It was not till the sixth month after the marriage that Geoffrey really showed what a first-rate fellow he was. For, as if Fate had not already treated Kathryn shabbily enough, the wretched woman had a stroke. She lost the use of her lower limbs completely, and from then on she spent most of her time in her bed, apart from short spells in a wheeled chair. Geoffrey tended her night and day. The parties stopped completely. He was her slave. Poor Kathryn, she had little enough left in her life now, just the memories of her first two husbands, and the devotion of the third.

As time went by, Jimmy slipped more and more completely out of her mind. Which was not surprising, for in most ways he had been a dim little man. Her thoughts were more and more with Dennis Wetherby. When

she asked that the Macbeth portrait and the property-chest should be transported from the landing to the bedroom, where she could gaze on them from her pillows, it did not occur to Geoffrey to utter a word of protest. He would sip brandy, and she would lie and gaze on the portrait, for hours and hours. Then she discovered another solace. She had copies by her bedside of the dramatic authors who had provided Dennis with some of his most illustrious roles, Shakespeare, Shaw, Rostand, etc., and she began to while away an occasional hour by declaiming one or other of the famous speeches. She could always read well, and she now read more beautifully than ever before. Naturally, she liked to have an audience. What actor does not? In her case it was a very restricted one, just Geoffrey. He would take the small parts which sometimes give a breathing-space in the longer speeches, and he read well enough. She also liked him to take out of the chest, and hold out before her, one or two pieces of the costume which Dennis had worn during his rendering of the character they were for the time being concerned with. She might even have asked Geoffrey to wear them, except for the fact that Geoffrey was a much bigger man than Dennis had been, and he would have split the costumes at the seams.

It was upon a certain warm evening in late spring that Kathryn opened her Shakespeare at the third act of Richard the Second, and, while she turned the pages, signalled to Geoffrey to go over to the chest and extract Richard's tunic. As she began to declaim the lovely lines, a blackbird was fluting deliciously in an elm beyond the lawn, and the scent of lilac and laburnum came in gusts through the open window. She went on:

—for within the hollow
crown
That rounds the mortal
temples of a king
Keeps Death his court, and
there the antic sits
Scoffing his state, and
grinning at his pomp . . .

As she read, Geoffrey stepped quietly over to the chest, lifted the lid and leaned it back against the wall, then started rummaging for the Richard costume. He had been asked to extract the garment several times before, and on those earlier occasions he had found it enough to display before her the red tunic with its long ragged sleeves. She had not asked, and he had not sought for, anything more than that. But on this occasion a curiously complete picture presented itself in his

mind of Dennis Wetherby as Richard the Second, for he had seen the flesh and blood performance several times. With startling vividness he saw the dead actor wearing not only his tunic, but the other elements in the conventional Richard attire, the roundel-hat, the pointed shoes, the gauntlets. It was upon the gauntlets that his memory fastened. Lemon-yellow they had been, richly embroidered above the knuckles. Casually he found himself rummaging for them among the crammed garments. This was the roundel-cap, wasn't it? These were the pointed shoes. Where were the gauntlets?

Kathryn was rendering:

As if this flesh which walls
about our life
Were brass impregnable: and
humour'd thus
Comes at the last, and with
a little pin
Bores through his castle wall,
and farewell king . . .;

Oh, at last! Here the gauntlets were!

"Here they are!" he muttered, half under his breath.

"What's that? Here's what?" Kathryn called out, for Geoffrey had no habit of uttering even a single syllable while she was in full voice.

He held the gauntlets up to her.

"I just thought—" he started. Then he stopped. He saw the look of fury in her eyes. The book had dropped from her hands. Her hands were clawing towards him as if they would be about his throat, if she had had the limbs to carry her over to him.

"Put them away!" she yelled raucously. "Do you hear me? Put them away!"

But no man, not even so easy-going a creature as Geoffrey Colgrave, can obey a request delivered in such a voice, by a woman whose eyes are wild with fury.

He held the gauntlets up before him. There seemed no reason why they should so dreadfully vex the woman. What was wrong with them? Why had they touched a nerve into hideous sensibility that had long been dormant? Did they hold, had they ever held, something dreadfully compromising to someone, and if to someone then to whom else than to this woman herself, twice-widowed? All his teeth twittered and jangled. It felt as if his skull had been wrenched sideways and was clanging like the bell in a fire engine.

He looked towards her. She was quiet, dead quiet. The fury had gone out of her eyes. She was watching intently, like an animal crouched at the entrance of her lair.

Suddenly, as if the painted

portrait had the power to screw his head round upon his neck, he found his eyes fastened upon the image of the Macbeth dagger. The green enamel in the chaised pommel flickered like lizards among rocks.

He turned to her, awareness of the truth already flooding him like air in the lungs of a man who had dived deep, too deep, below the decent light of day.

Had it not been like this? When they had come upon the dagger sticking up between the shoulder-blades of Jimmy Brennan, it had revealed no trace of fingerprints. The murderer had been too clever to leave behind so elementary an incrimination. He, or rather she, had worn gloves? To be more exact, she had worn gauntlets? She had had ample time to dispose of those gauntlets, if she had wished to, but for some reason or another, she had not done so. They had stayed there, the weak spot in the armour. So the days, the months, the years, had gone by. Sooner or later, perhaps even at an appointed time, the weak spot in the armour of even the most consummately wicked, the most blandly unsuspected, reveals itself. Had that been the way of it?

She answered his questions as if the words had actually been spoken.

"You're quite right," she murmured. For she knew he knew a truth that he could henceforth no more unknow than the sun could annul itself. "They were a bit large, of course, but my hands are quite large, too, as you see." She held them up before him. "I *had* to do it, you know. Jimmy was so *silly*. He was such a *bore*." A forefinger indicated the gauntlets. "I always had a feeling that somehow there was something wrong about putting them back and letting them stay there." She meant putting them back in the chest, of course. "I had a feeling the things might catch me out some time. But then how could they? Are you listening?"

Oh, yes. He answered immediately. He was listening right enough.

"Yet I could never make up my mind whether it was more dangerous to leave them there than to get rid of them. Suppose someone found they were missing, and asked why? I think I finally made up my mind to get rid of them. But by the time that happened—" she looked down at her useless limbs—"one couldn't do a thing about it. And I wasn't going to ask anyone to do it for me, was I? Yes, what is it? What is it you want to know?"

There was another question in his tormented eyes. But he could no more have spoken than he could have brought the walls of

that evil house down with his fingernails.

"Oh, of *course,*" she answered him. "Dennis, too. Poor dear Dennis! He was just as silly in his own way. He thought he was the only person in the world who could act. He wasn't, was he? I've not made such a bad job of it myself, lately. Have I, Geoffrey? It's been quite a part, too, with no principal man to steal the limelight from me."

"How she's enjoying it all!" a voice whispered behind his eyes. "What a good time she's having! She's got an audience at last!"

"It was easier to get rid of dear Dennis," she went on easily. "The sleeping draught—you remember? Child's play." She paused. She was weighing up the situation. There was silence for some moments.

"What?" she resumed, "Aren't you going to say anything?" Her voice was quite friendly. He was as silent as a dead thing. She, too, became silent again, and remained so for quite a long time. Then she spoke again.

"I liked them to be artists," she said. "First an actor, then a painter, then . . . ha! ha!" She laughed outright. "You're really rather lucky, you know," she assured him. "You're an artist of sorts yourself, aren't you? Oh, dear, what a pity!"

A new thought had occurred to her. "There are still one or two plain glass windows in the parish church. A third stained glass window would have looked *so* pretty. You're looking a bit off-color. Another brandy? Or may *I* mix you a drink, perhaps? No? You think not? Yes, I quite understand.

"You'd like to do a bit of telephoning, I suppose? My *dear,* don't be *silly!* Nobody would believe you. Would they now?"

BUSINESS CONFERENCE

Midnight—in the basement of the lonely antique shop. The little group of men and women, grey faces half in the shadows as the candles flickered behind them, were watching the gross old man sitting at the head of the table, complaining when they did not speak fast enough, complaining as bitterly when they skipped over something that caught his attention. . . . Once he pounded on the table, cursing them for fools. Admitted the Government had arrested the leaders—and the others. But *they* were still untouched, weren't they, he sneered, and they would continue to be untouched so long as they did nothing stupid, attracted no attention to themselves, and waited patiently, very patiently. . . . It had been necessary that they meet this once to receive instructions. Now—at a signal in the shadows—they must leave two by two, without appearing to hasten. . . .

Once they were gone the old man couldn't resist a chuckle. What *would* these idiots have said if they'd known who he was working for. . . .

the man who sang in church

by . . . Edgar Wallace

"A blackmailer, eh? You are the dirtiest little blackmailer I ever met," he murmured, aching to wring his neck....

TO LEON GONSALEZ went most of the cases of blackmail which came the way of the Three Just Men.

And yet, from the views he had so consistently expressed, he was the last man in the world to whom such problems should have gone, for in that famous article of his entitled "Justification," which put up the sales of a quarterly magazine by some thousand per cent, he offered the following opinion:

". . . as to blackmail, I see no adequate punishment but death in the case of habitual offenders. You cannot parley with the type of criminal who specializes in this loathsome form of livelihood. Obviously there can be no side of him to which appeal can be made: no system of reformation can affect him. He is dehumanized, and may be classified with the secret poisoner, the baby-farmer, and . . ."

He mentioned a trade equally unwholesome.

Leon found less drastic means of dealing with these pests; yet

Edgar Wallace returns with a story of the Three Just Men who, sickened by the law's delays and blindness, had determined to spend their lives and their fortunes in righting wrongs the law could not touch....In these days the Three Just Men were law-abiding people, many—but few as attractive as this girl—coming to the little house on Curzon Street for advice or assistance.

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we may suppose that the more violent means which distinguished the case of Miss Brown and the man who sang in church had his heartiest approval.

There are so many types of beauty that even Leon Gonsalez, who had a passion for classification, gave up at the eighteenth subdivision of the thirty-third category of brunettes. By which time he had filled two large quarto notebooks.

If he had not wearied of his task before he met Miss Brown, he would assuredly have recognized its hopelessness, for she fell into no category, nor had he her peculiar attractions catalogued in any of his subsections. She was dark and slim and elegant. Leon hated the word, but he was compelled to admit this characteristic. The impression she left was one of delicate fragrance. Leon called her the Lavender Girl. She called herself Brown, which was obviously not her name; also, in the matter of simulations, she wore one of those closely fitting hats that came down over a woman's eyes and might make subsequent identification extremely difficult.

She timed her visit for the half light of dusk—the cigarette hour that follows a good dinner, when men are inclined rather to think than to talk, and to doze than either.

Others had come at this hour to the little house in Curzon Street, where the silver triangle on the door marked the habitation of the Three Just Men, and when the bell rang George Manfred looked up at the clock.

"It's too early for the post—see who it is, Raymond: and before you go, I will tell you. It is a young lady in black, rather graceful of carriage, very nervous and in bad trouble."

Leon grinned as Poiccart rose heavily from his chair and went out.

"Clairvoyance rather than deduction," he said, "and observation rather than either: from where you sit you can see the street. Why mystify our dear friend?"

George Manfred sent a ring of smoke to the ceiling.

"He is not mystified," he said lazily. "He has seen her also. If you hadn't been so absorbed in your newspaper you would have seen her, too. She has passed up and down the street three times on the other side. And on each occasion she has glanced toward this door. She is rather typical, and I have been wondering exactly what variety of blackmail has been practiced on the poor girl."

Here Raymond Poiccart came back.

"She wishes to see one of you," he said. "Her name is Miss Brown—but she doesn't look like a Miss Brown!"

Manfred nodded to Leon.

"It had better be you," he said.

Gonsalez went to the little front drawing room and found the girl standing with her back to the window, her face in shadow.

"I would rather you did not put on the light, please," she said, in a calm, steady voice. "I do not wish to be recognized if you meet me again."

Leon smiled.

"I had no intention of touching the switch," he said. "You see, Miss—" he waited expectantly.

"Brown," she replied, so definitely that he would have known she desired anonymity even if she had not made her request in regard to the light. "I told your friend my name."

"You see, Miss Brown," he went on, "we have quite a number of callers who are particularly anxious not to be recognized when we meet them again. Will you sit down? I know that you have not much time, and that you are anxious to catch a train out of town."

She was puzzled.

"How did you know that?" she asked.

Leon made one of his superb gestures.

"Otherwise you would have waited until it was quite dark before you made your appointment. You have, in point of fact, left it just as late as you could.

She pulled a chair to the table and sat down slowly, turning her back to the window.

"Of course that is so," she nodded— "Yes, I have to leave in time, and I have to cut it fine. Are you Mr. Manfred?"

"I am Gonsalez."

"I want your advice," she said.

She spoke in an even, unemotional voice, her hands lightly clasped before her on the table. Even in the half-dark, and unfavorably placed as she was for observation, he could see that she was beautiful. He guessed from the maturity of her voice that she was in the region of twenty-four.

"I am being blackmailed. I suppose you will tell me I should go to the police, but I am afraid the police would be of no assistance, even if I were willing to risk an appearance in court, which I am not. My father—" she hesitated—"is a government official. It would break his heart if he knew. What a fool I have been!"

"Letters?" asked Leon, sympathetically.

"Letters and other things," she said. "About six years ago I was a medical student at St. John's Hospital. I did not take my final exam. for reasons which you will understand. My surgical knowledge has not been of very much use to me, except . . . well, I once saved a man's

life, though I doubt if it was worth saving. He seems to think it was, but that has nothing to do with the case. When I was at St. John's I got to know a fellow-student, a man whose name will not interest you, and, as girls of my age sometimes do, I fell desperately in love with him. I did not know that he was married, although he told me this before our friendship reached a climax.

"For all that followed I was to blame. There were the usual letters—"

"And these are the basis of the blackmail?" asked Leon.

She nodded.

"I was worried ill about the . . . affair. I gave up my work and returned home; but that doesn't interest you, either."

"Who is blackmailing you?" asked Leon.

She hesitated.

"The man. It is horrible, isn't it? But he has gone down and down. I have money of my own—my mother left me 2,000 a year—and of course I have paid."

"When did you see this man last?"

She was thinking of something else, and she did not answer him. As he repeated the question, she looked up quickly.

"Last Christmas Day—only for a moment. He was not staying with us—I mean it was at the end of . . ."

She had become suddenly panic-stricken, confused, and was almost breathless as she went on:

"I saw him by accident. Of course he did not see me, but it was a great shock . . . It was his voice. He always had a wonderful tenor voice."

"He was singing?" suggested Leon, when she paused, as he guessed, in an effort to recover her self-possession.

"Yes, in church," she said, desperately. "That is where I saw him."

She went on speaking with great rapidity, as though she were anxious not only to dismiss from her mind that chance encounter, but to make Leon also forget.

"It was two months after this that he wrote to me—he wrote to our old address in town. He said he was in desperate need of money, and wanted 500. I had already given him more than 1,000, but I was sane enough to write and tell him I intended to do no more. It was then that he horrified me by sending a photograph of the letter—of one of the letters—I had sent him. Mr. Gonsalez, I have met another man, and . . . well, John had read the news of my engagement."

"Your fiancé knows nothing about this earlier affair?"

She shook her head.

"No, nothing, and he mustn't

know. Otherwise everything would be simple. Do you imagine I would allow myself to be blackmailed any further but for that?"

Leon took a slip of paper from one pocket and a pencil from another.

"Will you tell me the name of this man? John—"

"John Letheritt, 27, Lion Row, Whitechurch Street. It is a little room that he has rented, as an office and a sleeping place. I have already had inquiries made."

Leon waited.

"What is the crisis—why have you come now?" he asked.

She took from her bag a letter, and he noted that it was in a clean envelope; evidently she had no intention that her real name and address should be known.

He read it and found it a typical communication. The letter demanded £3,000 by the third of the month, failing which the writer intended putting "papers" in "certain hands." There was just that little touch of melodrama which for some curious reason the average blackmailer adopts in his communiques.

"I will see what I can do—how am I to get in touch with you?" asked Leon. "I presume that you do not wish that either your real name or your address should be known even to me."

She did not answer until she had taken from her bag a number of banknotes, which she laid on the table.

Leon smiled.

"I think we will discuss the question of payment when we have succeeded. What is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to get the letters, and, if it is possible, I want you so to frighten this man so that he will not trouble me again. As to the money, I shall feel so much happier if you will let me pay you now!"

"It is against the rules of the firm!" said Leon cheerfully.

She gave him a street and a number which he guessed was an accommodation address.

"Please don't see me to the door," she said, with a half glance at the watch on her wrist.

He waited till the door closed behind her, and then went upstairs to his companions.

"I know so much about this lady that I could write a monograph on the subject," he said.

"Tell us a little," suggested Manfred. But Leon shook his head.

That evening he called at Whitechurch Street. Lion Row was a tiny, miserable thoroughfare, more like an alley than anything, and hardly deserved its grand designation. In one of those ancient houses which must have seen the decline of Alsatia,

at the top of three rickety flights of stairs, he found a door, on which had been recently painted:

J. LETHERITT, EXPORTER.

His knock produced no response.

He knocked again more heavily, and heard the creaking of a bed, and a harsh voice asking on the other side who was there. It took some time before he could persuade the man to open the door, and then Leon found himself in a very long, narrow room, lighted by a shadeless electric table lamp. The furniture consisted of a bed, an old washstand, and a dingy desk piled high with unopened circulars.

He guessed the man who confronted him, dressed in a soiled shirt and trousers, to be somewhere in the region of thirty-five; he certainly looked older. His face was unshaven and there was in the room an acrid stink of opium.

"What do you want?" growled John Letheritt, glaring suspiciously at the visitor.

With one glance Leon had taken in the man—a weakling, he guessed—one who had found and would always take the easiest way. The little pipe on the table by the bed was a direction post not to be mistaken.

Before he could answer, Letheritt went on:

"If you have come for letters you won't find them here, my friend." He shook a trembling hand in Leon's face. "You can go back to dear Gwenda and tell her that you are no more successful than the last gentleman she sent!"

"A blackmailer, eh? You are the dirtiest little blackmailer I ever met," mused Leon. "I suppose you know the young lady intends to prosecute you?"

"Let her prosecute! Let her get a warrant and have me pinched! It won't be the first time I've been inside. Maybe she can get a search warrant, then she will be able to have her letters read in court. I'm saving you a lot of trouble. I'll save Gwenda trouble, too! Engaged, eh? You're not the prospective bridegroom?" he sneered.

"If I were, I should be wringing your neck," said Leon calmly. "If you are a wise man—"

"I am not wise," snarled the other. "Do you think I would be living in this pigsty if I were? I . . . a man with a medical degree?"

Then, with a sudden rage, he pushed his visitor towards the door.

"Get out and stay out!"

Leon was so surprised by this onslaught that he was listening to the door being locked and bolted against him before he had realized what had happened.

From the man's manner he was certain that the letters were

in that room—there were a dozen places where they might be hidden: he could have overcome the man with ease, bound him to the bed, and searched the room, but in these days the Three Just Men were very law-abiding people.

Instead he came back to his friends late that night with the story of his partial failure.

"If he left the house occasionally, it would be easy—but he never goes out. I even think that Raymond and I could without the slightest trouble, make a very thorough search of the place. Letheritt has a bottle of milk left every morning, and it should not be difficult to put him to sleep if we reached the house a little after the milkman."

Manfred shook his head.

"You'll have to find another way; it's hardly worth while antagonizing the police," he said.

"Which is putting it mildly," murmured Poiccart. "Who's the lady?"

Leon repeated almost word for word the conversation he had had with Miss Brown.

"There are certain remarkable facts in her statement, and I am pretty sure they *were* facts, and that she was not trying to deceive me," he said. "Curious item No. 1 is that the lady heard this man singing in church last Christmas Day. Is Mr. Letheritt the kind of person one would expect to hear exercising his vocal organs on Christmas carols? My brief acquaintance with him leads me to suppose that he isn't. Curious item No. 2 was the words: 'He was not staying with us,' or something of that sort; and he was 'nearing the end'—of what? Those three items are really remarkable!"

"Not particularly remarkable to me," growled Poiccart. "He was obviously a member of a house party somewhere, and she did not know he was staying in the neighborhood, until she saw him in church. It was near the end of his visit."

Leon shook his head.

"Letheritt has been falling for years. He has not reached his present state since Christmas; therefore he must have been as bad—or nearly as bad—nine months ago. I really have taken a violent dislike to him, and I must get those letters."

Manfred looked at him thoughtfully.

"They would hardly be at his banker's, because he wouldn't have a banker; or at his lawyer's, because I should imagine that he is the kind of person whose acquaintance with law begins and ends in the criminal courts. I think you are right, Leon; the papers are in the room."

Leon lost no time. Early the next morning he was in White-

church Street, and watched the milkman ascend to the garret where Letheritt had his foul habitation. He waited till the milkman had come out and disappeared, but, sharp as he was, he was hardly quick enough. By the time he had reached the top floor, the milk had been taken in, and the little phial of colorless fluid which might have acted as a preservative to the milk was unused.

The next morning he tried again, and again he failed.

On the fourth night, between the hours of one and two, he managed to gain an entry into the house, and crept noiselessly up the stairs. The door was locked from the inside, but he could reach the end of the key with a pair of pliers he carried.

There was no sound from within when he snapped back the lock and turned the handle softly. He had forgotten the bolts.

The next day he came again, and surveyed the house from the outside. It was possible to reach the window of the room, but he would need a very long ladder, and after a brief consultation with Manfred, he decided against this method.

Manfred made a suggestion.

"Why not send him a wire, asking him to meet your Miss Brown at Liverpool Street Station? You know her Christian name?"

Leon sighed wearily.

"I tried that on the second day, my dear chap, and had little Lew Leveson on hand to 'whizz' him the moment he came into the street in case he was carrying the letters on him."

"By 'whizz' you mean to pick his pocket? I can't keep track of modern thief slang," said Manfred. "In the days when I was actively interested, we used to call it 'dip.' "

"You are *démodé,* George; 'whizz' is the word. But of course the beggar didn't come out. If he owed rent I could get the brokers put in; but he does not owe rent. He is breaking no laws, and is living a fairly blameless life—except, of course, one could catch him for being in possession of opium. But that would not be much use, because the police are rather chary of allowing us to work with them."

He shook his head.

"I am afraid I shall have to give Miss Brown a very bad report."

It was not until a few days later that he actually wrote to the agreed address, having first discovered that it was, as he suspected, a small stationer's shop where letters could be called for.

A week later Superintendent Meadows, who was friendly with the Three, came down to consult Manfred on a matter of

a forged Spanish passport, and since Manfred was an authority on passport forgeries and had a fund of stories about Spanish criminals, it was long after midnight when the conference broke up.

Leon, who needed exercise, walked to Regent Street with Meadows, and the conversation inevitably turned to Mr. John Letheritt.

"Oh, yes, I know him well. I took him two years ago on a false pretense charge, and got him eighteen months at the London Assizes. A real bad egg, that fellow, and a bit of a 'squeaker,' too. He's the man who put away Joe Lenthall, the cleverest cat burglar we've had for a generation. Joe got ten years, and I shouldn't like to be this fellow when he comes out! Lenthall could be rather unpleasant."

Suddenly Leon asked a question about Letheritt's imprisonment, and when the other had answered, his companion stood stock-still in the middle of the deserted Hanover Square and doubled up with silent laughter.

"I don't see the joke."

"But I do," chuckled Leon. "What a fool I've been! And I thought I understood the case!"

"Do you want Letheritt for anything? I know where he lives," said Meadows.

Leon shook his head.

"No, I don't want him: but I should very much like to have ten minutes in his room!"

Meadows looked serious.

"He's blackmailing, eh? I wondered where he was getting his money from."

But Leon did not enlighten him. He went back to Curzon Street and began searching certain works of reference, and followed this by an inspection of a large-scale map of the Home Counties. He was the last to go to bed, and the first to waken, for he slept in the front of the house and heard the knocking at the door.

It was raining heavily as he pulled up the window and looked out; and in the dim light of dawn he thought he recognized Superintendent Meadows. A second later he was sure of his visitor's identity.

"Will you come down? I want to see you."

Gonsalez slipped into his dressing gown, ran downstairs, and opened the door to the superintendent.

"You remember we were talking about Letheritt last night?" said Meadows as Leon ushered him into the little waiting room.

The superintendent's voice was distinctly unfriendly, and he was eying Leon keenly.

"Yes— I remember."

"You didn't by any chance go out again last night?"

"No. Why?"

Again that look of suspicion.

"Only Letheritt was murdered at half-past one this morning, and his room ransacked."

Leon stared at him.

"Murdered? Have you got the murderer?" he asked at last.

"No, but we shall get him all right. He was seen coming down the rainpipe by a city policeman. Evidently he had got into Letheritt's room through the window, and it was this discovery by the constable which led to a search of the house. The city police had to break in the door, and they found Letheritt dead on the bed. He had evidently been hit on the head with a jimmy, and ordinarily that injury would not have killed him, according to the police doctor; but in his state of health it was quite enough to put him out. A policeman went round the house to intercept the burglar, but somehow he must have escaped into one of the little alleys that abound in this part of the city, and he was next seen by a constable in Fleet Street, driving a small car, the number plate of which had been covered with mud."

"Was the man recognized?"

"He hasn't been—yet. What he did was to leave three fingerprints on the window, and as he was obviously an old hand at the game, that is as good as a direct identification. The city detective force called us in, but we have not been able to help them except to give them particulars of Letheritt's past life. Incidentally, I supplied them with a copy of your fingerprints. I hope you don't mind."

Leon grinned.

"Delighted!" he said.

After the officer had left, Leon went upstairs to give the news to his two friends.

But the most startling intelligence was to come when they were sitting at breakfast. Meadows arrived. They saw his car draw up at the door, which Poiccart went out to open to him. He strode into the little room, his eyes bulging with excitement.

"Here's a mystery which even you fellows will never be able to solve," he said. "Do you know that this is a day of great tragedy for Scotland Yard and for the identification system? It means the destruction of a method that has been laboriously built up—"

"What are you talking about?" asked Manfred quickly.

"The fingerprint system," said Meadows, and Poiccart, to whom the fingerprint method was something God-like, gaped at him.

"We've found a duplicate," said Meadows. "The prints on the glass were undoubtedly the prints of Joe Lenthall—and Joe

Lenthall is in Wilford County Prison serving the first part of twelve years' penal servitude!"

Something made Manfred turn his head toward his friend. Leon's eyes were blazing, his thin face wreathed in one joyous smile.

"The man who sang in church!" he said, softly. "This is the prettiest case that I have dealt with. Now sit down, my dear Meadows, and eat! No, no; sit down. I want to hear about Lenthall—is it possible for me to see him?"

Meadows stared at him. "What use would that be? I tell you this is the biggest blow we have ever had. And what is more, when we showed the city policeman a photograph of Lenthall, he recognized him as the man he had seen coming down the rainpipe! I thought Lenthall had escaped, and phoned the prison. But he's there all right."

"Can I see Lenthall?"

Meadows hesitated.

"Yes— I think it could be managed. The Home Office is rather friendly with you, isn't it?"

Friendly enough, apparently. By noon, Leon Gonsalez was on his way to Wilford Prison, and to his satisfaction, he went alone.

Wilford Prison is one of the smaller convict establishments, and was brought into use to house long-time convicts of good character and who were acquainted with the bookbinding and printing trade. There are several "trade" prisons in England—Maidstone is the "printing" prison, Shepton Mallet the "dyeing" prison—where prisoners may exercise their trades.

The chief warder whom Leon interviewed told him that Wilford was to be closed soon, and its inmates transferred to Maidstone. He spoke regretfully of this change.

"We've got a good lot of men here—they give us no trouble, and they have an easy time. We've had no cases of indiscipline for years. We only have one officer on night duty—that will give you an idea how quiet we are."

"Who was the officer last night?" asked Leon, and the unexpectedness of the question took the chief warder by surprise.

"Mr. Bennett," he said. "He's gone sick today by the way—a bilious attack. Curious thing you should ask the question: I've just been to see him. We had an inquiry about the man you've come to visit. Poor old Bennett is in bed with a terrible headache."

"Can I see the governor?" asked Leon.

The chief warder shook his head.

"He has gone to Dover with Miss Folian—his daughter.

She's gone off to the Continent."

"Miss Gwenda Folian?" and when the chief warder nodded:

"Is she the lady who was training to be a doctor?"

"She *is* a doctor," said the other, emphatically. "Why, when Lenthall nearly died from a heart attack, she saved his life —he works in the governor's house, and I believe he'd cut off his right hand to serve the young lady. There's a lot of good in some of these fellows!"

They were standing in the main prison hall. Leon gazed along the grim vista of steel balconies and little doors.

"This is where the night warder sits, I suppose?" he asked, as he laid his hand on the high desk near where they were standing: "and that door leads—?"

"To the governor's quarters."

"And Miss Gwenda often slips through there with a cup of coffee and a sandwich for the night man, I suppose?" he added, carelessly.

The chief warder was politely evasive.

"It would be against regulations if she did," he said. "Now you want to see Lenthall?"

Leon shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said quietly.

"Where could a blackguard like Letheritt be singing in church on Christmas Day?" asked Leon when he was giving the intimate history of the case to his companions. "In only one place—a prison. Obviously our Miss Brown was in that prison: the governor and his family invariably attend church. Letheritt was 'not staying'—it was the end of his sentence, and he had been sent to Wilford for discharge. Poor Meadows! With all his faith in fingerprints gone astray because a convict was true to his word and went out to get the letters that I missed, whilst the doped Mr. Bennett slept at his desk and Miss Gwenda Folian took his place!"

Little Mr. Oliphant Quigg was an inventor, a psychologist, and a fisherman.

The Saint was also a fisherman— with a line of his own. . . .

THE PERFECT SUCKER, a new Saint story by **LESLIE CHARTERIS**

—in the next SAINT

green paint and neat knots

by . . . William MacHarg

"Everybody knew the dead man to speak to—but nobody knew anything about him. . . ."

"THIS one," O'Malley said, "is a case where a guy got stabbed and was found floating in the harbor. They couldn't tell who he was because he didn't have no clothes on. But now they got the clothes, so they put me on the case. I won't find out nothing, but I got to go look at the clothes."

"Where'd they find those?" I asked.

"They were in the harbor too. They'd had a weight on 'em but a steamer broke 'em loose."

The clothes were at the police station. We looked at them. They were of fine quality and make, but of old style and worn. The tailor's label had been cut out of them. The clothes had been tied into a bundle with a heavy cord and the police had cut the cord so as to preserve the knots. There was no doubt they were the dead man's clothes because they had a picture of him and the holes in the clothes corresponded with the stab wounds. He was a fine-looking man of middle age, and he had been stabbed several times.

"Those are neat knots," I com-

We've pointed out before that the rare charm which William MacHarg's Officer O'Malley exercises for all readers, from executives to grandmothers, is hard to pin down—very hard. Officer O'Malley, referee of murder and with a wry philosophy of his own, is with us again in another story of deduction.

Copyright 1930, by William MacHarg

mented. "Whoever tied them knew his ropes."

"You're good!"

We went back into the outer office.

"They identified that guy yet?" O'Malley asked the sergeant.

"They have now," the sergeant answered. "I just got it. There was a laundry mark on his shirt and they traced it down. They got who he was and where he lived, and the key in the clothes unlocked his door. Marlind, the name is."

He gave us the address.

"Well," O'Malley said, "I suppose we got to go out there. We went. It was one of a row of brownstone fronts remodeled into cheap apartments. The basement floors were shops; at the street end was the river. Marlind had had a single room, with easy-chair and reading lamp and books. There were several pictures of two very beautiful women. Nothing had happened in the room, for it was all in perfect order, but there was a cop there waiting to see who came.

"We went across the hall and rang a bell.

"You know Mr. Marlind?" O'Malley asked the woman.

"To say howdy-do to. That's all anybody knew him."

"When did you see him last?"

"Four days ago."

"Who used to come to see him?"

"I never knew of anybody coming to see him."

We rang all the bells and asked everybody the same questions and then we went out into the street and asked the storekeepers. Everybody knew Marlind to speak to but nobody knew anything about him; he never had any visitors.

"This guy," O'Malley said, "seems to have been what they call a recluse. That means a guy that a smash has been handed to, so that he's lost interest and stopped trying. He said good morning to everybody but nothing else, and when he wanted company he sat in a store and talked with the storekeeper; and he spent his evenings home. How you going to figure who'd kill a guy like that? You can't."

The last place we came to was a Chinese laundry. The floor was freshly painted green. The Chinaman was ironing and I didn't like his looks.

"You're all painted up here," O'Malley said to him. "Who done that?"

"Me."

"When did you do it?"

"One time."

He wouldn't answer anything else. We went out and walked all around to find where the Chinaman bought his paint, but there was no paint store in the neighborhood. At the end of the street, on the river, was a place that sold marine stores and, in

back of it, in a big clean room with a concrete floor two men were working on a boat—a big man and a smaller one; the small man had red hair. On a shelf on the wall were cans of paint.

"You sell the Chinaman some paint?" O'Malley inquired of them.

"Sure," the big man answered. "We were paintin' her hull and the Chinaman came in and wanted some paint of that color and I sold him some." The hull was painted green.

"When was that?"

"Four days ago."

"You know Marlind?"

"Sure," the big man said. "He comes and sits here. Anything happened to him?"

"That makes the case," I said, when we had got outside. "The Chinaman did it."

"You're smart! I got enough now to make out a report."

"What are you going to report?" I asked.

"No clue."

I didn't see him till next day.

"Well," he said, "I got who this Marlind was now, anyway. His business got wiped out and his wife and daughter got killed in an accident, so he stopped taking interest and was just living till he died. He had some bonds left and he lived on the interest. If he had money he didn't clip the coupons. The day he died he clipped 'em for four months — about a thousand dollar."

"And told the Chinaman," I said.

"Told somebody, all right."

We went out to the boat-builders.

"You stay outside," O'Malley directed, "and I'll go in and move around, and you tell me when you can't see me."

He went in, and I watched him and then went in afterward.

"When you were in this corner by the door," I said, "I couldn't see you."

"Get me a bucket of water," O'Malley directed.

"What's the idea?" the big man demanded; but he brought the water.

O'Malley emptied it on the floor at the point where I had been unable to see him; and the water spread out over the uneven, cracked concrete and then gathered into several small puddles and one larger one. O'Malley mopped up the large one and then dug the dirt out of the cracks in the concrete where the water had been and put the dirt in an envelope.

"What's that for?" the big man demanded.

"Not a thing."

The little man said nothing, but he watched intently.

"Now what?" I inquired, after we had left the place.

"That's all," O'Malley answered.

We went to the station house and O'Malley gave the envelope with the dirt to an officer, who went away with it. We waited four hours. Then two plain-clothesmen came in, bringing the little red-headed man with them.

"Where'd you get him?" O'Malley inquired.

"Grand Central. He'd bought a ticket to Montreal."

"Find anything on him?"

"We ain't searched him yet, but he ain't thrown anything away."

They searched him and produced Marlind's coupons.

"This seems to have been smart work, O'Malley," I said. "I thought it was the Chinaman."

"The Chink never tied them knots," he answered. "Some guy used to boats did. So I was looking for someone on the river all along."

"But what had the pail of water to do with it?"

"This Marlind wasn't killed at night; he stayed home nights. But he was put into the river at night, or the guy would have been seen. If he was killed in the shop he was kept there till dark. He'd been stabbed several times and the shop was all cleaned up; they don't keep those places clean like that. I poured the water where I thought his body must have laid, and the water puddled in the spots where the blood must have puddled. That didn't mean a thing to the big guy; he wasn't in on it. But the red-head guy, who'd seen the blood there, knew what it meant. The red-head, I figure, killed him just before closing time when he and Marlind were alone there. If we'd searched him then we wouldn't have found nothing; but when he started to light out he took the coupons with him.

"I wasn't even sure either of them had done it, or that the chemist would find blood in the dirt out of the cracks, but now I know he will."

"You'll be promoted for this, O'Malley."

"Say! Listen: I'll be lucky if, after these other cops get through making out their reports, anybody knows I was even on the case."

DON'T SIT DOWN

A lawyer received a telephone call from a recent client rather early one morning. "I'm going to go to the electric chair in thirty minutes," shouted the man. "You call yourself a lawyer! Don't you have *any* ideas?"

The lawyer thought deeply for one long second and then replied in an even voice: "Sure, Jack," he said. "Don't sit down!"

hero worshipper

by . . . Rex Barr

With infinite care, he adjusted the black eye-piece at just the right angle, pulled on the soft green hat, and....

MOVING aside the suede-backed *Finnegan's Wake,* the French Brier, the superior tobacco, and reflectively stroking his moustache, Grierson began the letter:

"Dear General Havelock-Dexter," he wrote. "I am twelve years old. For the past six months I have been collecting the autographs of famous men and women of our time. Due to your exciting exploits in the African jungles and your discovery of the fabulous Lajorne diamond mines, everyone agrees you are one of the most colorful personalities ever to visit these shores.

"I am writing, therefore, to ask if you would be kind enough to sign your name in the enclosed book—you will notice that I already have the autograph of Winston S. Churchill, among others.

"Hoping this finds you as well as it leaves me, I remain, yours truly, Bob Thomas.

"P.S. As my mother says I am not to annoy people by asking for autographs, I have enclosed a stamped envelope ad-

Grierson felt it was appalling that this swaggering philistine should command such a fortune when Grierson himself, cultivated, refined, a product of the best schools, with impeccable taste in all things that mattered, should be penniless. The General, for all his charm, was a boor. Something had to be done . . .

dressed to me care of the G.P.O."

Suppressing his own distinguished handwriting under the awkward, over-meticulous script of a child bent on making a good impression, Grierson marked the envelope, "Private, Personal and Confidential." It was the sort of pompous, dramatic phrase an imaginative schoolboy might use, and Grierson smiled at his own adroitness—those years of psychology at university, especially the course in children's behaviour patterns, had not been wasted after all.

A week later, with the autograph book beside him, Grierson practiced forging Havelock-Dexter's turbulent, cascading signature.

The General, impressed no doubt, by the roll-of-honor quality of other autographs in the book, had promptly signed it. His was, in fact, the only genuine signature among them. The rest were testimony of Grierson's long poring over *Debrett* and a wide range of pens and inks.

Studying the signature closely, Grierson decided it was typical of the man behind it. Its swashbuckling sprawl summed up the years as an adventurer in the Klondike and on the Amazon, the quests for Inca gold, the war years as a commando, when he'd lost an eye and gained the valorous black patch over the empty socket, the diamond mines, the sudden, astonishing wealth and the glazed, honey-smooth wife who followed it.

As he copied the scrawl, Grierson found himself impressed, envious, angry. It was appalling that this swaggering philistine should command such a fortune when Grierson himself, cultivated, refined, a product of the best schools, with impeccable taste in all the things that mattered, should be penniless.

The General, he decided, for all his surface charm and bravado, was a boor. Given one-tenth of his wealth, Grierson could have been an inspired dilletante, sought-after patron of the arts.

Still, he reassured himself, with any luck at all, this last dream might be glad reality within a very few hours.

He turned from the signature to a newspaper picture of Mrs. Havelock-Dexter on the steps of a city bank.

"Once bitten, twice shy, is the motto of the Havelock-Dexters these days," the blocklines read. "Since the rather clumsy attempted robbery at their new Willowgate home two days after their arrival from Africa, they are taking no chances of the priceless family diamonds being stolen.

"Lovely Mrs. Havelock-Dexter is shown, escorted by an

armed chauffeur, on her way to deposit the jewels in the vault of a city bank.

"General Havelock - Dexter was not at Willowgate when the thieves struck. Immediately on his arrival in this country he went to Granfield, where his mother is seriously ill. He is expected to return to the city for a civic reception next Tuesday."

The paper was right, Grierson decided—the attempted robbery at Willowgate had been clumsy—simply because it was not his style of job at all. He had bungled it badly and its only real value lay in the fact that it had demonstrated, once and for all, that he was not cut out for the vulgar hurly-burly of common housebreaking.

His power lay in subtler kinds of virtuosity—in an expert use of make-up, an astonishing gift for mimicry, in poise and good taste and penmanship. And all these would be employed in the tour de force of his career—an impersonation of General Havelock-Dexter at his own bank, and the straightforward, uncluttered withdrawal of his diamonds from the vault.

It was hazardous, he knew. But with the right overtones of audacity, worthy of a man of his caliber.

The plan, fixed to the last detail now that the signature had been mastered, would swing into operation at two o'clock. He checked it over in his mind:

Clothes: Gray flannel suit, heavy suede shoes, pink shirt, soft green hat, the General's regimental tie.

Figure: Grierson and the General were about the same height and weight—a little extra padding at the shoulders would render them almost indistinguishable from the rear.

Make-up: The thin precision of his own moustache replaced by the bushy extravagance of a gummed-on version of the General's. A careful replica of the black eye-patch. The hair, with an added dusting of silver at the temples, would pass, he decided.

Voice: Perfected by long labor after hearing the General speak as guest of honor on a radio program — high-pitched, abrupt, with the faintest suggestion of a stammer, a brook-no-nonsense edge to it.

Demeanor: Rather belligerent, the conversation bristling with military clichés and marked by general lack of refinement.

With these things accounted for, Grierson could see no remaining loopholes. Once at the bank, he would immediately demand the manager and explain that his wife needed her jewels to attend a dinner-party that night, and was far too busy to call and collect them herself. His signature would no doubt

be checked with a permanent specimen on the records, and when found to be the same would be passed.

Grierson had no fear of encountering the manager. After all, he thought, it was highly unlikely that any one of the bank staff had seen the General in the past ten years—and a man could change considerably in that time.

Opening the latest issue of *Elite,* he turned to the glossy full-page portrait of Havelock-Dexter. It was a magnificent picture in color, taken a few weeks before by a photographer known for his brilliant capturing of the personality behind a face.

The General's flamboyance certainly shone through the aggressively questioning half-profile, but Grierson was more concerned with its sharp detail —finely grained wrinkles, slant of eyebrows, tiny tufts of hair inside the nose and ears. These were the meticulous points that would give his make-up veracity, and Grierson rejoiced at the unerring, instinctive prompting that had made him turn to a quality magazine like *Elite* for guidance—lesser men would have depended on shoddy reproductions in the yellow press, with blurred outlines on hideous paper.

With the photograph beside him he began to make-up. He worked slowly, twisting his head this way and that under the harsh candor of a naked light until, in the end, the magazine picture seemed just another facet of his own reflection in the mirror.

With infinite care he adjusted the black eyepiece at just the right angle, pulled on the soft green hat, looked at the final result, waited till the street outside was empty, then slipped out and hailed a cab.

His first jubilant excitement came when the driver touched his cap in recognition:

"Where to, General?" he said.

Crisply, Grierson gave the address of Mrs. Havelock-Dexter's bank, and when, a few minutes later, they arrived, he tipped the driver with one of his last remaining florins.

"Jolly fine piece of driving, that," he said. "Could have done with a few chappies of your stamp on our last little show in Burma."

"Thank you, General," the driver said. "Much obliged, I'm sure."

Inside the bank, conscious of the whispered exclamations of the staff, Grierson stamped up to the enquiry counter and asked for the manager. "My name—"

"Why, of course," an elderly clerk said. "It's General Havelock-Dexter, isn't it? Splendid to see you looking so well, sir. It

must be ten years since you last paid us a visit, though we had the pleasure of attending your wife yesterday. I'll tell the manager you're here, but I'm afraid our Mister Grey, who used to be in charge, is no longer with us—poor chap passed away last August."

Grierson resisted a triumphant smile. "Deuced sorry to hear that," he said. "First-rate fellow, Grey. Knew his job. Had his fingers on the pulse of things. Who took over command?"

"Mister Levis, sir—ah, here he comes now. Mister Levis, this is General Havelock-Dexter, one of our oldest customers, though a little before your time, I believe. He'd like a word with you."

"Delighted," Levis beamed. "If you'd just step into my office. I was speaking with your wife only yesterday. Strange, I could have sworn she said she didn't expect you in the city until next week."

"Came on the spur of the moment," Grierson said. "The mater rallied a little, so I slipped away for a breather. She can't last much longer, but when you've faced death as I have, Levis, it holds no real terrors. We'll all have to toe the line at the Commander-in-Chief's parade one day. Nothing to fear if your kit's in order and your buttons shined."

"A refreshing way to look at it, sir," Levis said as they went into his office and closed the door. "Please take a seat. Now, can I be of service?"

"Yes," Grierson said. "It's a nuisance for you, no doubt, and typical of the distaff side, but the little woman's asked me to collect her jewellery again. Wants to wear them to a slap-up shivoo this evening. Be a good chap and bring them to me at the double. I'm late for another appointment already."

"Isn't this rather sudden, sir? Your wife said yesterday that she wouldn't need them for some considerable time."

"Ah, you don't know her as well as I do, Levis. She's completely unpredictable—man to man, it's half her charm. But apparently she'd forgotten a long-standing engagement for this evening."

"Very well, sir, I'll have someone fetch them. If you'd be good enough to sign this receipt—we'll have to check your signature with our files—purely a formality, of course, a matter of minutes."

"Understood," Grierson said, signing the General's name. "But do please be slippy."

Levis took the receipt and came back shortly afterwards with a black leather attache case.

"Here we are, sir," he said. "Would you like to check that everything's in order?"

"Heavens, no, Levis—this is no time, for a kit inspection. I've banked with your firm for years—always had the squarest possible deal from them. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must toddle. No doubt my wife will return these fripperies tomorrow, unless something else crops up that she's overlooked."

Grierson shook hands and went out, stiffly military to the end—even at the front door when a police sergeant quietly took his arm.

"How dare you," Grierson stormed. "Do you realize who I am?"

"No," the sergeant said amiably, "But I know who you're not. Behave yourself and there'll be no fuss."

"It was pure luck," the superintendent said. "If the old clerk hadn't hero-worshipped the General to a point where he kept a scrap-book of his pictures, Grierson might well have got away with it."

"But," the reporter said, "he went to such pains to perfect his disguise. How could he make such a basic slip?"

"He made it because he was a snob. If he'd chosen any picture but the one in *Elite* it would never have happened of course."

"It was a splendid picture, but printed in reverse—purposely, to suit the page design."

"The acknowledgeable gents concerned were apparently upset at having their artistic sensibilities outraged by a portrait that looked away from the story instead of towards it, so they simply flipped it over—common practice, I'm told, in the higher-toned magazines where these things seem to matter."

"It worked beautifully, too, except that the patch was shown over the left eye instead of the right, and Grierson fell for it."

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE—

THE MARK ON THE WINDOW . by MELVILLE DAVISSON POST
THE CAVE OF ALI BABA . . . . . by DOROTHY SAYERS
ADVENTURE OF THE TRIPLE KENT . . . by AUGUST DERLETH
THE TURKISH YATAGHAN . . . . . by SAX ROHMER
THE MAN IN THE SHADOWS . . . . . by T. S. STRIBLING

—of *your* THE SAINT DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE

By STEPHEN BOND

"PLEASE note that I am not French, and that I reserve the right to cultivate any relations that may please me. The War is not a sufficient reason to stop me from being a cosmopolitan."

Three-quarters of an hour later the unanimous verdict was handed down. Marguerite Gertrude Zelle was to die.

August. September.

October. The evidence was still being weighed. The President of the Republic had still to hand down a decision on her appeal. The condemned spy had been returned to her cell at Saint-Lazare, constantly guarded, a nun always with her, but allowed better food, wine with all meals, and permitted to read and smoke.

She talked often with the Abbé Doumergue, the old Catholic Almoner at the prison. She never smoked. She read little except for what is described as a Buddhist "gospel," meditations on the nothingness of life, psalms on the joyful renunciation of life and the happiness to be attained in Nirvana. Sunday morning, October 14th, the conversation turned to dancing and Sister Léonide, who had been with her all this time, asked her to show them how she danced. She rose, smiled, loosened her dress a little, and began to dance—her audience the police doctor, the nun, and the other prisoners.

The next morning at four o'clock there was a knock on the cell door. The Commandant, approaching the suddenly wakened woman who sat up, leaning on her closed fists, told her, "Zelle—be brave. The President of the Republic has rejected your appeal. The moment has come for carrying out the sentence."

"It is not possible! It is not possible!"

Marguerite Gertrude Zelle began to dress. Another day she would not have forgiven them for waking her so early, she said. "Why do you have this custom of executing people at dawn? I would much sooner go to Vincennes about three o'clock after a good lunch. Give me my nice little slippers too. I always like to be well shod."

A hundred people were waiting outside the prison.

"All these people! What a success!"

At 6:15 she smiled at the kneeling Sister Léonide and motioned good-bye, eyes looking at the sky a last time. The officer in command raised his sword—and Mata Hari died . . .

black and white

by . . . Paul Tabori

It was much too lovely outside to die, and there remained so much to be done. So very much.

PEDRILLO GOMEZ was lost. The military court tribunal of South American colonels wasted little time. The indictment was clear, the proof ample: the *prononciamentos* urging "Death to the Tyrant," found in his home, undeniably had been aimed at the violent overthrow of the regime. Public opinion could not protest. The defendant was being given a "fair trial" in open court.

"Is there anything you wish to say before sentence is pronounced?" the presiding general asked.

"Nothing," Gomez said, his closely shaved face betraying no emotion.

The general paused, cleared his throat and automatically went through the motions of administering justice: Pedrillo Gomez, captured leader of the deposed opposition, having been found guilty of conspiracy to overthrow the "legal" government, was to be taken to an appropriate place at dawn and executed in the manner prescribed by law.

A murmur rippled through

This is not a detective story—this is *the story of how a man gambles his life on his knowledge of his fellow officers. Paul Tabori, distinguished Central European journalist, tells of the South American leader of the Opposition, who, facing a Military Court, knew what he would have done if in their place. . . .*

the courtroom as the guards prepared to escort the condemned man back to his dungeon. Suddenly, Pedrillo Gomez addressed the court:

"One moment, please. Under Section One Hundred and Nine, paragraph five, of the Constitution, all prisoners sentenced to death for political crimes have the right to demand a drawing of lots. If a condemned prisoner draws the white ball, the death sentence must be commuted. I demand this constitutional right."

The presiding general glanced at his colleagues. They lowered their eyes signifying that Gomez was correct. It would be risky to deny the prisoner his apparent legal right in open court. The public was volatile. Every move had to be calculated.

"The court will retire for a ten minute recess," the general announced.

There was a scraping of chairs as the tribunal rose and disappeared into the interior chambers. Pedrillo Gomez was left on the hard bench, flanked by two guards. The courtroom was buzzing with excited whispers. Gomez peered through the open windows. It was a beautiful spring day—much too beautiful a day to die, he thought. He had this one last chance. If he should lose, he must face the firing squad. The regime was ruthless and corrupt, he knew. Justice meant nothing to them. The fight his men were waging was righteous. With him or without, the struggle would go on. But with the leadership gone, it would take so much longer. He must try to remain alive for as long as possible. But he was well aware that his enemies, the men who now held his fate in their hands, would stop at nothing to destroy him. Even in open court, he knew he could not trust them.

Suddenly, the door to the interior chambers opened and the tribunal returned.

"We have acceded to the defendant's constitutional demand," the presiding general announced. "The prisoner may draw for his life. If he extracts the white ball from the urn, the death sentence is commuted; if he draws the black ball, he must die."

The general motioned to a court attendant who stepped over to Pedrillo, carrying a small urn. A tense hush fell over the courtroom.

Gomez stood up and looked at his judges. Their faces were stony, empty, devoid of human compassion. He was more convinced than ever that his cause was just. These men were not to be trusted.

He stuck his hand in the urn and drew a ball. He looked at it. It was black, signifying death. Suddenly, he played a

hunch. He whirled and with a lightning gesture, hurled the black ball through the open court window.

Wild excitement broke out in the room.

The presiding general rapped his gavel for order, then addressed the prisoner, "How dare you? What have you done? How can we tell whether you drew black or white?"

Pedrillo Gomez smiled, an understandably restrained smile. "Just see which ball remains in the urn, General. If it is the black, obviously I must have drawn the white . . ."

The members of the tribunal stared at one another. Gomez had outwitted them. He had guessed correctly that they had placed two black balls in the urn.

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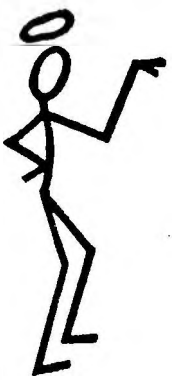

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conversation in chinatown

by . . . Hugh Wiley

THE telephone records show that at 8:15 in the morning long-distance rang through from San Francisco to Sunnymount with a call from Olga Saratov to Frank Russell.

Sunnymount is thirty miles south of San Francisco. There was a five-minute hitch in the long-distance call and this was due to the fact that Frank Russell's telephone was an unlisted number. Presently, the Palo Alto supervisor rigged things up so that Mr. Russell received Olga Saratov's call.

"I want to see you as soon as you can get here."

"Olga! I am delighted to hear your voice. Where are you? When did you get to San Francisco?"

"I have an apartment at 9900 Pacific Street," Olga Saratov said. "Apartment seven. When can you get here? Is Hans Ritter still a friend of yours?"

"Not later than ten," Mr. Russell said. "Hans is still a pal of mine. I will start as soon as I get dressed."

"This is the gun that was used to kill the woman. You told me you'd never seen the gun before, didn't you?"

Hugh Wiley returns with another of his famous stories about James Lee Wong, better known as James Lee, who identifies a murderer under unusual circumstances. Frank Russell, accused of murder, is to discover that his servants' private lives had little to do with cooking, and to bless the moment when Wong Lok hurried to the Cave of Harmony, the meeting place for the Wong family.

Originally published as "In Chinatown"
Copyright 1934 by Hugh Wiley

"You're not dressed?"

"Just getting up. I'll be there at ten."

Mr. Russell had promised himself the rare luxury of staying in bed until noon. On the bed, at his right between him and the teakwood stand on which the telephone stood, there lay an accumulation of reading matter.

Two recent numbers of the China Journal curled about a flat number of Antiquity. The third quarterly issue of the American Geographical Review lay above *Egypt As a Field for Anthropological Research.* Under these was a catalogue of ancient Chinese porcelains and then, in the lower strata, consecutively came Goddard's *Kato Texts,* a monograph on Korean mortuary pottery, Edwin Barber's *Tulip Ware of the Pennsylvania-German Potters,* three book auction catalogues of the Anderson Galleries in New York, and a much worn copy of *South Wind.*

The morning mail had come in and to the left of the literature there lay an assortment of letters that Mr. Russell's Japanese cook had brought up with his breakfast tray.

Dressing, "What a fool I am," the writer reflected. "Why should I have to doll myself up and drive to San Francisco at this moment? . . . Why is it that something always gums up the game with a lot of female visiting firemen!"

He was sorry then for these unkind thoughts. "Olga is a good soul," he said to himself whamming a razor blade through a two days' growth of beard. "I shouldn't be such a selfish pig. Maybe she really needs me. She sounded serious enough . . . I wonder what she wants with Hans Ritter."

When he had dressed, "I will be gone all day," he said to his Japanese cook. "I'll probably have dinner in San Francisco and be back late tonight or tomorrow morning."

A frown of disappointment lay on the face of the Japanese servant. "Berry fine ramb kidneys."

"Eat them yourself," Mr. Russell directed. "Lamb kidneys get nephritis in the tepid atmosphere in that refrigerator. You'd better get the ice off the coils of that machine before it becomes a hothouse."

"Berry fine ramb kidneys," the Japanese insisted.

Russell got into his car. He looked at his watch. The time was 9:15. The lights were against him at six crossings en route to San Francisco; a funeral had the traffic stopped at the cemeteries; a construction crew blockaded him at Colma, but he landed in front of Olga Saratov's residence at 9:55. He

looked at his watch again. He realized that he must have broken various traffic regulations. "Forty minutes! That's not bad time through that traffic. . . . I shouldn't drive so fast. . . . I wonder what Olga wants."

He got out of his car. He locked the ignition and put the key in his left-hand vest pocket alongside of the thin watch that he carried.

"She sounded sort of Sarah Bernhardt," he thought. "I hope she hasn't had a relapse of love's young dream."

He walked into the entrance of the apartment house and fumbled around with the cryptic mechanism of push-buttons and the concealed telephones with which such places are equipped. He pressed the button opposite Olga Saratov's name.

Within ten seconds the buzzing mechanism of the lock in the front door sounded as a signal for his entrance. He walked through the doorway and made his way to the elevator, wherein, guessing at the mathematics of apartment house numbers, he jabbed button Number Seven. When he had escaped from the elevator he found himself in an entrance hall from which, save for the elevator, there was but one exit. He pressed the button in the framing of the door.

When the door opened Mr. Russell faced a Chinese cook who had left his service three cooks back. The cook's name was Wong Lok. Following Wong Lok there had been a female refugee who had lasted ten days. The female refugee had given place to Sugi Matsuta.

Mr. Matsuta, leaving suddenly for Japan after two years' service, had replaced himself with the present incumbent. Of these various servants Wong Lok was the best cook and Sugi Matsuta the most generally efficient servant.

The wide vestibule of Olga Saratov's apartment narrowed to a hallway which led back to a dining room. A five-foot doorway in the left wall opened upon a long living room. Mr. Russell got a flash of this layout but in his surprise at meeting Wong Lok his survey of the scene was recorded without much attention to detail.

He held out his hand to his former Chinese cook. "What are you doing here?" he said. "When did you come back from China?"

Smiling only with his mouth, "How you, Mis' Russell?" Wong Lok asked, deliberately speaking pidgin. "Long time no see you. You ketchum large story?"

Answering this with another question, "What are you doing here?" Mr. Russell asked. "Are

you working for Miss Saratov?"

"I cookum lilly bit," Wong Lok answered. "You likee talk lady? She sit down in sun porch. You go through large room you see him." Wong Lok bowed and with a gesture of his right hand he indicated the route through the wide living room along which Mr. Russell would travel to find Miss Saratov.

Wong Lok put Mr. Russell's hat on a table against the east wall and with a pleasant nod toward his former master he turned and walked down the hallway.

Midway of the living room Mr. Russell announced himself with a casual call to Olga Saratov. "Olga! Hello, globe-trotter. Where are you?"

There was no reply to this. Ten feet farther along his route, looking into the colorful interior of the sunporch, Mr. Russell saw Olga Saratov. She was lying in a long wicker chair. Her head, resting on a yellow cushion, lay so that her face was turned toward the streaming sunlight. Russell called to her again. "Olga, my dear! It's good to—" he began, and then he saw against the yellow surface of the cushion under her head a blackening blood stain.

Mr. Russell halted. "Olga!" he said. Then, seeming to lack breath enough to speak her name aloud, "Olga," he whispered. . . . "She's dead!"

Over the telephone to police headquarters: "A woman has been killed," Mr. Russell reported. "9900 Pacific Street, Apartment Seven. . . . My name is Frank Russell."

"What's the woman's name?"

"Her name is Olga Saratov."

"How do you know she was killed?"

Mr. Russell was conscious of a sudden flash of anger. Without answering the question, "Hurry up," he said. "I'll be here when your men arrive."

He hung up the telephone and called loudly for Wong Lok. No voice answered him. He explored the kitchen of the apartment and the three bedrooms. Wong Lok had disappeared.

Inspector Coyne of the homicide squad gave one look at Olga Saratov. "Telephone the coroner's office," he said to one of the policemen who had accompanied him. To Russell, "How long have you been here?"

"Not over twenty minutes."

"Who let you in?"

"A Chinaman. A Chinaman named Wong Lok. He used to work for me."

"Did you know the dead woman?"

"I've known her for ten years."

"Where's the Chinaman?"

"He must have left right after I arrived. As soon as I saw

what had happened I looked for him."

"Why did you hide the gun?"

Russell felt the blood surging through the veins in his throat. "What gun are you talking about? Inspector, I don't like that question!"

"Show him the gun, Casey."

Officer Casey produced a .45 automatic. "This was lying under the rug over by that chair," Inspector Coyne explained. "Why did you hide it?"

"I never saw the gun before."

"Why don't you want the dead woman to be booked as a suicide?"

"She isn't a suicide. She was murdered."

Inspector Coyne smiled thinly at Russell. "I think so too. You'd better come down to headquarters with us, Mr. Russell."

"I'll drive down right away. My car is out in front of the house."

"One of the boys will bring it down. You'd better ride along with me."

At headquarters Inspector Coyne held his fire on the problem of booking Frank Russell. "The woman had quit bleeding by the time we got there," he explained to the chief of the homicide squad. "If Russell is telling the truth she was killed half an hour or so before he showed up. She telephoned him at 8:15. He could have been there at nine o'clock."

"What's the Chinaman angle sound like to you?"

"She's had a Chinese cook for a couple of weeks."

"Round him up."

"We're working on it."

"What about the gun?"

A clerk from the telegraph room came in with a wire that contained some interesting data on the gun. He handed the message to Inspector Coyne.

"I'm not a bad guesser," the inspector said when he had read the message. "The Army people identify the gun from the serial number. It was issued to Captain Frank Russell in San Francisco a week before his outfit started for France in 1917. It's still his gun."

"That makes it tough for Frank Russell. We'll book him 'en route' until the district attorney can do his stuff. Get Russell in here."

Facing Inspector Coyne and three other members of the homicide squad, Frank Russell realized that he confronted a new menace. Inspector Coyne showed him the .45 automatic. "This is the gun that was used to kill the woman. The bullet that killed her was fired through the barrel of this gun. You told me you'd never seen the gun before, didn't you?"

"To the best of my knowledge I never saw the gun before."

"It was issued to you in 1917 when you went to France. Think it over. . . . That's all, Russell. You'll have to stay here for a while. The charge will be first degree murder when the smoke clears away. Think it over."

Leaving Olga Saratov's Pacific Street apartment, Wong Lok headed for Chinatown. On Grant Avenue, near the corner of Jackson Street, in the heart of this colony of his countrymen, Wong Lok naturally sought sanctuary in the Cave of Harmony.

The Chinatown squad and a few of the white and yellow public in general know the Cave of Harmony as a rendezvous wherein members of the Wong family meet to discuss their mutual affairs, to enjoy the glow that comes from libations of black brandy, and to seek spiritual or financial support whenever the frowns on the face of Milo Fo gum up the game of life.

As a matter of fact, the Cave of Harmony is a more complex structure than the first view of the central assembly room might suggest. A system of twisted, narrow hallways, stairways leading upward to apartments above the street, stairways leading to subterranean apartments, telephones, an electric signal system, a treasure room, a properly ventilated opium room, a wine cellar and a barber shop are included as integral elements of the refuge to which Wong Lok hurried subsequent to his departure from Olga Saratov's apartment.

After greeting the old sentinel on duty in the Cave of Harmony in the slow phrases of the ritual of Right Conduct, "I must speak at once with James Lee Wong," the refugee declared. "You have not seen me. I am not here."

The elder Chinese removed his spectacles and bowed to Wong Lok.

"A wise man understands a nod," he said. "At the moment our friend is engaged. If you will rest in the Moon Cavern I will send him to you presently.

The Moon Cavern was an underground apartment lighted by a single forty-watt lamp. It was furnished with a table, three chairs, a mirror, a bed, a lithographed calendar that had been printed in Shanghai and a quotation board on which were recorded the international prices of silver, rice and silk. Here, after a delay of forty minutes, James Lee Wong found his countryman.

"I am sorry I had to hold you up," the late arrival said, speak-

ing in English. "What's the lay-out?"

James Lee Wong, known on the federal pay rolls as James Lee, sat down at the table in the Moon Cavern and lighted a cigarette. He was six feet tall, and from where he sat he could blow the smoke out over the head of Wong Lok. After the first drag at his cigarette he let a cloud of smoke drift through the thin nostrils of his aquiline nose. He looked at Wong Lok through the narrowed level lids of his warm brown eyes. His face was suddenly the face of a foreign devil—a "Yankee."

Wong Lok sensed the fact that James Lee had masked his countenance. "The State Department has me jumping sideways on the Manchukuo affair," James Lee said. "I'm loaded down with work but what is one more stone to an overloaded donkey?" The glowing cigarette quivered in the long, sensitive fingers of James Lee's right hand. "But what is your problem? I am a donkey who loves to have stones added to his burden by any member of the Wong clan."

After a moment, "This is a heavy stone," Wong Lok began. "First of all, the Russian woman is dead."

"Saratov?"

Wong Lok nodded. "Olga Saratov is dead. I have to stay under cover for a while. In the meantime the local police are holding Frank Russell for her murder. You remember, I worked for him down the peninsula while I was over here on those airplane purchases."

"I know him. His last two cooks have been Japanese Foreign Office men. What have the police got on him?"

"Plenty. The Russian woman was shot with his gun—the pistol he carried in the Army. They can prove that he was the last man who saw her alive."

"Where were you?"

Wong Lok's eyes narrowed. "Let us say that after I served her breakfast this morning I went out marketing."

"She had no other servants. If you were out how did Frank Russell get into her apartment?"

"The police assume that she let him in. They have an airtight case against him. They assume, perhaps, that I faded out in a cloud of fear—or discretion. They may think it was a lovers' quarrel."

James Lee smiled thinly at Wong Lok. "You'd do well to stay faded out for a while," he suggested. "Why did Russell come to see Olga Saratov?"

"She invited him. She telephoned him this morning while I was removing her breakfast tray."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'I want to see you as soon as you can get here.'

Then she asked, 'Is Hans Ritter still a friend of yours?' Then she gave Russell her address."

"Had Hans Ritter been up to see her?"

"Not that I know of. I think she visited him at his office several times."

"And had accomplished nothing?"

"I think she was about to accomplish—everything."

James Lee looked straight at Wong Lok for thirty seconds. Presently, "I think we have the motive," he said.

Wong Lok nodded. "We have the motive." Then, after a moment, smiling broadly, "We have the motive," Wong Lok repeated. "All we need now is —the man."

"You would not like to hang at San Quentin?" James Lee inquired.

"I prefer to live for a while yet," Wong Lok answered. "You are busy in the service of the State Department— I too have quite a lot of work to do for my country."

James Lee ground his cigarette into an ash tray that lay on the table. "Where did Russell keep this gun that the police found? Did he carry it? Was it out in the open?"

"He kept it with the rest of his war stuff in a little army trunk that he had in France."

"Was the trunk locked? Some of those locks aren't so simple."

"The trunk was locked but the key that opened it lay on top of his dresser in his bedroom. He had a lot of keys. He carried three or four on his key ring, but there must have been fifty others in a copper tray on his dresser."

James Lee lighted another cigarette. "You know," he said, "this is going to be a tough spot for you if Russell gets a lawyer with any brains."

Wong Lok closed his eyes for a moment. "This is a tough spot for me," he amended. Then, qualifying his statement, "It's a tough spot for me if Hans Ritter has sold out to the opposition."

James Lee got to his feet. "I'll see what I can do," he promised. "Stay under cover. I'll let you know what happens."

At the Hall of Justice it required the impact of James Lee's association with the Federal Department of Justice to batter down the barrier that lay between Frank Russell and the outer world.

"They may hold you this way —incommunicado— for a week or so," James Lee informed Russell. "In the meantime if you will trust me perhaps I can help you."

Russell scowled at his visitor. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am James Lee Wong. For the moment let us say that I am a friend of a Chinese man who cooked for you—Wong Lok."

"If you're that killer's friend I do not care to talk with you. Why did he murder Olga Saratov? Why did he steal my gun and frame me? The whole layout is clear enough to me. Get out of here. I don't want to see you."

Patiently, "Perhaps Wong Lok did not kill the woman," James Lee suggested. "He isn't a killer. He was a classmate of mine at Yale. I don't think he killed her. Maybe he was guarding her."

"A hell of a job he made of it. It's all too horrible. I don't want to talk about it."

"You have my deep sympathy. If you will forgive me, the police department has you convicted now. I would like to help you. I believe that you are innocent."

"If you believe I am innocent, then get me a lawyer. This police outfit won't even let me talk to—"

"They have permitted me to see you," James Lee said evenly. "If you will let me discuss your problem with you perhaps I can help you."

"I'll talk to no stool pigeons. I'll give you a thousand dollars if you'll get Morgan Lombardi in here to see me. He's my lawyer."

"There's no charge against you yet. No one can see you unless—"

"It's an outrage!" Russell fumed. "It's inhuman! It's absolutely against the law to hold me this way."

"So it is," James Lee agreed. Then, quickly, "Tell me about Olga Saratov. How long have you known her? What were your common interests?"

Surrendering to the will of his inquisitor, "I have known her eight or ten years," Russell said wearily. "I knew her first through our common interest in Scythian art and Han pottery. We explored some of the graves on the Kuban River together. We did some digging in Kansu—Neolithic stuff. She traveled a great deal. In the past five years I have seen her only two or three times. I quit traveling."

"Why?"

"I got tired. I've stayed in California for the past six years. The only traveling I've done has been in the California gold country."

"Scythian art, Neolithic China, Han pottery, jade—"

"How did you know about that?"

James Lee smiled. "I read your book on jade," he said. "All of these things are diversions of yesterday. Is that true?"

"They were yesterday's hobbies," Russell admitted. "California history has engaged me

to the exclusion of every other interest."

"Was Olga Saratov interested in California?"

"I was her friend. She saw California through my eyes."

"Her own interest was awakened by no special scene—no single element of the California picture?"

After a moment, "The only California story that really interested her was the Red Mountain affair. She knew every angle of that web of fraud from start to finish."

"Red Mountain—you mean the big cinnabar mine?"

Russell nodded. "Discovered a hundred years ago and still a big producer."

Abruptly, "Is Hans Ritter a friend of yours?"

Russell's eyes widened. "Of course he is a friend of mine. He's the president of Cinnabar Limited. They own the Red Mountain properties. He is a good friend of mine. He turned over all the old Red Mountain records to me."

"Did she know Ritter?"

"She met him. I introduced him to her three years ago."

"You really think that Ritter is a good friend of yours?"

"He was a good friend when I was digging into the Red Mountain records. He's more than a good friend now. He is one of the closest friends I have."

"Cinnabar Limited controls nearly all the quicksilver mines in the United States, doesn't it?"

"All the quicksilver in the United States and then some," Russell answered. "Cinnabar Limited is the biggest quicksilver outfit in the world."

"After Wong Lok left your employ, who cooked for you?"

"Two or three cooks followed him. There was a Polish woman, and then there was a Japanese boy, Sugi Matsuta, and then—"

"How long did Matsuta work for you?"

"He worked for me two years or so. He went back to Japan. When he left me he got me another Japanese man—the one who works for me now."

"Was Matsuta a good cook?"

"He was good at everything. His cooking was cosmopolitan in its flavor, to say the least."

"Did that ever strike you as being a bit unusual?"

"Of course. I was in luck. There are lots of unusual cooks in the world. A friend of mine in Palo Alto has a Russian admiral cooking for him."

"Do you ever hear from Sugi Matsuta?"

"I had one letter from him after he got back to Japan."

"You may hear from him again within the next few days." James Lee held out his hand to Frank Russell. "I'll see you again before long, Mr. Russell.

This affair is less complex than you think. I know that you are under a frightful strain. It sounds a bit absurd—but for the next few hours let me do the worrying for you. Get some sleep."

At this, conscious of a sudden overwhelming undefined sense of relief, "Who the hell are you?" Russell asked.

James Lee smiled at Russell. "Let us say that I am one of the Wong family," he suggested.

Facing Hans Ritter, president of Cinnabar Limited, across the wide desk in the executive's office, "I have called to discuss a problem that confronts a friend of yours," James Lee announced directly after he had introduced himself to Ritter. "His name is Russell. He is a friend of yours?"

"What about him?"

"He's in jail."

"Jail! What's he done?"

"He's guilty of knowing Olga Saratov."

"I don't get you."

"Pardon me. Of course you know Miss Saratov?"

Ritter's eyes narrowed. "I'm not supposed to know her. She was to— How does she come into the picture?"

"Olga Saratov was murdered this morning. The police are holding Frank Russell. They accuse him of the murder."

"Olga Saratov murdered! Why—she was to— Why do they think Frank Russell did it?"

"Forgive me, Mr. Ritter. Will you complete your statement about Miss Saratov? She was to —what?"

"She was to meet me in this office at four o'clock this afternoon."

"She is dead, Mr. Ritter. They are holding your friend Frank Russell for her murder."

"It's absurd! He's no more guilty than I am! What evidence have they?"

"There is some interesting evidence. Some of it is very embarrassing to Mr. Russell. Will you answer one question in strictest confidence?"

"What's the question?"

"Within the past month, Mr. Ritter, have you had any business contacts with a Japanese gentleman by the name of Sugi Matsuta?"

Hans Ritter hesitated a moment and then, "I'll answer your question. The answer is yes. What of it?"

For an instant two hard lines appeared at the corners of James Lee's mouth. "Thank you," he said. "It has been a sort of poker game—a race between Matsuta and Olga Saratov. Am I correct?"

"You're correct. But what has Frank Russell got to do with the game?"

"My guess is that Miss Saratov desired his aid—his friendly influence with you. Your com-

pany controls half of the world's supply of quicksilver. A war cannot be fought without quicksilver. Even a war chest has a bottom to it. Playing against Matsuta the lady was playing in a no-limit game."

James Lee smiled. Then, "Another player will take Miss Saratov's place in the game this afternoon," he said. "Mr. Ritter, the Russian government will have an authorized representative in your office at four o'clock this afternoon to complete Miss Saratov's work."

"Well, if it's of the slightest interest to you, I have decided to play ball with Russia."

James Lee reached for his hat. Rising, he held out his hand to Hans Ritter. "Thank you," he said. "As a minor consequence of your decision I think your friend Frank Russell will be out of jail before midnight. There appears to be an honorable suicide in Mr. Sugi Matsuta's immediate future. I will do what I can to facilitate his departure from life."

At 5:20 Pacific Time Mr. Sugi Matsuta arrived at the Cave of Harmony. He was forcibly escorted by James Lee. In a secluded apartment in the Cave of Harmony, at James Lee's dictation, Mr. Matsuta began to write his confession.

Writing in clear and beautiful English script, "This confession is written of my own free will," he began. "I killed Olga Saratov. I shot her with a .45 caliber automatic pistol. The pistol belonged to Frank Russell, of Sunnymount, California. I obtained the weapon through one of my aides who is now employed by Mr. Russell."

"I will permit you to say that theft was the motive for Miss Saratov's murder," James Lee conceded. "It will clear your name in the records of your Foreign Office."

Sugi Matsuta bowed to James Lee. "I thank you," he said. "You are very considerate."

Thereafter, to the end of his confession, Mr. Matsuta continued writing in clear and beautiful script. Near the bottom of the page, "That, I think, is complete," he said. He handed the unsigned document to James Lee.

The Chinese reached for a telephone that sat on the table in front of him. Into the instrument a moment later, "Send three men down here," he ordered. "I want them to witness a signature. They must be citizens of the United States." He hung up the telephone. From a long and narrow ebony box inlaid with gold that lay on the table at his left he removed a smaller box, an ancient lacquered affair wherein, wrapped in silk, there lay a Japanese dagger-sword.

With due ceremony James Lee passed the sword to Sugi Matsuta. The Japanese received it reverently in both hands, holding his palms upward. "I have permission to inspect the blade?"

James Lee bowed without speaking.

Slowly drawing the sword from its sheath, the Japanese inspected the steel inch by inch as it appeared. Following the ancient ritual he held the edge of the sword toward himself. When the point of the blade was nearly exposed, bowing again to James Lee, "May I inspect the point?" he asked. "Etiquette does not permit drawing a sword in the house of a friend, even for hari-kari."

There was a quick light of enjoyment in Sugi Matsuta's eyes. "This is a jewel by Muramasa!" he said. "A *tanto* by Muramasa! Fourteenth century! I am not worthy of its blade. It is . . ."

Interrupting Sugi Matsuta's words, three men came into the room. Addressing them, "This gentleman is going on a long journey," James Lee announced. "Observe him while he signs that document on the table. Each of you will witness his signature."

At 6:20 Pacific Time Frank Russell was released from the custody of the San Francisco police department. Inspector Coyne had accompanied James Lee to Frank Russell's cell.

Now, bidding farewell to Russell, the inspector looked admiringly at James Lee. "In all the records of the department there has never been a slicker piece of work!" the inspector said. "Never a slicker piece of work—nor a quicker piece of work! I'll have to hand it to you, Lee, for making a bull's-eye with your first shot."

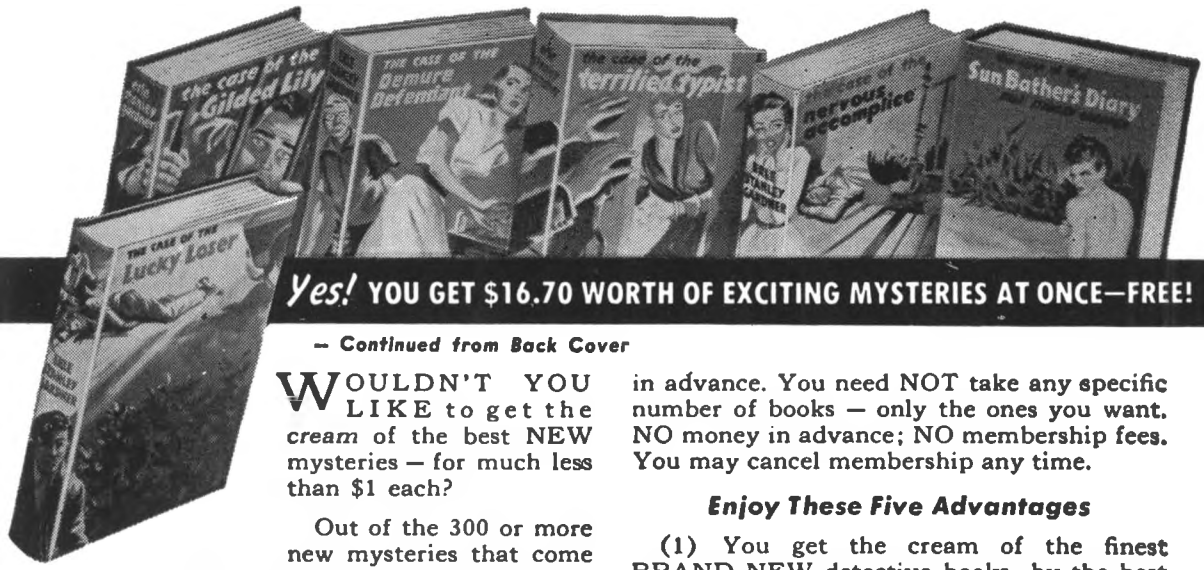
"Thank you very much, Inspector." James Lee smiled at the police officer. Then, to Frank Russell, "I have your car outside for you," he said. "Incidentally, I have taken the liberty of hiring a new cook for you. Your Japanese servant found it necessary to leave your employ. Your new cook is a Chinese friend of mine. I hope that he will be satisfactory. Wong Lok has coached him a bit."

When they were alone, to James Lee, "I will not attempt to express my gratitude," Russell said. "I can't—"

"Thank you," James Lee said. "Let's call it a closed incident. The books are balanced."

"I can't understand why—"

"Please do not try to understand Matsuta," James Lee suggested. "He was always too sure of himself. You know, Mr. Russell, sooner or later even a monkey falls out of a tree."



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