The Shaggy Dog and Other Murders

by

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The Shaggy Dog Murders

Peter Kidd should have suspected the shaggy dog of something, right away. He got into trouble the first time he saw the animal. It was the first hour of the first day of Peter Kidd's debut as a private investigator. Specifically, ten minutes after nine in the morning.

It had taken will power on the part of Peter Kidd to make himself show up a dignified ten minutes late at his own office that morning instead of displaying an unprofes-sional overenthusiasm by getting there an hour early. By now, he knew, the decorative secretary he had engaged would have the office open. He could make his entrance with quiet and decorum.

The meeting with the dog occurred in the downstairs hallway of the Wheeler Building, halfway between the street door and the elevator. It was entirely the fault of the shaggy dog, who tried to pass to Peter Kidd's right, while the man who held the dog's leash--a chubby little man with a bulbous red nose--tried to walk to the left. It didn't work.

"Sorry," said the man with the leash, as Peter Kidd stood still, then tried to step over the leash. That didn't work, either, because the dog jumped up to try to lick Peter Kidd's ear, raising the leash too high to be straddled, even by Peter's long legs.

Peter raised a hand to rescue his shell-rimmed glasses, in imminent danger of being knocked off by the shaggy dog's display of affection.

"Perhaps," he said to the man with the leash, "you had better circumambulate me."

"Huh?"

"Walk around me, I mean," said Peter. "From the Latin, you know. *Circum,* around--*ambulare,* to walk. Parallel to *circumnavigate,* which means to sail around. From *ambu-lare* also comes the word *ambulance*-- although an ambu-lance has nothing to do with walking. But that is because it came through the French *hôpital ambulant,* which ac-tually means--"

"Sorry," said the man with the leash. He had already circumambulated Peter Kidd, having started the pro-cedure even before the meaning of the word had been ex-plained to him.

"Quite all right," said Peter.

"Down, Rover," said the man with the leash. Regret-fully, the shaggy dog desisted in its efforts to reach Peter's ear and permitted him to move on to the elevator.

"Morning, Mr. Kidd," said the elevator operator, with the deference due a new tenant who has been introduced as a personal friend of the owner of the building.

"Good morning," said Peter. The elevator took him to the fifth, and top floor. The door clanged shut behind him and he walked with firm stride to the office door where-upon--with chaste circumspection--golden letters spelled out:

PETER KIDD
PRIVATE INVESTIGAT I O N S

He opened the door and went in. Everything in the office looked shiny new, including the blonde stenographer be-hind the typewriter desk. She said, "Good morning, Mr. Kidd. Did you forget the letterheads you were going to pick up on the floor below?"

He shook his head. "Thought I'd look in first to see if there were any--ah--"

"Clients? Yes, there were two. But they didn't wait. They'll be back in fifteen or twenty minutes."

Peter Kidd's eyebrows lifted above the rims of his glasses. "Two? Already?"

"Yes. One was a pudgy-looking little man. Wouldn't leave his name."

"And the other?" asked Peter.

"A big shaggy dog," said the blonde. "I got *his* name, though. It's Rover. The man called him that. He tried to kiss me."

"Eh?" said Peter Kidd.

"The dog, not the man. The man said 'Down, Rover,' so that's how I know his name. The dog's, not the man's."

Peter looked at her reprovingly. He said, "I'll be back in five minutes," and went down the stairs to the floor below. The door of the Henderson Printery was open, and he walked in and stopped in surprise just inside the doorway. The pudgy man and the shaggy dog were standing at the counter. The man was talking to Mr. Henderson, the proprietor.

"--will be all right," he was saying. "I'll pick them up Wednesday afternoon, then. And the price is two-fifty?" He took a wallet from his pocket and opened it. There seemed to be about a dozen bills in it. He put one on the counter. "Afraid I have nothing smaller than a ten." "Quite all right, Mr. Asbury," said Henderson, taking change from the register. "Your cards will be ready for you."

Meanwhile, Peter walked to the counter also, a safe distance from the shaggy dog. From the opposite side of the barrier Peter was approached by a female employee of Mr. Henderson. She smiled at him and said, "Your order is ready. I'll get it for you."

She went to the back room and Peter edged along the counter, read, upside down, the name and address written on the order blank lying there: Robert Asbury, 633 Kenmore Street. The telephone number was BEacon 3-3434. The man and the dog, without noticing Peter Kidd this time, went on their way out of the door.

Henderson said, "Hullo, Mr. Kidd. The girl taking care of you?"

Peter nodded, and the girl came from the back room with his package. A sample letterhead was pasted on the outside. He looked at it and said, "Nice work. Thanks."

Back upstairs, Peter found the pudgy man sitting in the waiting room, still holding the shaggy dog's leash.

The blonde said, "Mr. Kidd, this is Mr. Smith, the gentleman who wishes to see you. And Rover."

The shaggy dog ran to the end of the leash, and Peter Kidd patted its head and allowed it to lick his hand. He said, Glad to know you, Mr.--ah--Smith?'

"Aloysius Smith," said the little man. "I have a case I'd like you to handle for me."

"Come into my private office, then, please, Mr. Smith. Ah--you don t mind if my secretary takes notes of our conversation?"

"Not at all," said Mr. Smith, trolling along at the end of the leash alter the dog, which was following Peter Kidd into the inner office. Everyone but the shaggy dog took chairs.

The shaggy dog tried to climb up onto the desk, but was dissuaded.

"I understand," said Mr. Smith, "that private detectives always ask a retainer. I--" He took the wallet from his pocket and began to take ten-dollar bills out of it. He took out ten of them and put them on the desk. "I--I hope a hundred dollars will be sufficient."

"Ample," said Peter Kidd. "What is it you wish me to do?"

The little man smiled deprecatingly. He said, "I'm not exactly sure. But I'm scared. Somebody has tried to kill me--twice. I want you to find the owner of this dog. I can't just let it go, because it follows me now. I suppose I could--ah--take it to the pound or something, but maybe these people would keep on trying to kill me. And anyway, I'm curious."

Peter Kidd took a deep breath. He said, "So am I. Can you put it a bit more succinctly?"

"Huh?"

"Succinctly," said Peter Kidd patiently, "comes from the Latin word, *succinctus,* which is the past participle of *succingere,* the literal meaning of which is *to gird* up--but in this sense, it--"

"I knew I'd seen you before," said the pudgy man. "You're the circumabulate guy. I didn't get a good look at you then, but--"

"Circumambulate," corrected Peter Kidd.

The blonde quit drawing pothooks and looked from one to another of them. "What was that word?" she asked.

Peter Kidd grinned. "Never mind, Miss Latham. I'll explain later. Ah--Mr. Smith, I take it you are referring to the dog which is now with you. When and where did you ac-quire it--and how?"

"Yesterday, early afternoon. I found it on Vine Street near Eighth. It looked and acted lost and hungry. I took it home with me. Or rather, it followed me home once I'd spoken to it. It wasn't until I'd fed it at home that I found the note tied to its collar."

"You have that note with you?"

Mr. Smith grimaced. "Unfortunately, I threw it into the stove. It sounded so utterly silly, but I was afraid my wife would find it and get some ridiculous notion. You know how women are. It was just a little poem, and I remember every word of it. It was--uh--kind of silly, but--"

"What was it?"

The pudgy man cleared his throat. "It went like this:

I am the dog
Of a murdered man.
Escape his fate, Sir,
If you can."

"Alexander Pope," said Peter Kidd.

"Eh? Oh, you mean Pope, the poet. You mean that's something of his?"

"A parody on a bit of doggerel Alexander Pope wrote about two hundred years ago, to be engraved on the collar of the King's favorite dog. Ah--if I recall rightly, it was:

I am the dog
Of the King at Kew.
Pray tell me, Sir,
Whose dog are you?"

The little man nodded. "I'd never heard it, but-- Yes, it would be a parody all right. The original's clever. *'Whose dog are you?"* He chuckled, then sobered abruptly. "I thought my verse was funny, too, but last night--"

"Yes?"

"Somebody tried to kill me, twice. At least, I think so. I took a walk downtown, leaving the dog home, inciden-tally, and when I was crossing the street only a few blocks from home, an auto *tried* to hit me."

"Sure it wasn't accidental?"

"Well, the car actually swerved out of its way to get me, when I was only a step off the curb. I was able to jump back, by a split second and the car's tires actually scraped the curb where I'd been standing. There was no other traffic, no reason for the car to swerve, except--"

"Could you identify the car? Did you get the number?"

"I was too startled. It was going too fast. By the time I got a look at it, it was almost a block

away. All I know is that it was a sedan, dark blue or black. I don't even know how many people were in it, if there was more than one. Of course, it *might* have been just a drunken driver. I thought so until, on my way home, somebody took a shot at me.

"I was walking past the mouth of a dark alley. I heard a noise and turned just in time to see the flash of the gun, about twenty or thirty yards down the alley. I don't know by how much the bullet missed me--but it did. I ran the rest of the way home."

"Couldn't have been a backfire?"

"Absolutely not. The flash was at shoulder level above the ground, for one thing. Besides-- No, I'm sure it was a shot."

"There have never been any other attempts on your life, before this? You have no enemies?"

"No, to both questions, Mr. Kidd."

Peter Kidd interlocked his long fingers and looked at him. "And just what do you want me to do?"

"Find out where the dog came from and take him back there. To--uh--take the dog off my hands meanwhile. To find what it's all about."

Peter Kidd nodded. "Very well, Mr. Smith. You gave my secretary your address and phone number?"

"My address, yes. But please don't call me or write me. I don't want my wife to know anything about this. She is very nervous, you know. I'd rather drop in after a few days lo see you for a report. If you find it impossible to keep the dog, you can board it with a veterinary for some length of time."

When the pudgy man had left, the blonde asked, "Shall I transcribe these notes I took, right away?"

Peter Kidd snapped his fingers at the shaggy dog. He said, "Never mind, Miss Latham. Won't need them."

"Aren't yon going to work on the case?"

"I *have* worked on the case," said Peter. "It's finished."

The blonde's eyes were big as saucers. "You mean--"

"Exactly." said Peter Kidd. He rubbed the backs of the shaggy dog's ears and the dog seemed to love it. "Our client's right name is Robert Asbury, of six-thirty-three Kenmore Street, telephone Beacon three, three-four-three-four. He's an actor by profession, and out of work. He did not find the dog, for the dog was given to him by one Sidney Wheeler who |purchased the dog for that very purpose undoubtedly--who also provided the hundred-dollar fee. There's no question of murder."

Peter Kidd tried to look modest, but succeeded only in looking smug. After all, he'd solved his first case--such as it was--without leaving his office.

He was dead right, too, on all counts except one: The shaggy dog murders had hardly started.

The little man with the bulbous nose went home--not to the address he had given Peter Kidd, but to the one he had given the printer to put on the cards he'd had en-graved.

His name, of course, *was* Robert Asbury and not Aloysius Smith. For all practical purposes, that is, his name was Robert Asbury. He had been born under the name of Herman Gilg. But a long time ago he'd changed it in the interests of euphony the first time he had trodden the boards; 633 Kenmore Street was a theatrical boardinghouse.

Robert Asbury entered, whistling. A little pile of mail on the hall table yielded two bills and a theatrical trade paper for him. He pocketed the bills unopened and was looking at the want ads in the trade paper when the door at the back of the hall opened.

Mr. Asbury closed the magazine hastily, smiled his most winning smile. He said, "Ah, Mrs. Drake."

It was Hatchet-face herself, but she wasn't frowning. Must be in a good mood. Swell! The five-dollar bill he could give her on account would really tide him over. He took it from his wallet with a flourish.

"Permit me," he said, "to make a slight payment on last week's room and board, Mrs. Drake. Within a few days I shall-"

"Yes, yes," she interrupted. "Same old story, Mr. Asbury, but maybe this time it's true even if you don't know it yet. Gentleman here to see you, and says it's about a role."

"Here? You mean he's waiting in the--?"

"No, I had the parlor all tore up, cleaning. I told him he could wait in your room."

He bowed. "Thank you, Mrs. Drake." He managed to walk, not run, to the stairway, and start the ascent with dignity. But who the devil would call to see him about a role? There were dozens of producers any one of whom might phone him, but it couldn't be a producer calling in person. More likely some friend telling him where there was a spot he could try out for.

Even that would be a break. He'd felt it in his bones that having all that money in his wallet this morning had meant luck. A hundred and ten dollars! True, only ten of it was his own, and Lord, how it had hurt to hand out that hundred! But the ten meant five for his landlady and two and a half for the cards he absolutely *had* to have--you can't send in your card to producers and agents unless you have cards to send in--and cigarette money for the balance. Funny job that was. The length some people will go to play a practical joke. But it was just a joke and nothing crooked, because this Sidney Wheeler was supposed to be a right guy, and after all, he owned that office building and a couple of others; probably a hundred bucks was like a dime to him. Maybe he'd want a follow-up on the hoax, another call at this Kidd's office. That would be another easy ten bucks.

Funny guy, that Peter Kidd. Sure didn't look like a detective; looked more like a college professor. But a good detective *ought* to be part actor and not look like a shamus. This Kidd sure talked the part, too. Circum--am-- Circumambulate, and--uh--succinctly. "Perhaps you had better circumambulate me succinctly." Goofy! And that "from the Latin" stuff!

The door of his room was an inch ajar, and Mr. Asbury pushed it open, started through the doorway. Then he tried to stop and back out again.

There was a man sitting in the chair facing the doorway and only a few feet from it--the opening door had just cleared the man's knees. Mr. Asbury didn't know the man, didn't *want* to know him. He disliked the man's face at sight and disliked still more the fact that the man held a pistol with a long silencer on the barrel. The muzzle was aimed toward Mr. Asbury's third vest button.

Mr. Asbury tried to stop too fast. He stumbled, which, under the circumstances, was particularly unfortunate. He threw out his hands to save himself. It must have looked to the man in the chair as though Mr. Asbury was attack-ing him, making a diving grab for the gun.

The man pulled the trigger.

" 'I am the dog of a murdered man,'" said the blonde. " 'Escape his fate, Sir, if you can.'" She looked up from her shorthand notebook. "I don't get it."

Peter Kidd smiled and looked at the shaggy dog, which had gone to sleep in the comfortable warmth of a patch of sunlight under the window.

"Purely a hoax," said Peter Kidd. "I had a hunch Sid Wheeler would try to pull something of the sort. The hundred dollars is what makes me certain. That's the amount Sid thinks he owes me."

"Thinks he *owes* you?"

"Sid Wheeler and I went to college together. He was full of ideas for making money, even then. He worked out a scheme of printing special souvenir programs for in-tramural activities and selling advertising in them. He talked me into investing a hundred dollars with the under-standing that we'd split the profits. That particular idea of his didn't work and the money was lost.

"He insisted, though, that it was a debt, and after he began to be successful in real estate, he tried to persuade me to accept it. I refused, of course. I'd invested the money and I'd have shared the profits if there'd been any. It was *my* loss, not his."

"And you think he hired this Mr. Smith--or Asbury--"

"Of course. Didn't you see that the whole story was silly? Why would anyone put a note like that

on a dog's collar and then try to kill the man who found the dog?"

"A maniac might, mightn't he?"

"No. A homicidal maniac isn't so devious. He just kills. Besides, it was quite obvious that Mr. Asbury's story was untrue. For one thing, the fact that he gave a false name is pretty fair proof in itself. For another he put the hundred dollars on the desk before he even explained what he wanted. If it was his own hundred dollars, he wouldn't have been so eager to part with it. He'd have asked me how much of a retainer I'd need.

"I'm only surprised Sid didn't think of something more believable. He underrated me. Of all things--a lost shaggy dog."

The blonde said, "Why not a shag-- Oh, I think I know what you mean. There's a shaggy dog *story,* isn't there? Or something?"

Peter Kidd nodded. *"The* shaggy dog story, the archetype of all the esoteric jokes whose humor values lie in sheer nonsensicality. A New Yorker, who has just found a large white shaggy dog, reads in a New York paper an advertisement offering five hundred pounds sterling for the return of such a dog, giving an address in London. The New Yorker compares the markings given in the adver-tisement with those of the dog he has found and im-mediately takes the next boat to England. Arrived in Lon-don, he goes to the address given and knocks on the door. A man opens it. 'You advertised for a lost dog,' says the American, 'a shaggy dog.' 'Oh,' says the Englishman coldly, 'not so damn shaggy' . . . and he slams the door in the American's face."

The blonde giggled, then looked thoughtful. "Say, how did you know that fellow's right name?"

Peter Kidd told her about the episode in the printing shop. He said, "Probably didn't intend to go there when he left here, or he wouldn't have taken the elevator down-stairs first. Undoubtedly he saw Henderson's listing on the board in the lobby, remembered he needed cards, and took the elevator back up."

The blonde sighed. "I suppose you're right. What are you going to do about it?"

He looked thoughtful. "Return the money, of course. But maybe I can think of some way of turning the joke. After all, if I'd fallen for it, it *would* have been funny."

The man who had just killed Robert Asbury didn't think it was funny. He was scared and he was annoyed. He stood at the washstand in a corner of Asbury's dingy little room, sponging away at the front of his coat with a soiled towel. The little guy had fallen right into his lap. Lucky, in one way, because he hadn't thudded on the floor. Unlucky, in another way, because of the blood that had stained his coat. Blood on one's clothes is to be deplored at any time. It is especially deplorable when one has just com-mitted a murder.

He threw the towel down in disgust, then picked it up and began very systematically to wipe off the faucets, the bowl, the chair, and anything else upon which he might have left fingerprints.

A bit of cautious listening at the door convinced him that the hallway was empty. He let himself out, wiping first the inside knob and then the outside one, and tossing the dirty towel back into the room through the open transom.

He paused at the top of the stairs and looked down at his coat again. Not too bad--looked as though he'd spilled a drink down the front of it. The towel had taken out the color of blood, at least.

And the pistol, a fresh cartridge in it, was ready if needed, thrust through his belt, under his coat. The land-lady--well, if he didn't see her on the way out, he'd take a chance on her being able to identify him. He'd talked to her only a moment.

He went down the steps quietly and got through the front door without being heard. He walked rapidly, turn-ing several corners, and then went into a drugstore which had an enclosed plume booth. He dialed a number.

He recognized the voice that answered. He said, "This is--me. 1 saw the guy. He didn't have it. ... Uh, no, couldn't ask him. I--well, he won't talk to anyone about it now, if you get what I mean."

He listened, frowning. "Couldn't help it," he said. "Had to. He--uh--well, I had to. That's all. ... See Whee--the other guy? Yeah, guess that's all we can do now. Unless we can find out what happened *to--it.* . . . Yeah, nothing to lose now. I'll go see him right away."

Outside the drugstore, the killer looked himself over again. The sun was drying his coat and the stain hardly showed. Better not worry about it, he thought, until he was through with this business. Then he'd change clothes and throw this suit away.

He took an unnecessarily deep breath, like a man nerv-ing himself up to something, and then started walking rapidly again. He went to an office in a building about ten blocks away.

"Mr. Wheeler?" the receptionist asked. "Yes, he's in. Who shall I say is calling?"

"He doesn't know my name. But I want to see him about renting a property of his, an office."

The receptionist nodded. "Go right in. He's on the phone right now, but he'll talk to you as soon as he's finished."

"Thanks, sister," said the man with the stain on his coat. He walked to the door marked private--sidney wheeler, went through it, and closed it behind him.

Stretched out in the patch of sunlight by the window, the white shaggy dog slept peacefully. "Looks well fed," said the blonde. "What are you going to do with him?"

Peter Kidd said, "Give him back to Sid Wheeler, I sup-pose. And the hundred dollars, too, of course."

He put the bills into an envelope, stuck the envelope into his pocket. He picked up the phone and gave the number of Sid Wheeler's office. He asked for Sid.

He said, "Sid?"

"Speaking-- Just a minute--"

He heard a noise like the receiver being put down on the desk, and waited. After a few minutes Peter said, "Hello," tried again two minutes later, and then hung up his own receiver.

"What's the matter?" asked the blonde.

"He forgot to come back to the phone." Peter Kidd tapped his fingers on the desk. "Maybe it's just as well," he added thoughtfully.

"Why?"

"It would be letting him off too easily, merely to tell him that I've seen through the hoax. Somehow, I ought to be able to turn the tables, so to speak."

"Ummm," said the blonde. "Nice, but how?"

"Something in connection with the dog, of course. I'll have to find out more about the dog's antecedents, I fear."

The blonde looked at the dog. "Are you sure it *has* ante-cedents? And if so, hadn't you better call in a veterinary right away?"

Kidd frowned at her. "I must know whether he bought the dog at a pet shop, found it, got it from the pound, or whatever. Then I'll have something to work on."

"But how can you find that out without--? Oh, you're going to see Mr. Asbury and ask him. Is that it?"

"That will be the easiest way, if he knows. And he probably does. Besides, I'll need his help in reversing the hoax. He'll know, too, whether Sid had planned a follow-up of his original visit."

He stood up. "I'll go there now. I'll take the dog along. he might .need--he might have to-- Ah--a bit of fresh air and exercise may do him good. Here, Rover, old boy." He clipped the leash to the dog's collar, started to the door. He turned. "Did you make a note of that number on Kenmore Street? It was six hundred something, but I've forgotten the rest of it."

The blonde shook her head. "I made notes of the inter-view, but you told me that afterward. I didn't write it down."

"No matter. I'll get it from the printer." Henderson, the printer, wasn't busy. His assistant was talking to Captain Burgoyne of the police, who was order-ing tickets for a policemen's benefit dance. Henderson came over to the other end of the railing to Peter Kidd. He looked down at the dog with a puzzled frown.

"Say," he said, "didn't I see that pooch about an hour ago, with someone else?"

Kidd nodded. "With a man named Asbury, who gave you an order for some cards. I wanted to ask you what his address is."

"Sure, I'll look it up. But what's it all about? He lose the dog and you find it, or what?"

Kidd hesitated, remembered that Henderson knew Sid Wheeler. He told him the main details of the story, and the printer grinned appreciatively.

"And you want to make the gag backfire," he chuckled. "Swell. If I can help you, let me know. Just a minute and I'll give you this Asbury's address."

He leafed a few sheets down from the top on the order spike. "Six-thirty-three Kenmore." Peter Kidd thanked him and left.

A number of telephone poles later, he came to the corner of Sixth and Kenmore. The minute he turned that corner, he knew something was wrong. Nothing psychic about it--there was a crowd gathered in front of a brownstone house halfway down the block. A uniformed police-man at the bottom of the steps was keeping the crowd back. A police ambulance and other cars were at the curb in front.

Peter Kidd lengthened his stride until he reached the edge of the crowd. By that time he could see that the building was numbered 633. By that time the stretcher was coming out of the door. The body on the stretcher-- and the fact that the blanket was pulled over the face showed that it was a dead body--was that of a short, pudgy person.

The beginning of a shiver started down the back of Peter Kidd's neck. But it was a coincidence, of course. It had to be, he told himself, even if the dead man *was* Robert Asbury.

A dapper man with a baby face and cold eyes was run-ning down the steps and pushing his way out through the crowd. Kidd recognized him as Wesley Powell of the *Tribune.* He reached for Powell's arm, asked, "What hap-pened in there?"

Powell didn't stop. He said, "Hi, Kidd. Drugstore--phone!"

He hurried off, but Peter Kidd turned and fell in step with him. He repeated his question. "Guy named Asbury, shot. Dead."

"Who was it?"

"Dunno. Cops got description from landlady, though, the guy was waiting for him in his room when he came home less'n hour ago. Musta burned him down, lammed quick. Landlady found corpse. Heard other guy leave and went up to ask Asbury about job--guy was supposed to see him about a job. Asbury an actor, Robert Asbury. Know him?"

"Met him once," Kidd said. "Anything about a dog?"

Powell walked faster. "What you mean," he demanded, "anything about a dog?"

"Uh--did Asbury have a dog?"

"Hello, no. You can't keep a dog in a rooming house. Nothing was said about a dog. Damn it, where's a store or a tavern or *any* place with a phone in it?"

Kidd said, "I believe I remember a tavern being around the next corner."

"Good." Powell looked back, before turning the corner, to see if the police cars were still there, and then walked even faster. He dived into the tavern and Kidd followed him.

Powell said, "Two beers," and hurried to the telephone on the wall.

Peter Kidd listened closely while the reporter gave the story to a rewrite man. He learned nothing new of any importance. The landlady's name was Mrs. Belle Drake. The place was a theatrical boardinghouse. Asbury had been "at liberty" for several months.

Powell came back to the bar. He said, "What was that about a dog?" He wasn't looking at Kidd, he was looking out into the street, over the low curtains in the window of the tavern.

Peter Kidd said, "Dog? Oh, this Asbury used to have a dog when I knew him. Just wondered if he still had it."

Powell shook his head. He said, "That guy across the street--is he following you or me?"

Peter Kidd looked out the window. A tall, thin man stood well back in a doorway. He didn't appear to be watching the tavern. Kidd said, "He's no acquaintance of mine. What makes you think he's following either of us?"

"He was standing in a doorway across the street from the house where the murder was. Noticed him when I came out of the door. Now he's in a doorway over there. Maybe he's just sight-seeing. Where'd you get the pooch?"

Peter Kidd glanced down at the shaggy dog. "Man gave him to me," he said. "Rover, Mr. Powell. Powell, Rover."

"I don't believe it," Powell said. "No dog is actually named Rover any more."

"I know," Peter Kidd agreed solemnly, "but the man who *named* him didn't know. What about the fellow across the street?"

"We'll find out. We go out and head in opposite direc-tions. I head downtown, you head for the river. We'll see which one of us he follows."

When they left, Peter Kidd didn't look around behind him for two blocks. Then he stopped, cupping his hands to light a cigarette and half turning as though to shield it from the wind.

The man wasn't across the street. Kidd turned a little farther and saw why the tall man wasn't across the street. He was directly behind, only a dozen steps away. He hadn't stopped when Kidd stopped. He kept coming.

As the match burned his fingers, Peter Kidd remembered that these two blocks had been between warehouses. There was no traffic, pedestrian or otherwise. He saw that the man had already unbuttoned his coat--which had a stain down one side of it. He was pulling a pistol out of his belt.

The pistol had a long silencer on it, obviously the reason why he'd carried it that way instead of in a holster or in a pocket. The pistol was already half out of the belt.

Kidd did the only thing that occurred to him. He let go the leash and said, "Sic him, Rover!"

The shaggy dog bounded forward and jumped up just as the tall man pulled the trigger. The gun pinged dully but the shot went wild. Peter Kidd had himself set by then, jumped forward after the dog. A silenced gun, he knew, fires only one shot. Between him and the dog, they should be able . . .

Only it didn't work that way. The shaggy dog had bounded up indeed, but was now trying to lick the tall man's face. The tall man, his nerve apparently having de-parted with the single cartridge in his gun, gave the dog a push and took to his heels. Peter Kidd fell over the dog. That was that. By the time Kidd untangled himself from dog and leash, the tall man was down an alley and out of sight.

Peter Kidd stood up. The dog was running in circles around him, barking joyously. It wanted to play some more. Peter Kidd recovered the loop end of the leash and spoke bitterly. The shaggy dog wagged its tail.

They'd walked several blocks before it occurred to Kidd that he didn't know where he was going. For that matter, he told himself, he didn't really know where he'd been. It had been such a beautifully simple matter, be-fore he'd left his office.

Except that if the shaggy dog *hadn't* been the dog of a murdered man, it was one now. Except for that bullet having gone wild, his present custodian, one Peter Kidd, might be in a position to ask Mr. Aloysius Smith Robert Asbury just exactly what the devil it was all about.

It had been so beautifully simple, as a *hoax.* For a mo-ment he tried to think that-- But no, that was silly. The police department didn't go in for hoaxes. Asbury had really been murdered.

"I am the dog of a murdered man. . . . Escape his fate, Sir, if you can...."

Had Asbury actually found such a note and then been murdered? Had the man with the silenced gun been following Kidd because he'd recognized the dog? A nut, maybe, out to kill each successive possessor of the shaggy dog?

Had Asbury's entire story been true--except for the phony name he'd given--and had he given a wrong name and address only because he'd been afraid?

But how to--? Of course. Ask Sid Wheeler. If Sid had originated the hoax and hired Asbury, then the murder was a coincidence--one hell of a whopping coincidence. Yes, they were bound for Sid Wheeler's office. He knew that now, but they'd been walking in the wrong direction. He turned and started back, gradually lengthening his strides. A block later, it occurred to him it would be quicker to phone. At least to make certain Sid was in, not out collecting rents or something.

He stopped in the nearest drugstore and: "Mr. Wheeler," said the feminine voice, "is not here. He was taken to the hospital an hour ago. This is his secretary speaking. If there is anything I can--"

"What's the matter with Sid?" he demanded. There was a slight hesitation and he; went on: "This is Peter Kidd, Miss Ames. You know me. What's wrong?"

"He--he was shot. The police just left. They told me not to g-give out the story, but you're a detective and a friend of his, so I guess it's all ri--"

"How badly was he hurt?"

"They-they say he'll get better, Mr. Kidd. The bullet went through his chest, but on the right side and didn't touch his heart. He's at Bethesda Hospital. You can find out more there than I can tell you. Except that he's still unconscious--you won't be able to see him yet."

"How did it happen, Miss Ames?"

"A man I'd never seen before said he wanted to see Mr. Wheeler on business and I sent him into the inner office. Mr. Wheeler was talking on the phone to some-one who'd just called-- What was that, Mr. Kidd?"

Peter Kidd didn't care to repeat it. He said, "Never mind. Go on."

"He was in there only a few seconds and came out and left, fast. I couldn't figure out why he'd changed his mind so quick, and after he left I looked in and-- Well, I thought Mr. Wheeler was dead. I guess the man thought so too, that is, if he meant to kill Mr. Wheeler, he could have easily--uh--"

"A silenced gun?"

"The police say it must have been, when I told them I hadn't heard the shot."

"What did the man look like?"

"Tall and thin, with a kind of sharp face. He had a light suit on. There was a slight stain of some kind on the front of the coat."

"Miss Ames," said Peter Kidd, "did Sid Wheeler buy or find a dog recently?"

"Why, yes, this morning. A big white shaggy one. He came in at eight o'clock and had the dog with him on a leash. He said he'd bought it. He said it was to play a *joke* on somebody."

"What happened next--about the dog?"

"He turned it over to a man who had an appointment with him at eight-thirty. A fat, funny-looking little man. He didn't give his name. But he must have been in on the joke, whatever it was, because they were chuckling to-gether when Mr. Wheeler walked to the door with him."

"You know where he bought the dog? Anything more about it?"

"No, Mr. Kidd. He just said he bought it. And that it was for a joke."

Looking dazed, Peter Kidd hung up the receiver.

Sid Wheeler, shot.

Outside the booth, the shaggy dog stood on its hind legs and pawed at the glass. Kidd stared at it. Sid Wheeler had bought a dog. Sid Wheeler had been shot with intent to kill. Sid had given the dog to actor Asbury. Asbury had been murdered. Asbury had given the dog to him, Peter Kidd. And less than half an hour ago, an attempt had been made on *his* life.

The dog of a murdered man.

Well, there wasn't any question now of telling the police. Sid might have started this as a hoax, but a wheel had come off somewhere, and suddenly.

He'd phone the police right here and now. He dropped the dime and then--on a sudden hunch--dialed his own office number instead of that of headquarters. When the blonde's voice answered, he started talking fast: "Peter Kidd, Miss Latham. I want you to close the office at once and go home. Right away, but be sure you're not followed before you go there. If anyone seems to be following you, go to the police. Stay on busy streets meanwhile. Watch out particularly for a tall, thin man who has a stain on the front of his coat. Got that?"

"Yes, but--but the police are here, Mr. Kidd. There's a Lieutenant West of Homicide here now, just came into the office asking for you. Do you still want me to--?"

Kidd sighed with relief. "No, it's all right then. Tell him to wait. I'm only a few blocks away and will come there at once."

He dropped another coin and called Bethesda Hospital. Sid Wheeler was in serious, but not critical, condition. He was still unconscious and wouldn't be able to have visitors for at least twenty-four hours.

He walked back to the Wheeler Building, slowly. The first faint glimmering of an idea was coming. But there were still a great many things that didn't make any sense at all.

"Lieutenant West, Mr. Kidd," said the blonde.

The big man nodded. "About a Robert Asbury, who was killed this morning. You knew him?"

"Not before this morning," Kidd told him. "He came here--ostensibly--to offer me a case. The circumstances were very peculiar."

"We found your name and the address of this office on a slip of paper in his pocket," said West. "It wasn't in his handwriting. Was it yours?"

"Probably it's Sidney Wheeler's handwriting, Lieuten-ant. Sid sent him here, I have cause to believe. And you know that an attempt was made to kill Wheeler this morning?"

"The devil! Had a report on that, but we hadn't con-nected it with the Asbury murder as yet."

"And there was another murder attempt," said Kidd. "Upon me. That was why I phoned. Perhaps I'd better tell you the whole story from the beginning."

The lieutenant's eyes widened as he listened. From time to time he turned to look at the dog.

"And you say," he said, when Kidd had finished, "that you have the money in an envelope in your pocket? May I see it?"

Peter Kidd handed over the envelope. West glanced inside it and then put it in his pocket. "Better take this along," he said. "Give you a receipt if you want, but you've got a witness." He glanced at the

blonde.

"Give it to Wheeler," Kidd told him. "Unless--maybe you've got the same idea I have. You must have, or you wouldn't have wanted the money." "What idea's that?"

"The dog," said Peter Kidd, "might not have anything to do with all this at all. Today the dog was in the hands of three persons--Wheeler, Asbury, and myself. An at-tempt was made--successfully, I am glad to say, in only one case out of the three--to kill each of us. But the dog was merely the--ah--*deus ex machina* of a hoax that didn't come off, or else came off too well. There's something else involved--the money."

"How do you mean, Mr. Kidd?"

"That the money was the object of the crimes, not the dog. That money was in the hands of Wheeler, Asbury, and myself, just as was the dog. The killer's been trying to get that money back."

"Back? How do you mean, *back?* I don't get what you're driving at, Mr. Kidd."

"Not because it's a hundred dollars. Because it isn't."

"You mean counterfeit? We can check that easy enough, but what makes you think so?"

"The fact," said Peter Kidd, "that I can think of no other motive at all. No reasonable one, I mean. But postu-late, for the sake of argument, that the money *is* counter-feit. That would, or could, explain everything. Suppose one of Sid Wheeler's tenants is a counterfeiter."

West frowned. "All right, suppose it."

"Sid could have picked up the rent on his way to his office this morning. That's how he makes most of his collections. Say the rent is a hundred dollars. Might have been slightly more or less--but by mistake, sheer mistake, he gets paid in counterfeit money instead of genuine.

"No counterfeiter--it is obvious--would ever dare give out his own product in such a manner that it would di-rectly trace back to him. It's--uh--"

"Shoved," said West. "I know how they work."

"But as it happened, Sid wasn't banking the money. He needed a hundred to give to Asbury along with the dog. And--"

He broke off abruptly and his eyes got wider. "Lord," he said, "it's obvious!"

"What's obvious?" West growled.

"Everything. It all spells *Henderson."*

"Huh?"

"Henderson, the job printer on the floor below this. He's the only printer-engraver among

Wheeler's tenants, to begin with. And Asbury stopped in there this morning, on his way *here.* Asbury paid him for some cards out of a ten-dollar bill he got from Wheeler! Henderson saw the other tens in Asbury's wallet when he opened it, knew that Asbury had the money he'd given Wheeler for the rent.

"So he sent his torpedo--the tall thin man--to see Asbury, and the torpedo kills Asbury and then finds the money is gone--he's given it to me. So he goes and kills Sid Wheeler--or thinks he does--so the money can't be traced back to him from wherever Asbury spent it.

"And then--" Peter Kidd grinned wryly-- "I put my-self on the spot by dropping into Henderson's office to get Asbury's address, and *explaining* to him what it's all about, letting him know I have the money and know As-bury got it from Wheeler. I even tell him where I'm going--to Asbury's. So the torpedo waits for me there. It fits like a gl-- Wait, I've got something that proves even better. This--"

As he spoke he was bending over and opening the second drawer of his desk. His hand went into it and came out with a short-barreled Police Positive.

"You will please raise your hands," he said, hardly chang-ing his voice. "And, Miss Latham, you will please phone for the police."

"But how," demanded the blonde, when the police had left, "did you guess that he wasn't a *real* detective?"

"I didn't," said Peter Kidd, "until I was explaining things to him, and to myself at the same time. Then it occurred to me that the counterfeiting gang wouldn't simply drop the whole thing because they'd missed me once, and--well, as it happens, I was right. If he'd been a real detec-tive, I'd have been making a fool out of myself, of course, but if he wasn't, I'd have been making a corpse out of my-self, and that would be worse."

"And me, too," said the blonde. She shivered a little. "He'd have had to kill both of us!"

Peter Kidd nodded gravely. "I think the police will find that Henderson is just the printer for the gang and the tall thin fellow is just a minion. The man who came here, I'd judge, was the real entrepreneur."

"The what?"

"The manager of the business. From the Old French *entreprendre,* to undertake, which comes from the Latin *inter* plus *pren--"*

"You mean the bigshot," said the blonde. She was open-ing a brand-new ledger. "Our first case. Credit entry-one hundred dollars counterfeit. Debit--given to police-one hundred dollars counterfeit. And--oh, yes, one shaggy dog. Is that a debit or a credit entry?"

"Debit," said Peter Kidd.

The blonde wrote and then looked up. "How about the credit entry to balance it off? What'll I put in the credit column?"

Peter Kidd looked at the dog and grinned. He said, "Just write in 'Not so *damn* shaggy!' "

Life and Fire

Mr. Henry Smith rang the doorbell. Then he stood looking at his reflection in the glass pane of the front door. A green shade was drawn down behind the glass and the reflection was quite clear.

It showed him a little man with gold-rimmed spectacles of the pince-nez variety, wearing a conservatively cut suit of banker's gray.

Mr. Smith smiled genially at the reflection and the re-flection smiled back at him. He noticed that the necktie knot of the little man in the glass was a quarter of an inch askew; he straightened his own tie and the reflection in the glass did the same thing.

Mr. Smith rang the bell a second time. Then he decided he would count up to fifty and that if no one answered by then, it would mean that no one was home. He'd counted up to seventeen when he heard footsteps on the porch steps behind him, and turned his head.

A loudly checkered suit was coming up the steps of the porch. The man inside the suit, Mr. Smith

decided, must have walked around from beside or behind the house. For the house was out in the open, almost a mile from its nearest neighbor, and there was nowhere else that Check-ered Suit could have come from.

Mr. Smith lifted his hat, revealing a bald spot only medium in size but very shiny. "Good afternoon," he said. "My name is Smith. I--"

"Lift 'em," commanded Checkered Suit grimly. He had a hand jammed into his right coat pocket.

"Huh?" There was utter blankness in the little man's voice. "Lift what? I'm sorry, really, but I don't--"

"Don't stall," said Checkered Suit. "Put up your mitts and then march on into the house."

The little man with the gold pince-nez glasses smiled. he raised his hands shoulder-high, and gravely replaced his hat. Checkered Suit had removed his hand halfway from his coat pocket and the heavy automatic it contained looked--from Mr. Smith's point of view--like a small can-non.

"I'm sure there must be some mistake," said Mr. Smith brightly, smiling doubtfully this time. "I am not a burglar, nor am I--"

"Shut up," Checkered Suit said. "Lower one hand enough to turn the knob and go on in. It ain't locked. But move slow."

He followed Mr. Smith into the hallway.

A stocky man with unkempt black hair and a greasy face had been waiting just inside. He glowered at the little man and then spoke over the little man's shoulder to Checkered Suit. "What's the idea bringing this guy in here?" he wanted to know.

"I think it's the shamus we been watching out for, Boss. It says its name's Smith."

Greasy Face frowned, staring first at the little man with the pince-nez glasses and then at Checkered Suit.

"Hell," he said. "That ain't a dick. Lots of people named Smith. And would he use his right name?"

Mr. Smith cleared his throat. "You gentlemen," he said, with only the slightest emphasis on the second word, "seem to be laboring under some misapprehension. I am Henry Smith, agent for the Phalanx Life and Fire Insur-ance Company. I have just been transferred to this ter-ritory and am making a routine canvass.

"We sell both major types of insurance, gentlemen, life *and* fire. And for the owner of the home, we have a combination policy that is a genuine innovation. If you will permit me the use of my hands, so I can take my rate book from my pocket, I should be very pleased to show you what we have to offer."

Greasy Face's glance was again wavering between the insurance agent and Checkered Suit. He said "Nuts" quite disgustedly.

Then his gaze fixed on the man with the gun, and his voice got louder. "You half-witted ape," he said. "Ain't you got eyes? Does this guy look like--?"

Checkered Suit's voice was defensive. "How'd I know, Eddie?" he whined, and the insurance agent felt the pressure of the automatic against his back relax. "You told me we were on the lookout for this shamus Smith, and that he was a little guy. And he coulda disguised him-self, couldn't he? And if he did come, he wouldn't be wearing his badge in sight or anything."

Greasy Face grunted. "Okay, okay, you done it now. We'll have to wait until Joe gets back to be sure. Joe's seen the Smith we got tipped was coining up here."

The little man in the gold-rimmed glasses smiled more confidently now. "May I lower my arms?" he asked. "It's quite uncomfortable to hold them this way."

The stocky man nodded. He spoke to Checkered Suit, "Run him over, though, just to make sure."

Mr. Smith felt a hand reach around and tap his pockets lightly and expertly, first on one side of him and then on the other. He noticed wonderingly that the touch was so light he probably wouldn't have noticed it at all if the stocky man's remark had not led him to expect it.

"Okay," said Checkered Suit's voice behind him. "He's clean, Boss. Guess I did pull a boner."

The little man lowered his hands, and then took a black leather-bound notebook from the inside

pocket of his banker's-gray coat. It was a dog-eared rate book.

He thumbed over a few pages, and then looked up smiling. "I would deduce," he said, "that the occupation in which you gentlemen engage--whatever it may be--is a hazardous one. I fear our company would not be inter-ested in selling you the life insurance policies for that reason.

"But we sell both kinds of insurance, life and fire. Does one of you gentlemen own this house?"

Greasy Face looked at him incredulously. "Are you try-ing to kid us?" he asked.

Mr. Smith shook his head and the motion made his pince-nez glasses fall off and dangle on their black silk cord. He put them back on and adjusted them carefully before he spoke.

"Of course," he said earnestly, "it is true that the manner of my reception here was a bit unusual. But that is no reason why--if this house belongs to one of you and is not insured against fire--I should not try to interest you in a policy. Your occupation, unless I should try to sell you life insurance, is none of my business and has nothing to do with insuring a house. Indeed, I understand that at one time our company had a large policy covering fire loss on a Florida mansion owned by a certain Mr. Capone who, a few years ago, was quite well known as--"

Greasy Face said, "It ain't our house."

Mr. Smith replaced his rate book in his pocket regret-fully. "I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said.

He was interrupted by a series of loud but dull thuds, coming from somewhere upstairs, as though someone was pounding frantically against a wall.

Checkered Suit stepped past Mr. Smith and started for the staircase. "Kessler's got a hand or a foot loose," he growled as he went past Greasy Face. "I'll go--"

He caught the glare in Greasy Face's eyes and was on the defensive again. "So what?" he asked. "We can't let this guy go anyway, can we? Sure, it was my fault, but now he knows we're watching for cops and that *something's* up. And if we can't let him go, what for should we be careful what we say?"

The little man's eyes had snapped open wide behind the spectacles. The name Kessler had struck a responsive chord, and for the first time the little man realized that he himself was in grave danger. The newspapers had been full of the kidnaping of millionaire Jerome Kessler, who was being held for ransom. Mr. Smith had noted the ac-counts particularly, because his company, he knew, had a large policy on Mr. Kessler's life.

But the lace of Mr. Smith was impassive as Greasy Face swung round to look at him. He stepped quite close to him to peer into his face, the gesture of a nearsighted man.

Mr. Smith smiled at him. "I hope you'll pardon me," he said mildly, "but I can tell that you are in need of glasses. I know, because I used to be quite nearsighted myself. Until I got these glasses, I couldn't tell a horse from an auto at twenty yards, although I could read quite well. I can recommend a good optometrist in Springfield who can--"

"Brother," said Greasy Face, "if you're putting on an act, don't overdo it. If you ain't--" He shook his head.

Mr. Smith smiled. He said deprecatingly, "You mustn't mind me. I know I'm talkative by nature, but one has to be to sell insurance. If one isn't that way by nature, he be-comes that way, if you get what I mean. So I hope you won't mind my--" "Shut up."

"Certainly. Do you mind if I sit down? I canvassed all the way out here from Springfield today, and I'm tired. Of course, I have a car, but--"

As he talked, he had seated himself in a chair at the side of the hall; now, before crossing his legs, he carefully adjusted a trouser leg so as not to spoil the crease.

Checkered Suit was coming down the stairs again. "He was kicking a wall," he said. "I tied up his foot again." He looked at Mr. Smith and then grinned at Greasy Face. "He sold you an insurance policy yet?"

The stocky man glowered back. "The next time you bring in--"

There were footsteps coming up the drive, and the stocky man whirled and put his eye to the crack between the shade of the door and the edge of its pane of glass. His right hand jerked a revolver from his hip pocket.

Then he relaxed and replaced the revolver. "It's Joe," he said over his shoulder to Checkered

Suit. He opened the door as the footsteps sounded on the porch.

A tall man with dark eyes set deep into a cadaverous face came in. Almost at once those eyes fell on the little insurance agent, and he looked startled. "Who the hell--?" Greasy Face closed the door and locked it. "It's an in-surance agent, Joe. Wanta buy a policy? Well, he won't sell you one, because you're in a hazardous occupation." Joe whistled. "Does he know--?"

"He knows too much." The stocky man jerked a thumb at the man in the checkered suit. "Bright Boy here even pops out with the name of the guy upstairs. But listen, Joe, his name's Smith--this guy here, I mean. Look at him close. Could he be this Smith of the Feds, that we had a tip was in Springfield?"

The cadaverous-faced man glanced again at the in-surance agent and grinned. "Not unless he shaved off twenty pounds weight and whittled his nose down an inch, it ain't."

"Thank you," said the little man gravely. He stood up. "And now that you have learned I am not who you thought I was, do you mind if I leave? I have a certain amount of this territory which I intend to cover by quitting time this evening."

Checkered Suit put a hand against Mr. Smith's chest and pushed him buck into the chair. He turned to the stocky man. "Boss," he said, "I think this little guy's razzing us. Can I slug him one?"

"Hold it," said the stocky man. He turned to Joe. "How's about--what you were seeing about? Everything going okay?"

The tall man nodded. "Payoff's tomorrow. It's airtight." He shot a sidewise glance at the insurance agent. "We gonna have this guy on our hands until then? Let's bump him off now."

Mr. Smith's eyes opened wide. "Bump?" he asked. "You mean murder me? But what on earth would you have to gain by killing me?"

Checkered Suit took the automatic out of his coat pocket. "Now or tomorrow, Boss," he asked. "What's the diff?"

Greasy Face shook his head. "Keep your shirt on," he replied. "We don't want to have a stiff around, just in case." Mr. Smith cleared his throat. "The question," he said, "seems to be whether you kill me now or tomorrow. But why should the necessity of killing me arise at all? I may as well admit that I recognized Mr. Kessler's name and have deduced that you are holding him here. But if you collect the ransom tomorrow for him, you can just move on and leave me tied up here. Or release me when you release him. Or-"

"Listen," said Greasy Face, "you're a nervy little guy and I'd let you go if I could, but you can identify us, see? The bulls would show you galleries and you'd spot our mugs and they'd know who we are. We've been photo-graphed, see? We ain't amateurs. But we'll let you stick around till tomorrow if you'll only shut up and--" "But hasn't Mr. Kessler seen you also?" The stocky man nodded. "He gets it, too," he said calmly. "As soon as we've collected."

Mr. Smith's eyes were wide. "But that's hardly fair, is it? To collect a ransom with the agreement that you will release him, and then fail to keep your part of the con-tract? To say the least, it's poor business. I thought that there was honor among--er--it will make people distrust you."

Checkered Suit raised a clubbed revolver. "Boss," he pleaded, "at least let me conk him one."

Greasy Face shook his head. "You and Joe take him down to the cellar. Cuff him to that iron cot and he'll be all right. Yeah, tap him one if he argues about it, but don't kill him, yet."

The little man rose with alacrity. "I assure you I shall not argue about it. I have no desire to be--"

Checkered Suit grabbed him by an arm and hustled him toward the cellar steps. Joe followed.

At the foot of the steps, Mr. Smith stopped so suddenly that Joe almost stepped on him. Mr. Smith pointed ac-cusingly at a pile of red cans.

"Is that gasoline?" He peered closer. "Yes, I can see that it is, and smell that it is. Keeping cans of it like that in a place like that is a fire hazard, especially when one of the cans is leaking. Just look at the floor, will you? Wet with it."

Checkered Suit yanked at his arm. Mr. Smith gave ground, still protesting. "A wooden floor, too! In all the houses I've examined when I've issued fire policies, I've never seen--

"Joe," said Checkered Suit, "I'll kill him if I sock him, and the boss'll get mad. Got your sap?"

"Sap?" asked the little man. "That's a new term, isn't it? What is a--?" Joe's blackjack punctuated the sentence.

It was very dark when Mr. Smith opened his eyes. At first, it was a swirling, confused, and thunderous dark-ness. But after a while it resolved itself into the everyday damp darkness of a cellar, and there was a little square

of moonlight coming in at a window over his head. The thunder, too, resolved itself into nothing more startling than the sound of footsteps on the floor above.

His head ached badly, and Mr. Smith tried to raise his hands to it. One of them moved only an inch or two be-fore there was a metallic clank, and the hand couldn't be moved any farther. He explored with the hand that was free and found that his right hand was cuffed to the side of the metal cot with a heavy handcuff.

He found, too, that there was no mattress on the bed and that the bare metal springs were cold as well as un-comfortable.

Slowly and painfully at first, Mr. Smith raised himself to a sitting position on the edge of the bed and began to examine the possibilities of his situation.

His eyes were by now accustomed to the dimness. The metal cot was a very heavy one. Another one just like it stood on end against the wall at the head of the cot to which Mr. Smith was handcuffed. At first glance it ap-peared ready to crash down on Mr. Smith's head, but he reached out his left hand and found that it stood there quite solidly.

He heard the cellar door open and footsteps starting down. A light flashed on back by the steps and another at a work bench on the opposite side of the cellar. Checkered Suit appeared, and crossed to the work bench. He glanced over toward the dark corner where Mr. Smith was, but Mr. Smith was lying quietly on the cot.

After a moment at the bench he went back up the stairs. The two lights remained on.

Mr. Smith rose to a sitting position again, this time slowly so the springs of the cot would make no noise. Once erect, however, he went to work rapidly. What he was about to attempt was, he knew, a long-shot chance, but he had nothing to lose.

With his free hand he pushed and pulled at the iron cot leaning against the wall, first grasping the frame as high as he could reach, then as low. It was heavy and hard to shift, but finally he got it off balance, ready to topple over on his head if he had not held it back. Then he got it back on balance again, by a hair. He moved his hand away experimentally. The cot stood, a sword of Damocles over his head.

Then lifting a foot up to the edge of the cot on which he sat, he took out the lace of one of his shoes. It wasn't easy, with one hand, to tie an end of the shoelace to the frame of the upended cot, but he managed. Holding the other end of the shoelace, he lay down again.

He had worked more rapidly than had been necessary. It was a full ten minutes before Checkered Suit returned to the cellar.

Through slitted eyes, the insurance agent saw that he carried several objects--a cigar box, a clock, dry-cell bat-teries. He put them down on the bench and started to work.

"Making a bomb?" Mr. Smith asked pleasantly.

Checkered Suit turned around and glowered. "You talking again? Keep your lip buttoned, or I'll--"

Mr. Smith did not scorn to hoar. "I take it you intend to plant the bomb near that pile of gasoline cans tomorrow?" he asked. "Yes, I can sec now that I was hasty in criticiz-ing it as a fire hazard. It's all in the point of view, of course. You want it to be a fire hazard. Seeing things from the point of view of an insurance man, I can hardly approve. But from your point of view, I can quite ap-preciate--"

"Shut up!" Checkered Suit's voice was exasperated.

"I take it you intend to wait until you have collected the ransom money for Mr. Kessler, and then, leaving him and me in the house--probably already dead--you will set the little bomb and take your departure."

"That sock Joe gave you should have lasted longer," said Checkered Suit. "Want another?"

"Not particularly," Mr. Smith replied. "In fact, my head still aches from the last one I had from that--did you call it a 'sap'?" He sighed. "I fear my knowledge of the slang of the underworld to which you gentlemen belong is sadly lacking--"

Checkered Suit slammed the cigar box back on the bench and took the automatic from his pocket. Holding it by the barrel, he stalked across the cellar toward Mr. Smith.

The little man's eyes appeared to be closed, but he rambled on, "It is rather a coincidence, isn't it, that I should call here to sell insurance--life and fire--and that you should be so sadly ill-qualified to receive either one? Your occupation is definitely hazardous. And--"

Checkered Suit had reached the bed. He bent over and raised the clubbed pistol. But apparently the little man's eyes hadn't been closed. He jerked up his free hand to ward off the threatened blow, and the hand held the shoestring. The heavy metal cot, balanced on end, toppled and fell.

It had gained momentum by the time a corner of it struck the head of Checkered Suit. Quite sufficient mo-mentum. Mr. Smith's long-shot chance had come off. He said "Oof" as Checkered Suit fell across him and the cot came on down atop Checkered Suit.

But his left hand caught the automatic and kept it from clattering to the floor. As soon as he caught his breath, he wormed his hand, not without difficulty, be-tween his own body and that of the gangster. In a vest pocket, he found a key that unlocked the handcuff.

He wriggled his way out, trying to do so quietly. But the upper of the two cots slipped and there was a clang of metal against metal.

There were footsteps overhead and Mr. Smith darted around behind the furnace as the cellar door opened. A voice--it seemed to be the voice of the man they had called Joe-called out, "Larry!" Then the footsteps started down the stairs.

Mr. Smith leaned around the furnace and pointed Checkered Suit's automatic at the descending gangster. "You will please raise your hands," he said. Then he noticed that smoke curled upward from a lighted cig-arette in Joe's right hand. "And be very careful of that--"

With an oath, the cadaverous-faced man reached for a shoulder holster. As he did so, the cigarette dropped from his hand.

Mr. Smith's eyes didn't follow the cigarette to the floor, for Joe's revolver had leaped from its holster almost as though by magic and was spitting noise and fire at him. A bullet nicked the furnace near Mr. Smith's head.

Mr. Smith pulled at the trigger of the automatic, but nothing happened. Desperately, he pulled harder. Still nothing--

At the foot of the staircase a sheet of bright flame, started by Joe's dropped cigarette, flared upward from the wooden floor, saturated with gasoline from the leaky can.

The sheet of flame leaped for the stack of cans, found the hole in the leaky one. Mr. Smith had barely time to jerk his head back behind the furnace before the explo-sion came.

Even though he was shielded from its force, the concus-sion sent him sprawling back against the steps that led to the outer door of the cellar. Behind him, as he got to his feet, half the cellar was an inferno of flames. He couldn't see Joe--or Checkered Suit.

He ran up the steps and tried the slanting outside cellar door. It seemed to be padlocked from the outside. But he could see where the hasp of the padlock was. He put the muzzle of the automatic against the door there, and tried the trigger again. He brought up his other hand and tried the gun with both hands. It wouldn't fire.

He glanced behind him again. Flames filled almost the entire cellar. At first he thought he was hopelessly trapped. Then through the smoke and flame he saw that there was an outside window only a few yards away, and a chair that would give him access to it.

Still clinging to the gun that wouldn't shoot, he got the window open and climbed out. A sheet of flame, drawn by the draft of the opened window, followed him out into the night.

He paused only an instant for some cool air and a quick look, to be sure his clothing wasn't afire, and then ran around the house and up onto the front porch. Already the fire was licking upward. Through the first-floor win-dows he could see its red glare.

He ran up onto the front porch. The gun that wouldn't shoot came in handy to knock the glass, already cracked by explosion, out of the front door so he could reach in and turn the key.

As he went into the hallway, Mr. Smith heard the back door of the house slam, and surmised that Greasy Face was making his getaway. But Mr. Smith's interests lay upstairs; he didn't believe that the fleeing criminal would have untied his captive.

The staircase was ablaze, but still intact. Mr. Smith took a handkerchief from his pocket, held it tightly over his mouth and nose, and darted up through the flames.

The hallway on the second floor was swirling with smoke, but not yet afire. He stopped only long enough to beat out the little flame that was licking upward from one of his trouser cuffs, and then began to throw open the doors that led from the hallway.

In the center room on the left, just down the hallway from the stairs, a bound and gagged man was lying on a bed. Hurriedly Mr. Smith took off the gag and began to work on the ropes that were knotted tightly about his feet and ankles.

"You're Mr. Kessler?" he asked.

The gray-haired man took a deep breath and then nodded weakly. "Are you the police or--?"

Mr. Smith shook his head. "I'm an agent for the Phalanx Life and Fire Insurance Company, Mr. Kessler. I've got to get you out of here, because the house is burning down and we've got a big policy on your life. Two hundred thousand, isn't it?"

The ropes at the wrists of the prisoner gave way. "You rub your wrists, Mr. Kessler," said Mr. Smith, "to get back your circulation, while I untie your ankles. We'll have to work fast to get out of here. I hope we haven't a policy on this house, because there isn't going to be a house here in another fifteen or twenty minutes."

The final knots parted. Over the crackling of flames, Mr. Smith heard the cough of an automobile's engine. He ran to the open window and looked out, while Mr. Kessler stood up.

Through the windshield of the car nosing out of the garage behind the house, he could see the face of the leader of the trio of kidnapers. The driveway ran under the window.

"The last survivor of your three acquaintances is leav-ing us," said Mr. Smith over his shoulder. "I think the police would appreciate it if we slowed down his de-parture."

He picked up a heavy metal-based lamp from the bureau beside the window and jerked it loose from its cord.

As he leaned out of the window, the car, gathering speed, was almost directly below him. Mr. Smith poised the lamp and slammed it downward.

It struck the hood just in front of the windshield. There was the sound of breaking glass, and the car swerved into the side of the house and jammed tightly against it. One wheel kept on rolling, but the car itself didn't.

Greasy Face came out of the car door, and there was a long red gash across his forehead from the broken glass. He squinted up at the window as he stepped back, then raised a revolver and fired. Mr. Smith ducked back as a bullet thudded into the house beside the window.

"Mr. Kessler," he said, "I'm afraid I made a mistake. I should have permitted him to depart. We'll have to leave by the other side of the house."

Kessler was stamping his foot to help bring his cramped leg muscles back to normal. Mr. Smith ran past him and opened the door to the hallway. He staggered back and slammed it shut again as a sheet of flame burst in.

The room was thick with smoke now, and on the in-side edge, flames were beginning to lick through the floor-boards.

"The hallway is quite impassable," said the insurance agent. "And I fear the stairs are gone by now, anyway. I fear we shall have to--" He coughed from the smoke and looked around. There was no other door.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "perhaps our friend has--"

Two shots, as he appeared at the window, told him that Greasy Face was still there. One of them went through the upper pane of the window, near the top.

Mr. Smith leaped to one side, then peered cautiously out again. The leader of the kidnapers stood, revolver in hand, twenty feet back from the house, beyond the wrecked car under the window. His face was twisted with anger.

"Come out and get it, damn you," he yelled. "Or stay in there and sizzle."

The gray-haired man was coughing violently now. "What can we--?"

Mr. Smith took the automatic from his pocket and glanced at it regretfully. "If only this thing--Mr. Kessler, do you know how many bullets a revolver holds? He's shot three times. And lie's nearsighted. Maybe--"

"Six, most of them, I think. But--" The gray-haired man was gasping now. Mr. Smith took a deep breath and stepped to the window, started to climb through it. If he could get the kidnaper to empty his revolver, probably he could bluff him with the automatic that wouldn't shoot.

The gun below him barked and a bullet thudded into the window sill. Another; he didn't know where it landed. The third shot went just over his head as he let go and dropped to the top of the wrecked car.

He whirled, jumped to the grass. It was farther than he thought and he fell, but still clung to the automatic. He was flat on his face in the grass only a few steps from the kidnaper.

Greasy Face didn't wait to reload. He clubbed the re-volver and stepped in. Mr. Smith rolled over hastily, bringing the automatic up, held in both hands. "Raise your--" His grip on the weapon was tight with despera-tion and one thumb chanced to touch and move the safety lever. The automatic roared so loudly and suddenly that the unexpected recoil knocked it out of the insurance agent's hands.

But there was a look of surprise on the face of the stocky man, and there was a hole in his chest. He turned slowly as he fell, and Mr. Smith felt slightly ill to see that there was a hole, much larger, in the middle of the kid-naper's back.

Mr. Smith rose a bit unsteadily and hurried back to the car to help Mr. Kessler down to the ground. Over the crackling roar of the flames they could now hear the wail of approaching sirens.

The gray-haired man glanced apprehensively at the fallen kidnaper. "Is he--?"

Mr. Smith nodded. "I didn't mean to shoot--but I *told* them they were in a hazardous occupation. Someone must have seen the blaze and reported it. Some of those sirens sound like police cars. They'll be glad to know you're safe, Mr. Kessler. They've been--"

Five minutes later, the gray-haired man was surrounded by a ring of excited policemen. "Yes," he was saying, "three of them. The insurance chap says the other two are dead in the cellar. Yes, he did it all. No, I don't know his name yet but that reward--"

The police chief turned and crossed the grass toward the little man in the rumpled banker's-gray suit and the gold-rimmed glasses. Outlined in the red glare of the blazing house, he was talking volubly to the fireman on the front end of the biggest hose.

"And because we sell both life *and* fire insurance, we have special consideration for firemen. So instead of charging higher rates for them, as most companies do, we offer a very special policy, with low premiums and double indemnities, and--"

The chief waited politely. At long last he turned to a grinning sergeant. "If that little guy *ever* gets through talking," he said, "tell him about the reward and get his name. I've got to get back to town before morning."

Teacup Trouble

Good morning, Mr. Gupstein. My name is Wilson. Some of my friends around at police headquarters call me Slip Wilson; you know how those things get started.

You see, Mr. Gupstein, my regular lawyer gave me your name and suggested I see you if I needed anything while he was away. And I need legal advice.

No, my lawyer isn't on vacation, or not exactly. He's in jail, Mr. Gupstein.

But here's what I want to know. I've got a diamond stickpin with a stone about the size of a flashlight bulb. I want to find out if I can make a deal for nearly what it's worth or whether I'll have to push it through a fence for whatever I can get. The difference ought to amount to maybe a couple of grand, Mr. Gupstein.

How'd I get it? Well, in a manner of speaking, Mr. Gup-stein, it was given to me by a teacup. But that's hard for you to understand so maybe I'd better start farther back.

I first saw this guy in the elevator at Brandon's. He was a big bozo, about six feet between the straps of his spats and the band of his derby. And big all over. He wasn't over twenty-five years old either.

But what made me notice him was his glims. He had the biggest, softest baby-blue eyes I ever saw. Honest, they made him look like a cherub out of a stained-glass window. I guess I mean a cherub--you know, one of those plump little brats with wings sprouting from behind the ears?

No, Mr. Gupstein, he didn't have wings from behind his ears. I just mean he had that kind of eyes and that kind of a look in his face.

We both got off at the main floor, and I happened to reach into my pocket for a fag. And they weren't there. I'd just put my cigarette case in that pocket when I'd got in the elevator, too. So I quick dived a hand into my inside pocket.

Yeah, my billfold was gone too.

I don't know whether you can imagine just how that made me feel, Mr. Gupstein. Me, Slip Wilson, being picked clean like a visiting fireman! I hadn't even been bumped into, either, and the elevator hadn't been crowded. And I'd thought I was good!

Huh? Yeah, Mr. Gupstein, that's my profession. Until I got out of that elevator, I thought I was the best leather-goods worker this side of the Hudson Tunnel. You can figure how I felt. Me, Slip Wilson, picked cleaner than a mackerel in a home for undernourished cats.

Well, I took a quick gander around and I spotted my companion of the elevator ride disappearing through the door to the street. I hightailed after him.

A block farther on, where it wasn't so crowded, I caught up and asked him for a match. I'd forgotten for the mo-ment that my cigarettes were gone and I didn't have any-thing to light with it, but he didn't seem to notice the difference.

I made a crack about the weather, and since we seemed to be going in the same direction, friendship ripened into thirst and I asked him to stop in at a tavern for a drink.

He paid for it, too, out of a wallet that needed reducing exercises. We agreed that the Scotch was lousy, so I in-vited him around to my apartment so I could show him the merits of my favorite brand. Funny, but we seemed to hit it off together from the start like bacon and eggs.

When we got there, he flops into my favorite chair, nearly breaking the springs, and makes himself at home.

"I say, old chap," he says. "We haven't introduced our-selves. My name is Cadwallader Van Aylslea."

Well, Mr. Gupstein, you've heard of the Van Aylsleas; they own half this island and have a mortgage on more. Every time Old Man Van Aylslea stubs his toe getting out of bed after breakfast, the market drops ten points.

So I grinned sarcastic at him. "Glad to know you, Cad-wallader," I said. "I'm the Rajah of Rangoon."

Without batting an eye, he pipes up that he's glad to know me and how are things in my native land. For the first time, Mr. Gupstein, I began to suspect.

I'd been looking right into those baby-blue glims, and I could see he wasn't spoofing. He took himself at face value and he took me that way too. And I began to add up a few other little things he'd said, and I saw he was off his trolley.

But trolley or no, I wanted my money back. So I sort of accidentally got a couple of kayo drops tangled in his next Scotch. And I steered clear of doubtful topics of conver-sation until he leaned back in the chair and blinked a few times, and then closed his eyes and exposed his tonsils to the afternoon

breeze.

I waited a few minutes to be sure, and then I put every-thing in his pockets into a neat little pile on the table.

Listen, Mr. Gupstein. There were seven billfolds, four of them fat ones. There were five watches, my cigarette case, and an assortment of junk ranging from a pair of pink garters to a bag of glass marbles. Not mentioning jewelry.

The billfolds added up to almost a grand, and what of the other stuff was valuable would have brought half of that from any fence this side of Maiden Lane.

To top it off there is a rock in his cravat that looks to be worth ten times all the rest of the haul put together. I'd noticed it before, of course, but it hadn't occurred to me that it might be the McCoy. But when I looked at it close, you could have knocked me down with a busted flush. It wasn't just a diamond, Mr. Gupstein. It was blue-white and flawless.

I put it with the rest and sat there looking at the pile goggle-eyed. If that was one day's haul, he was one of the seven wonders of the Bronx.

And all I had to do was let him sleep. All I had to do was wrap up my toothbrush, fill my pockets with the dough and the jewelry on the table, and head for Bermuda. With a grand in cash to buy pancakes until I could get a market for the rock.

All I had to do was blow. And I didn't.

I guess curiosity has hooked better guys than me, Mr. Gupstein. I wanted to know what it was all about. I had a roscoe that 1 never carried, and I got it out of mothballs, looked to the priming, and sat down. I was determined to find out who and what he was, and damn the torpedoes.

I guess his big bulk helped him to throw off the shut-eye-juice sooner than most. It wasn't but an hour before he sat up and opened his eyes and began to rub his forehead.

"Funny," he muttered. "Sorry, but I must have dropped off. Horribly rude."

Then he lamped the pile of boodle on the table, and I tightened the grip of my roscoe. But he merely blinked.

"Where'd all this stuff come from, Rajah?" His voice sounded as puzzled as his eyes looked. "Why, some of it is mine." He reached over and picked up the fattest wallet, the diamond tiepin, and a few other trifles.

"It came out of your pockets, my fine-feathered friend," I assured him. "Before that, it seems to have come from a number of places."

He sighed. Then he looked at me like a dog that knows it needs a beating. "All right, Rajah," he said. "I may as well admit it. I'm a kleptomaniac. I take things and don't even know it. That's why I'm not allowed out at home. This morning I got away from them."

The eyes had me again. He was telling the truth, and he looked like a kid that expected to be told to go sit in a corner. And if *that* was true . . .

I sat up suddenly. An electric light seemed to be turned on inside my head. "Let me see that wallet you say is yours," I barked at him.

He handed it over like a lamb. I looked at the identifi-cation. Yes, Mr. Gupstein. Cadwallader Van Aylslea. Plenty of identification to prove it.

"Listen, Rajah," he was begging. "Don't send me back. They keep me a prisoner there. Let me stay here with you for a while anyway before I go back."

By that time I was pacing up and down the room. I had an idea, and my idea was having pups.

I looked at him for a long minute before I opened up.

"Listen, Cadwallader," I told him, "I'll let you stay here on a few terms. One is that you never go out unless we go together. If you happen to pinch anything, 111 take care of it and see that it goes back where it belongs. I'm a whiz at telling where things like that belong, Cadwallader."

"Gee, that's swell of you. I--"

"And another thing," I went on. "If and when you're found by your folks, you'll never mention me. You'll tell them you don't remember where you've been. Same goes; for cops. Okay?"

He wrung my hand so hard I thought I'd lose a finger.

I took all the stuff from the table, except what he said was his, out to the kitchen. I put all the currency in my own billfold, and put the empties and the junk in the in-cinerator. I put the jewelry where I usually keep stuff like that.

All in all, it was still nearly a thousand bucks. And he'd collected it in a couple of hours or so, I figured. I began to add figures and count unhatched chickens until I got dizzy.

"Cadwallader," I said, when I came back to the living room. "I've got an errand downtown. Want to come with me?"

He did. Until almost dark I led him through crowded stores and gave him every chance; to acquit himself nobly. And I kept him clear of counters where he might fill valuable space in his pockets with cheap junk.

It was something of a shock when I got in the taxi to take him back home with me, to discover my wallet was gone again. So were my cigarettes, but I had enough change loose in a trouser pocket to pay the cab.

I grinned to myself, Mr. Gupstein, but it was a grin of chagrin. Twice in one day I'd been robbed and hadn't known it.

"Now, Cadwallader, my boy," I said when we were safely in my apartment, "I'll trouble you for my leather back, and if by any chance you collared anything else, give it to me and I'll see that it is all returned where it belongs."

He began to feel in his pockets and an embarrassed look spread over his face. He smiled but it was a sickly-looking smile.

"I'm afraid I haven't got your wallet, Rajah," he said after he'd felt all around. "If you say it's gone, I must have taken it on the way downtown, but I haven't it now."

I remembered all the sugar in that billfold, and, Mr. Gupstein, I must have let out a howl that could have been heard on Staten Island if it had been a clear night. I forgot he was more than twice my size, and I stepped right up and frisked him and I didn't miss a bet.

Then I did it again. Every pocket was as empty as an alderman's cigar box the day after election. I didn't be-lieve it, but there it was.

I pushed him back into a chair. I thought of getting my roscoe but I didn't think I'd need it. I felt mad enough to peel the hide off a tiger bare-handed.

"What's the gag?" I demanded. "Talk fast."

He looked like a four-year-old caught with a jam pot. "Sometimes, Rajah, but not often, my kleptomania works sort of backward. I put things from my own pockets in other people's. It's something I've done only a few times, but this must have been one of them. I'm awfully sorry."

I sighed and sat down. I looked at him, and I guess I wasn't mad any longer. It wasn't his fault. He was telling the truth; I could see that with half an eye. And I could see, too, that he was just about three times as far off his rocker as I'd given him credit for.

Still and all, Mr. Gupstein, I still liked the guy. I began to wonder if I was getting mushy above the eyebrows myself.

Oh well, I thought, I can get the dough back by taking him out a few more times. He'd said his kleptomania didn't go into reverse often. And if I'd start out broke each time, it couldn't do any harm.

So that was that, but after I'd counted all those chickens it was a discouraging evening. You can see that, Mr. Gupstein. I got out a deck of cards and taught him how to play cribbage and he beat me every game until I began to get bored. I decided to pump him a bit.

"Listen, Cadwallader," I began.

"Cadwallader?" he pops back. "That isn't my name." It caught me off guard. "Huh?" says I. "You're Cadwal-lader Van Aylslea!"

"Who's he? I fear there is a mistake of identity."

He was sitting up straight, looking very intently at me, and his right hand had slid between the third and fourth buttons of his shirt. I should have guessed, of course, but I didn't.

But I decided to humor him. "Who are you, then?"

A shrewd look came into his eyes as he swept back from his forehead a lock of hair that wasn't

there. "It escapes me for the moment," he temporized. "But no, I shall not lie to you, my friend. I remember, of course, but it is best that I remain incognito."

I began to wonder if I'd bit off more than I could handle. I wondered if he had these spells often, and if so, how I should handle him.

"For all of me," I said a bit disgustedly, "you can re-main anything you want. I'm going out for a paper."

It was time for the morning papers to be out, eleven-thirty, and I wanted to see if any mention was made of a search for a missing nut from the Van Aylslea tree. There wasn't.

I hate to tell you about the next morning, Mr. Gupstein.

When I woke up, there was Cadwallader standing in his undershirt looking out of the window. His right hand was thrust inside his undershirt and he had a carefully coiled spitcurl on his forehead. When he heard me sit up in bed, he turned majestically.

"My good friend," he said, "I have thought it over and I've decided that I may cast aside anonymity and reveal to you in confidence my true identity."

Yeah, Mr. Gupstein, you guessed it. Why do so many nuts think they are Napoleon? Why don't some of them pick on Eddie Cantor or Mussolini?

I didn't know, and of course it would have been useless to ask him, whether this delusion was something tem-porary that he'd been through before, or whether it was here to stay.

I got dressed quick and after breakfast I locked him in to keep him safe from English spies, and I went out and sat in the park to think.

I could, of course, take him out and lose him some-where and wash my hands of the matter. The cops would pick him up and he'd tell them he'd been staying with the Rajah of Rangoon, if he told them anything even that lucid. Stuff like that goes over big at headquarters.

But I didn't want to do that, Mr. Gupstein. Funny as it sounds, I liked the guy, and I had a hunch that if he had right treatment he'd get over this stage and go back to good old kleptomania. And he belonged there, Mr. Gupstein. It would be a shame for technique like his to go to waste.

And I remembered, too, that if I could get him back to normal, such as normal was, I could clean up enough in a week or two to retire. As it was, I was out a couple of hundred bucks of my own dough.

Then I had my big idea. You can't argue with a nut. Or maybe *you* can, Mr. Gupstein, because you're a lawyer, but I couldn't. But my idea was this: How could two guys both be Napoleon? If you put two Napoleons in the same cell, wouldn't one of them outtalk the other? And wouldn't the guy who had the delusion longest be the best talker?

I went around to the bank and drew some dough and then I hunted up a private sanitarium and a bit of fast talking got me an audience in private with the head cheese.

"Have you got any Napoleons here?" I asked him.

"Three of them," he admitted, looking me over like he was wondering if I'd dispute their claims to that identity. "Why?"

I leaned forward confidentially. "I have a very dear friend who has the same delusion. I think if he were shut up with another guy who has prior claim on the same idea, he might be talked out of it. They can't both be Napoleon, you know."

"Such a procedure," he said, "would be against medical ethics. We couldn't possibly--"

I took a roll of bills from my pocket and held them under his nose. "A hundred dollars," I suggested, "for a three-day trial; win, lose, or draw."

He looked offended. He opened his mouth to turn me down, but I could see his eyes on the frogskins.

"Plus, of course," I added, "the regular sanitarium fees for the three days. The hundred dollars as an honorarium to you personally for taking an interest in the experiment."

"It couldn't possibly--" he began, and looked at me expectantly to see if I was going to cut in and raise the ante. I stood pat; that was all I wanted to invest. There was silence while I kept holding the bills out toward him.

"--do any harm," he concluded, taking the money. "Can you bring your friend today?"

Cadwallader was under the bed when I got home. He said the spies had been closing in on the apartment. It took a lot of fast talking to get him out. I had to go and buy him a false mustache and colored glasses for a disguise. And I pulled the shades down in the taxi that took us to the sanitarium.

It took all my curiosity-tortured will power, Mr. Gup-stein, to wait the full three days, but I did it.

When I was shown into his office, the doctor looked up sadly.

"I fear the experiment was a dismal failure," he ad-mitted. "I warned you. The patient still has paranoia."

"I don't give three shrieks in Hollywood if he still has pyorrhea," I came back. "Does he or does he not still think he's Napoleon?"

"No," he said. "He doesn't. Come on, I'll let you see for yourself."

We went upstairs and the doc waited outside while I went into the room to talk to Cadwallader.

The other Napoleon had already been moved on.

My blue-eyed wonder was lying on a bed with his head in his mitts, but he sprang up with delight when he saw me.

"Rajah, old pal," he asked eagerly. "Have you a saucer?"

"A saucer?" I looked at him in bewilderment.

"A saucer."

"What do you want with a saucer?"

The beginning wasn't promising, but I plowed on. There was one thing interested me most.

"Are you Napoleon Bonaparte?" I asked him.

He looked surprised. *"Me?"*

I was getting fed up. "Yes, you," I told him.

He didn't answer, and I could see that his mind, what there was of it, wasn't on the conversation. His eyes were roving around the room.

"What are you looking for?" I demanded.

"A saucer."

"A *saucer?"*

"Sure. A saucer."

The conversation was getting out of hand. "What on earth do you want with a saucer?"

"So I can sit down, of course."

"Huh?" I asked, startled.

"Naturally," he replied. "Can't you see that I'm a teacup?"

I gulped, and turned sadly to the door. Then for a mo-ment he seemed to gather shreds of his sanity together. "I say, Rajah," he piped up. I turned.

"If I don't see you again, Rajah, I want you to have something to remember me by." He reached for his tie and pulled out the stickpin with the rock the size of a postage stamp. I'd forgotten about it, no kidding. He handed it to me, and I thanked him. And I meant it.

"You'll come again, though?" he asked wistfully.

"Sure I will, Cadwallader." I turned to the door again. Darned if I didn't want to bawl, Mr. Gupstein.

I told the doctor he'd be sent for, and got out of the sanitarium safely. Then I looked the sparkler over care-fully again, and I decided it's worth at least five G's. So I'll come out ahead on the deal as soon as I cash in on it.

First, I was going to appraise the stone, so I trotted into one of the ritziest shops in town. I knew I'd have to pick an expensive joint to flash a rock that size without arousing too much suspicion.

There was only one clerk behind the counter and an-other customer was ahead of me. I began to look around, but when I caught part of the conversation, I froze.

"... and since then," the clerk was saying, "you haven't heard a word from or about your brother, Mr. Van Aylslea?"

The customer shook his head. "Not a word. We're keep-ing it from the press, of course."

I took a close look. The bloke was older and not so heavy, but I could see he resembled my

kleptomaniac teacup.

So as quietly as though I was walking on eggs, I eased out of the shop. But I waited outside. I figured I might do Cadwallader a final favor. When Van Aylslea came out, I buttonholed him.

"Mr. Van Aylslea," I whispered. "I'm Operative Fifty-three. Your brother is at Bide-a-Wee Sanitarium."

His face lighted up, and he shook my hand and patted my shoulder like a long-lost brother. "I'll get him right away," he said.

"Better stop for a saucer," I called after him as his car started, but I guess he didn't hear me.

I drifted on. If that stone had belonged to the Van Aylsleas and if they traded at that particular shop, they might recognize it, so I figured I'd had a narrow squeak.

It occurred to me that it had been in my tie when I talked to Cadwallader's brother, which had been a foolish chance to take, but I guess he didn't notice it. He was too excited.

Well, that takes me up to a few minutes ago, Mr. Gupstein. I decided to skip the appraisal and come right to you for advice.

Are you willing to approach the Van Aylsleas for me and find out if they want to offer a reward for the rock? I understand, Mr. Gupstein, that you *have* handled deals like that very successfully, and I'd rather not risk trying to peddle it if they offer a good reward.

And the Van Aylslea guy I just left looked like a reason-able guy who--

Huh? You say you know the family and that the brother is almost as batty as Cadwallader, and that he's a klepto too, at times?

Nix, Mr. Gupstein, you can't make me believe that he's slicker than his brother with the finger-work. That's im-possible. Mr. Gupstein. Nobody could be smoother than--

Oh, well, let's not worry about that. The point is, are you willing to handle the deal for me?

The stickpin? Why, it's right here in my tie, of course, where it's been ever since . . .

Huh?

. . . Well, Mr. Gupstein, I'm sorry I took up your time. But this decides me, Mr. Gupstein. When *two* amateur dips give me a cleaning the same week, I'm through.

I've got a brother-in-law who's a bookie and wants to give me a good, honest job. And I'm taking it. I've lifted my last leather.

You're darned right I mean it, Mr. Gupstein. And to prove it, here's *your* billfold back. So long, Mr. Gupstein.

Good Night, Good Knight

The bar in front of him was wet and sloppy; Sir Charles Hanover Gresham carefully rested his forearms on the raised dry rim of it and held the folded copy of *Stage-craft* that he was reading up out of the puddles. His fore-arms, not his elbows; when you have but one suit and it is getting threadbare you remember not to rest your el-bows on a bar or a table. Just as, when you sit, you always pull up the trouser legs an inch or two to keep the knees from becoming baggy. When you are an actor you remem-ber those things. Even if you're a has-been who never really was and who certainly never will be, living--barely --off blackmail, drinking beer in a Bowery bar, hung over and miserable, at two o'clock on a cool fall afternoon, you remember.

But you always read *Stagecraft*.

He was reading it now. "Gambler Angels Meller," a one-column headline told him; he read even that, casually. Then he came to a name in the second paragraph, the name of the playwright. One of his eyebrows rose a full millimeter at that name. Wayne Campbell, his *patron,* had written another play. The first in three full years. Not that that mattered to Wayne, for his last play and his second last had both sold to Hollywood for very substantial sums. New plays or no, Wayne Campbell would keep on eating caviar and drinking champagne. And new plays or no, he, Sir Charles Hanover Gresham, would keep on eating hamburger sandwiches and drink-ing beer. It was the only thing he was ashamed of--not the

hamburgers and the beer, but the means by which he was forced to obtain them. Blackmail is a nasty word; he hated it.

But now, possibly, just possibly-Even that chance was worth celebrating. He looked at the bar in front of him; fifteen cents lay there. He took his last dollar bill from his pocket and put it down on the one dry spot on the bar.

"Mac!" he said. Mac, the bartender, who had been gazing into space through the wall, came over. He asked, "The same, Charlie?"

"Not the same, Mac. This time the amber fluid."

"You mean whiskey?"

"I do indeed. One for you and one for me. *Ah, with the Grape my jading life provide* ..."

Mac poured two shots and refilled Sir Charles's beer glass. "Chaser's on me." He rang up fifty cents.

Sir Charles raised his shot glass and looked past it, not at Mac the bartender but at his own reflection in the smeary back-bar mirror. A quite distinguished-looking gentleman stared back at him. They smiled at one another; then they both looked at Mac, one of them from the front, the other from the back.

"To your excellent health, Mac," they said--Sir Charles aloud and his reflection silently. The raw, cheap whiskey burned a warm and grateful path.

Mac looked over and said, "You're a screwy guy, Charlie, but I like you. Sometimes I think you really *are* a knight. I dunno."

"A Hair perhaps divides the False and True" said Sir Charles. "Do you by any chance know Omar, Mac?"

"Omar who?"

"The tentmaker. A great old boy, Mac; he's got me down to a T. Listen to this:

After a momentary silence spake
Some Vessel of a more ungainly Make:
'They sneer at me from leaning all awry:
What! did the Hand then of the Potter shake?'"

Mac said, "I don't get it."

Sir Charles sighed. "Am I all awry, Mac? Seriously, I'm going to phone and make an important appointment, may-be. Do I look all right or am I leaning all awry? Oh, Lord, Mac, I just thought what that would make me. Hamawry."

"You look all right, Charlie."

"But, Mac, you missed that horrible pun. Ham awry. Ham on rye."

"You mean you want a sandwich?"

Sir Charles smiled gently. He said, "I'll change my mind, Mac; I'm not hungry after all. But perhaps the exchequer will stand another drink."

It stood another drink. Mac went to another customer.

The haze was coming, the gentle haze. The figure in the back-bar mirror smiled at him as though they had a secret in common. And they had, but the drinks were helping them to forget it--at least to shove it to the back of the mind. Now, through the gentle haze that was not really drunkenness, that figure in the mirror did not say, "You're a fraud and a failure, Sir Charles, living on black mail," as it so often and so accusingly had said. No, now it said, "You're a fine fellow, Sir Charles; a little down on your luck for these last few--let us not say how many-years. Things are going to change. You'll walk the boards; you'll hold audiences in the palm of your hand. You're an *actor,* man."

He downed his second shot to that, and then, sipping his beer slowly, he read again the article in *Stagecraft,* the actor's Bible.

There wasn't much detail, but there was enough. The name of the melodrama was *The Perfect Crime,* which didn't matter; the author was Wayne Campbell, which did matter. Wayne could try to get him into the cast; Wayne would try. And not because of threat of blackmail; quite the converse.

And, although this didn't matter either, the play was being backed by Nick Corianos. Maybe, come to think of it, that did matter. Nick Corianos was a plunger, a real bigshot. *The Perfect Crime* wouldn't lack for funds, not if Nick was backing it. You've heard of Nick Corianos. Legend has it that he once dropped half a million dollars in a single forty-hour session of poker, and laughed about it. Legend says many unpleasant things about him, too, but the police have never proved them.

Sir Charles smiled at the thought--Nick Corianos getting away with *The Perfect Crime.* He wondered if that thought had come to Corianos, if it was part of his reason for back-ing this particular play. One of life's little pleasures, thinking such things. Posing, posturing, knowing you were ridiculous, knowing you were a cheat and a failure, you lived on the little pleasures--and the big dreams.

Still smiling gently, he picked up his change and went to the phone booth at the front of the tavern near the door. He dialed Wayne Campbell's number. He said, "Wayne? This is Charles Gresham."

"Yes?"

"May I see you, at your office?"

"Now listen, Gresham, if it's more money, no. You've got some coming in three days and you agreed, definitely agreed, that if I gave you that amount regularly, you'd--"

"Wayne, it's not money. The opposite, my dear boy. It can save you money."

"How?" He was cold, suspicious.

"You'll be casting for your new play. Oh, I know you don't do the actual casting yourself, but a word from you --a word from you, Wayne, would get me a part. Even a walk-on, Wayne, anything, and I won't bother you again."

"While the play runs, you mean?"

Sir Charles cleared his throat. He said, regretfully, "Of course, while the play runs. But if it's a play of yours, Wayne, it may run a long time."

"You'd get drunk and get fired before it got out of rehearsal."

"No. I don't drink when I'm working, Wayne. What have you to lose? I won't disgrace you. You know I can act. Don't you?"

"Yes." It was grudging, but it was a yes. "All right--you've got a point if it'll save me money. And it's a cast of fourteen; I suppose I could--"

"I'll be right over, Wayne. And thanks, thanks a lot." He left the booth and went outside, quickly, into the cool, crisp air, before he'd be tempted to take another drink to celebrate the fact that he would be on the boards again. *Might be,* he corrected himself quickly. Even with help from Wayne Campbell, it was no certainty.

He shivered a little, walking to the subway. He'd have to buy himself a coat out of his next--allowance. It was turning colder; he shivered more as he walked from the subway to Wayne's office. But Wayne's office was warm, if Wayne wasn't. Wayne sat there staring at him.

Finally he said, "You don't look the part, Gresham. Damn it all, you don't look it. And that's funny."

Sir Charles said, "I don't know why it's funny, Wayne. But looking the part means nothing. There is such a thing as make-up, such a thing as acting. A true actor can look any part."

Surprisingly, Wayne was chuckling with amusement.

He said, "You don't know it's funny, Gresham, but it is. I've got two possibilities you can try for. One of them is practically a walk-on; you'd get three short speeches. The other--"

"Yes?"

"It is funny, Gresham. There's a blackmailer in my play. And damn it all, you are one; you've been living off me for five years now."

Sir Charles said, "Very reasonably, Wayne. You must admit my demands are modest, and that I've never in-creased them."

"You are a very paragon of blackmailers, Gresham. I assure you it's a pleasure--practically. But the cream of the jest would be letting you play the blackmailer in my play so that for the duration of it I wouldn't be paying you blackmail. And it's a fairly strong supporting role; it'd pay you a lot more than you ask from me. But--"

"But what?"

"Damned if you look it. I don't think you'd be convinc-ing, as a blackmailer. You're always so apologetic and ashamed about it--and yes, I know, you wouldn't be doing it if you could earn your eats--and drinks--any other way. But the blackmailer in my play is a fairly hard-boiled mug. Has to be. People wouldn't believe in any-body like you, Gresham."

"Give me a chance at it, Wayne. Let me read the part."

"I think we'd better settle for the smaller role. You said you'd settle for a walk-on, and this other part is a little better than that. You wouldn't be convincing in the fat role. You're just not a heavy, Gresham."

"Let me read it. At least let me read it."

Wayne Campbell shrugged. He pointed to a bound manuscript on a corner of his desk, nearer to Sir Charles than to him. He said, "Okay, the role is Richter. Your biggest scene, your longest and most dramatic speech is about two pages back of the first-act curtain. Go ahead and read it to me."

Sir Charles's fingers trembled just slightly with eager-ness as he found the first-act curtain and thumbed back. He said, "Let me read it to myself first, Wayne, to get the sense of it." It was a longish speech, but he read it rapidly twice and he had it; memorizing had always been easy for him. He put down the manuscript and thought an instant to put himself in the mood.

His face grow cold and hard. Iris eyes hooded. He stood up and leaned his hands on the desk, caught Wayne's eyes with his own, and poured on the speech, his voice cold and precise and deadly.

And it was a balm to his actor's soul that Wayne's eyes widened as he listened to it. He said, "I'll be damned. You *can* act. Okay, I'll try to get you the role. I didn't think you had it in you, but you have. Only if you cross me up by drinking--"

"I won't." Sir Charles sat down; he'd been calm and cold during the speech. Now he was trembling a little again and he didn't want it to show. Wayne might think it was drink or poor health, and not know that it was eagerness and excitement. This might be the start of it, the comeback he'd hoped for--he hated to think how long it had been that he'd been hoping. But one good support-ing role, and in a Wayne Campbell play that might have a long run, and he'd be on his way. Producers would notice him and there'd be another and slightly better role when this play folded, and a better one after that.

He knew he was kidding himself, but the excitement, the *hope* was there. It went to his head like stronger drink than any tavern served.

Maybe he'd even have a chance to play again in a Shakespeare revival, and there are always Shakespeare revivals. He knew most of every major Shakesperean role, although he'd played only minor ones. Macbeth, that great speech of Macbeth's--

He said, "I wish you were Shakespeare, Wayne. I wish you were just writing *Macbeth.* Beautiful stuff in there, Wayne. Listen:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out--"

"Brief candle, et cetera. Sure, it's beautiful and I wish, too, that I were Shakespeare, Gresham. But I haven't got all day to listen."

Sir Charles sighed and stood up. Macbeth had stood him in good stead; he wasn't trembling any more. He said, "Nobody ever has time to listen. Well, Wayne, thanks tremendously."

"Wait a minute. You sound as though I'm doing the casting and have already signed you. I'm only

the first hurdle. We're going to let the director do the actual cast-ing, with Corianos's and my advice and consent, but we haven't hired a director yet. I think it's going to be Dixon, but it isn't a hundred per cent sure yet."

"Shall I go talk to him? I know him slightly." "Ummm--not till it's definite. If I send you to him, he'll be sure we are hiring him, and maybe he'll want more money. Not that it won't take plenty to get him any-way. But you can talk to Nick; he's putting up the money and he'll have a say in the casting."

"Sure, I'll do that, Wayne."

Wayne reached for his wallet. "Here's twenty bucks," he said. "Straighten out a little; get a shave and a haircut and a clean shirt. Your suit's all right. Maybe you should have it pressed. And listen--" "Yes?"

"That twenty's no gift. It comes out of your next."

"More than fair. How shall I handle Corianos? Sell him on the idea that I can handle the part, as 1 did you?"

Wayne Campbell grinned, lie said, *"Speak the speech, I pray you, as you haw, pronounced it to me, trippingly on the tongue; but if you month it, as many of your play-ers do, I had as lief the towncrier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air*--I can recite Shakespeare, too."

"We'll not mention how." Sir Charles smiled. "Thanks a million, Wayne. Good-by."

He got the haircut, which he needed, and the shave, which he didn't really need--he'd shaved this morning. He bought a new white shirt and had his shoes shined and his suit pressed. He had his soul lifted with three Manhat-tans in a respectable bar--three, sipped slowly, and no more. And he ate--the three cherries from the Manhattans.

The back-bar mirror wasn't smeary. It was blue glass, though, and it made him look sinister. He smiled a sinister smile at his reflection. He thought, *Blackmailer. The role; play it to the hilt, throw yourself into it. And someday you'll play Macbeth.*

Should he try it on the bartender? No. He'd tried it on bartenders before.

The blue reflection in the back-bar mirror smiled at him. He looked from it to the front windows and the front windows, too, were faintly blue with dusk. And that meant it was time. Corianos might be in his office above his club by now.

He went out into the blue dusk. He took a cab. Not for practical reasons; it was only ten blocks and he could easily have walked. But, psychologically, a cab was im-portant. As important as was an oversize tip to the driver.

The Blue Flamingo, Nick Corianos's current club, was still closed, of course, but the service entrance was open. Sir Charles went in. One waiter was working, putting cloths on tables. Sir Charles asked, "Will you direct me to Mr. Corianos's office, please?"

"Third floor. There's a self-service elevator over there." He pointed, and, looking again at Sir Charles, he added, "Sir."

"Thank you," said Sir Charles.

He took the elevator to the third floor. It let him off in a dimly lighted corridor, from which opened several doors. Only one door had a light behind it showing through the ground glass. It was marked "Private." He tapped on it gently; a voice called out, "Come in." He went in. Two big men were playing gin rummy across a desk.

One of them asked him, "Yeah?"

"Is either of you Mr. Corianos?"

"What do you want to see him about?"

"My card, sir." Sir Charles handed it to the one who had spoken; he felt sure by looking at them that neither one of them was Nick Corianos. "Will you tell Mr. Corianos that I wish to speak to him about a matter in connection with the play he is backing?"

The man who had spoken looked at the card. He said, "Okay," and put down his hand of cards; he walked to the door of an inner office and through it. After a moment he appeared at the door again; he said, "Okay." Sir Charles went in.

Nick Corianos looked up from the card lying on the ornate mahogany desk before him. He

asked, "Is it a gag?"

"Is what a gag?"

"Sit down. Is it a gag, or are you really Sir Charles Han-over Gresham? I mean, are you really a--that would be a knight, wouldn't it? Are you really a knight?"

Sir Charles smiled. "I have never yet admitted, in so many words, that I am not. Would it not be foolish to start now? At any rate, it gets me in to see people much more easily."

Nick Corianos laughed. He said, "I see what you mean. And I'm beginning to guess what you want. You're a ham, aren't you?"

"I am an actor. I have been informed that you are backing a play; in fact, I have seen a script of the play. I am interested in playing the role of Richter."

Nick Corianos frowned. "Richter--that's the name of the blackmailer in the play?"

"It is." Sir Charles held up a hand. "Please do not tell me offhand that I do not look the part. A true actor can look, and can be, anything. I can be a blackmailer."

Nick Corianos said, "Possibly. But I'm not handling the casting."

Sir Charles smiled, and then let the smile fade. He stood up and leaned forward, his hands resting on Nick's ma-hogany desk. He smiled again, but the smile was different. His voice was cold, precise, perfect. He said, *"Listen, pal, you cant shove me off. I know too much. Maybe I can't prove it myself, but the police can, once I tell them where to look. Walter Donovan. Does that name mean anything to you, pal? Or the date September first? Or a spot a hundred yards off the road to Bridgeport, halfway between Stamford and there. Do you think you can--?"*

"That's enough," Nick said. There was an ugly black automatic in his right hand. His left was pushing a buzzer on his desk.

Sir Charles Hanover Gresham stared at the automatic, and he saw it--not only the automatic, but everything. He saw death, and for just a second there was panic.

And then all the panic was gone, and there was left a vast amusement.

It had been perfect, all down the line. *The Perfect Crime*--advertised as such, and he hadn't guessed it. He hadn't even suspected it.

And yet, he thought, why wouldn't--why shouldn't-- Wayne Campbell be tired enough of a blackmailer who had bled him, however mildly, for so many years? And why wouldn't one of the best playwrights in the world be clever enough to do it this way?

So clever, and so simple, however Wayne had come across the information against Nick Corianos which he had written on a special page, especially inserted in his copy of the script. *Speak the speech, I pray you--*

And he had even known that he, Charles, wouldn't give him away. Even now, before the trigger was pulled, he could blurt: "Wayne Campbell knows this, too. He did it, not I!"

But even to say that now couldn't save him, for that black automatic had turned fiction into fact, and although he might manage Campbell's death along with his own, it wouldn't save his own life. Wayne had even known him well enough to know, to be sure, that he wouldn't do that--at no advantage to himself.

He stood up straight, taking his hands off the desk but carefully keeping them at his sides, as the two big men came through the wide doorway that led to the outer office.

Nick said, "Pete, get that canvas mail sack out of the drawer out there. And is the car in front of the service entrance?"

"Sure, chief." One of the men ducked back through the door.

Nick hadn't taken his eyes-- or the cold muzzle of the gun-- off Sir Charles.

Sir Charles smiled at him. He said, "May I ask a boon?"

"What?"

"A favor. Besides the one you already intend to do for me. I ask thirty-five seconds."

"Huh?"

"I've timed it; it should take that long. Most actors do it in thirty-- they push the pace. I refer, of course, to the immortal lines from *Macbeth.* Have I your permission to die thirty-five seconds from now,

rather than right at this exact instant?"

Nick's eyes got even narrower. He said, "I don't get it, but what's thirty-five seconds, if you really keep your hands in sight?"

Sir Charles said, *"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and to-morrow--"*

One of the big men was back in the doorway, something made of canvas rolled up under his arm. He asked, "Is the guy screwy?" "Shut up," Nick said.

And then no one was interrupting him. No one was even impatient. And thirty-five seconds were ample.

"... Out, out, brief candle
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

He paused, and the quiet pause lengthened.

He bowed slightly and straightened so the audience would know that there was no more. And then Nick's finger tightened on the trigger.

The applause was deafening.

Beware of the Dog

The seed of murder was planted in the mind of Wiley Hughes the first time he saw the old man open the safe.

There was money in the safe. Stacks of it.

The old man took three bills from one orderly pile and handed them to Wiley. They were twenties.

"Sixty dollars even, Mr. Hughes," he said. "And that's the ninth payment." He took the receipt Wiley gave him, closed the safe, and twisted the dial.

It was a small, antique-looking safe. A man could open it with a cold chisel and a good crowbar, if he didn't have to worry about how much noise he made.

The old man walked with Wiley out of the house and down to the iron fence. After he'd closed the gate behind Wiley, he went over to the tree and untied the dog again.

Wiley looked back over his shoulder at the gate, and at the sign upon it: "Beware of the Dog."

There was a padlock on the gate too, and a bell button set in the gatepost. If you wanted to see old man Erskine you had to push that button and wait until he'd come out of the house and tied up the dog and then unlocked the gate to let you in.

Not that the padlocked gate meant anything. An able-bodied man could get over the fence easily enough. But once in the yard he'd be torn to pieces by that hound of hell Erskine kept for a watchdog.

A vicious brute, that dog.

A lean, underfed hound with slavering jaws and eyes that looked death at you as you walked by. He didn't run to the fence and bark. Nor even growl.

Just stood there, turning his head to follow you, with his yellowish teeth bared in a snarl that was the more sinister in that it was silent.

A black dog, with yellow, hate-filled eyes, and a quiet viciousness beyond ordinary canine ferocity. A killer dog. Yes, it was a hound of hell, all right.

And a beast of nightmare, too. Wiley dreamed about it that night. And the next.

There was something he wanted very badly in those dreams. Or somewhere he wanted to go. And his way was barred by a monstrous black hound, with slavering jowls and eyes that looked death at you. Except for size, it was old man Erskine's watchdog. The seed of murder grew.

Wiley Hughes lived, as it happened, only a block from the old man's house. Every time he went past it on his way to or from work he thought about it. It would be so easy. The dog? He could poison the dog. There were some things he wanted to find out, without asking about them. Patiently, at the office, he cultivated the acquaintance of the collector who had dealt with the old man before he had been transferred to another route. He went out drinking with the man several times be-fore the subject of the old man crept into the conversation --and then, after they'd discussed many other debtors. "Old Erskine? The guy's a miser, that's all. He pays for that stock on time because he can't bear to part with a big chunk of money all at once. Ever see all the money he keeps in--?"

Wiley steered the conversation into safer channels. He didn't want to have discussed how much money the old man kept in the house.

He asked, "Ever see a more vicious dog than that hell-hound of his?"

The other collector shook his head. "And neither did anybody else. That mutt hates even the old man. Can't blame him for that, though; the old geezer half starves him to keep him fierce."

"The hell," said Wiley. "How come he doesn't jump Erskine then?"

"Trained not to, that's all. Nor Erskine's son--he visits there once in a while. Nor the man who delivers groceries. But anybody else he'd tear to pieces."

And then Wiley Hughes dropped the subject like a hot coal and began to talk about the widow who was always behind in her payments and who always cried if they threatened to foreclose.

The dog tolerated two people besides the old man. And that meant that if he could get past the dog *without* harm-ing it, or it harming him, suspicion would be directed toward those two people.

It was a big *if,* but then the fact that the dog was un-derfed made it possible. If the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, why not the way to a dog's heart?

It was worth trying.

He went about it very carefully. He bought the meat at a butcher shop on the other side of town. He took every precaution that night, when he left his own house heading into the alley, that no one would see him.

Keeping to the middle of the alley, he walked past old man Erskine's fence, and kept walking. The dog was there, just inside the fence, and it kept pace with him, sound-lessly.

He threw a piece of meat over the fence and kept walk-ing.

To the corner and back again. He walked just a little closer to the fence and threw another piece of meat over. This time he saw the dog leave the fence and run for the meat.

He returned home, unseen, and feeling that things were working out his way. The dog *was* hungry; it would eat meat he threw to it. Pretty soon it would be taking food from his hand, through the fence.

He made his plans carefully, and omitted no factor. The few tools he would need were purchased in such a way that they could not be traced to him. And wiped off fin-gerprints; they would be left at the scene of the burglary. He studied the habits of the neighborhood and knew that everyone in the block was asleep by one o'clock, except for two night workers who didn't return from work until four-thirty.

There was the patrolman to consider. A few sleepless nights at a darkened window gave him the information that the patrolman passed at one and again at four.

The hour between two and three, then, was the safest.

And the dog. His progress in making friends with the dog had been easier and more rapid than he had anticipated. It took food from his hand, through the bars of the alley fence.

It let him reach through the bars and pet it. He'd been afraid of losing a finger or two the first time he'd tried that. But the fear had been baseless.

The dog had been as starved for affection as it had been starved for food.

Hound of hell, *hell*! He grinned to himself at the ex-travagance of the descriptive phrase he had once used.

Then came the night when he dared climb over the fence. The dog met him with little whimpers of delight. He'd been sure it would, but he'd taken every precaution possible. Heavy leather leggings under his trousers. A scarf wrapped many times around his throat. And meat to offer, more tempting than his own. There was nothing to it, after that.

Friday, then, was to be the night. Everything was ready.

So ready that between eight o'clock in the evening and two in the morning, there was nothing for him to do. So he set and muffled his alarm, and slept.

Nothing to the burglary at all. Or the murder.

Down the alley, taking extra precautions this time that no one saw him. There was enough moonlight for him to read, and to grin at, the "Beware of the Dog" sign on the back gate.

Beware of the dog! That was a laugh, now. He handed it a piece of meat through the fence, patted its head while it ate, and then he vaulted over the fence and went up toward the house.

His crowbar opened a window, easily.

Silently he crept up the stairs to the bedroom of the old man, and there he did what it was necessary for him to do in order to be able to open the safe without danger of being heard.

The murder was really necessary, he told himself. Stunned--even tied up--the old man might possibly have managed to raise an alarm. Or might have recognized his assailant, even in the darkness.

The safe offered a bit more difficulty than he had an-ticipated, but not too much. Well before three o'clock-- with an hour's factor of safety--he had it open and had the money.

It was only on his way out through the yard, after everything had gone perfectly, that Wiley Hughes began to worry and to wonder whether he had made any possible mistake. There was a brief instant of panic.

But then he was safely home, and he thought over every step he had taken, and there was no possible clue that would lead the police to suspect Wiley Hughes.

Inside the house, in sanctuary, he counted the money under a light that wouldn't show outside. Monday he would put it in a safe deposit box he had already rented under an assumed name.

Meanwhile, any hiding place would serve. But he was taking no chances; he had prepared a good one. That afternoon he had spaded the big flower bed in the back yard.

Now, keeping close under cover of the fence, so he could not be seen in the remotely possible case of a neigh-bor looking from a window, lie scooped a hollow in the freshly spaded earth.

No need to bury it deep; a shallow hole, refilled, in the freshly turned soil would be best, and could never on earth be detected by human eyes. He wrapped the money in oiled paper, buried it, and covered the hole carefully, leaving no trace whatsoever.

By four o'clock he was in bed, and lay there thinking pleasantly of all the things that he could do with the money once it would be safe for him to begin spending it.

It was almost nine when he awakened the next morning. And again, for a moment, there was reaction and panic. For seconds that seemed hours he lay rigidly, trying to recall everything he had done. Step by step he went over it and gradually confidence returned.

He had been seen by no one; he had left no possible clue.

His cleverness in getting past the dog without killing it would certainly throw suspicion elsewhere.

It had been easy, so easy, for a clever man to commit a crime without leaving a single lead. Ridiculously easy. There was no possible--

Through the open window of his bedroom he heard voices that seemed excited about something. One of them sounded like the voice of the policeman on the day shift. Probably, then, the crime had been discovered. But why--?

He ran to the window and looked out.

A little knot of people were gathered in the alley behind his house, looking into the yard.

His gaze turned more directly downward and he knew then that he was lost. Across the freshly turned earth of the flower bed, strewn in wild profusion, was a disorderly array of banknotes, like flat green plants that had sprouted too soon.

And asleep on the grass, his nose beside the torn oiled paper in which Wiley had brought him the

meat and which Wiley had used later to wrap the banknotes, was the black dog.

The dangerous, vicious, beware-of-the-dog, the hound of hell, whose friendship he had won so thoroughly that it had dug its way under the fence and followed him home.

Little Boy Lost

There was a knock on the door. Gram put the sock she was mending back into the work basket in her lap and then moved the work basket to the table, ready to get up.

But by that time Ma had come out of the kitchen and, wiping her hands on her apron, opened the door. Her eyes went hard.

The smile of the sleek young man in the hallway out-side the door showed two gold teeth. He shoved his hat back from his forehead and said: "How ya, Mrs. Murdock? Tell Eddie I'm-"

"Eddie ain't here." Ma's voice was hard like her eyes.

"Ain't, huh? Said he'd be at the Gem. Wasn't there so I thought--"

"Eddie ain't here." There was finality in Ma's repetition. A tense finality that the man in the hallway couldn't pre-tend to overlook.

His smile faded. "If he comes in, you remind him. Tell him I said nine-thirty's the time."

"The time for what." There wasn't any rising inflection in Ma Murdock's voice to stamp those four words as a question.

There was a sudden narrowing of the eyes that looked at Ma. The man with the gold teeth said: "Eddie'll know that." He turned and walked to the stairs.

Ma closed the door slowly.

Gram was working on the sock again. Her high voice asked: "Was that Johnny Everard, Elsie? Sounded a bit like Johnny's voice."

Ma still faced that closed door. She answered without turning around. "That was Butch Everard, Gram. No one calls him Johnny any more."

Gram's needle didn't pause.

"Johnny Everard," she said. "He had curls, Elsie, a foot long. I 'member when his dad took him down to the barber shop, had 'em cut off. His ma cried. He had the first scooter in the neighborhood, made with roller-skate wheels. He went away for a while, didn't he?"

"He did," said Ma. "For five years. I wish--"

"Used to be crazy about chocolate cake," said Gram. "When he'd leave our paper, I'd give him a slice every time I'd baked one. But, my, he was in eighth grade when Eddie was just starting in first. Isn't he a bit old to want to play with Eddie? I used to say your father--"

The querulous voice trailed off into silence. Ma glanced at her. Poor Gram, living in a world that was neither past nor present, but a hodgepodge of them both. Eddie was a man now--almost. Eddie was seventeen. And sliding away from her. She couldn't seem to hold him any longer.

Butch Everard and Larry and Slim. Yes, and the crooked streets that ran straight, and the dark pool halls that were brightly lighted, and the things that Eddie hid from her but that she read in his eyes. There were things you didn't know how to fight against.

Ma walked to the window and looked down on the street three floors below. A few doors down, at the opposite curb, stood Eddie's recently acquired jalopy. He'd told her he'd bought it for ten bucks, but she knew better than that. It wasn't much of a car, as cars go, but it had cost him at least fifty. And where had that money come from?

Steady *creak-creak* of Gram's rocker. Ma almost wished she were like Gram, so she wouldn't lie awake nights worrying herself sick until she had to take a sleeping powder to get some sleep. If there was only some way she could make Eddie want to settle down and get a steady job and not run around

with men like--

Gram's voice cut across her thoughts. "You ain't lookin' so well, Elsie. Guess none of us are, though. It's the spring, the damp air and all. I made up some sulphur and molasses for us. Your pa, he used to swear by it, and he never had a sick day until just the week before he died."

Ma's tone was lifeless. "I'm all right, Gram. I--I guess I worry about Eddie. He--"

Gram nodded her gray head without looking up. "Has a cold coming on. He don't get outdoors enough daytimes. Boy ought to play out more. But you look downright peaked, Elsie. Used to be the purtiest girl on Seventieth Street. You worry about Eddie. He's a good boy."

Ma whirled. "Gram, I never said I thought he wasn't--"

Gram chuckled. "Brought home a special merit star on his report card, didn't he? And I met his teacher on the street, and she say, says she: 'Mrs. Garvin, that there grandson of yours--'"

Ma sighed and turned to go back to the kitchen to finish the dishes. Gram was back in the past again. It was eight years ago, when he was nine, that Eddie'd brought home that report card with the special merit star on it. That was when she'd hoped Eddie would--

"Elsie, you take a big spoonful of that sulphur 'n' molasses. Over the sink there. I took mine for today a'ready."

"All right, Gram." Ma's steps lagged. Maybe she'd failed Eddie; she didn't know. What else could she do? How could she make Butch Everard let him alone? What did Butch want with him?

There was a dull ache in her head and a heavy weight in her chest. She glanced up at the clock over the door of the kitchen, and her feet moved faster. Eight-forty, and she wasn't through with the supper dishes.

Eddie Murdock awoke with a start as the kitchen door closed. It was dark. Golly, he hadn't meant to fall asleep. He lifted his wrist quick to look at the luminous dial of his watch, and then felt a quick sense of relief. It was only eight-forty. He had time. Then he grinned in the darkness, a bit proud that he *had* been able to take a nap. Tonight of all nights, and he'd been able to fall asleep.

Why, tonight was *the* night. Lucky he'd waked up. Butch sure wouldn't have liked it if he'd been late or hadn't showed up. But if it was only eight-forty he had lots of time to meet the boys. Nine-thirty they met, and ten o'clock was *it.*

Suppose his wrist watch was wrong, though. It was a cheap one. With a sudden fear he jumped off the bed and ran to the window to look at the big clock across the way. Whew! Eight-forty it was--on the dot.

Everything was ducky then. Golly, if he'd overslept or anything, Butch would have thought he was yellow. And --why, he wasn't even worried. Hell, he was one of the gang now, a regular, and this was his first crack at some-thing big. Real money.

Well, not *big* money, maybe, but that box office ought to have enough dough to give them a couple hundred apiece. And that wasn't peanuts.

Butch had all those angles figured. He'd picked the best night, the night the most dough came in that window, and he'd timed the best hour--ten o'clock--just before the box office closed. Sure, they were being smart, waiting until all the money had come in that was coming in. And the getaway was a cinch, the way Butch had planned it.

Eddie turned on the light and then crossed over to the mirror and examined himself critically as he straightened his necktie and ran the comb through his hair. He rubbed his chin carefully, but he didn't seem to need a shave.

He winked at his reflection in the glass. That was a smart guy in there looking back at him. A guy that was going places. If a guy proved to Butch that he was a right guy and had the nerve, he could get in on all kinds of easy money.

He pulled out the shoe box from under his dresser and gave his already shiny shoes another lick with the polisher to make them shinier. The leather was a little cracked on one side. Well, after tonight he'd get new shoes and a couple of new suits. A few more jobs, and he'd get a new car like Butch's and scrap the old jalop'.

Then--although the door of his room was closed--he looked around carefully before he reached

down into the very bottom of the shoe box and took out something which was carefully concealed by being wrapped in the old polishing cloth, the one that wasn't used any more.

It was a little nickel-plated thirty-two revolver, and he looked at it proudly. It didn't matter that the plating was worn off in a few spots. It was loaded and it would shoot all right.

Just yesterday Butch had given it to him. " 'Sall right, kid," Butch had said. "It'll do for this here job. There ain't gonna be no shootin' anyway. Just one bozo in the box office that'll fold up the minute he sees guns. Hell shell out without a squawk. And outa your share get yourself something good. A thirty-eight automatic like mine may-be, and a shoulder holster."

The gun in his hand felt comfortingly heavy. Good little gun, he told himself. And *his.* He'd sure keep it even after he'd got himself a better one.

He dropped it into his coat pocket before he went out into the living room. As he walked through the door, the revolver in his pocket hit the wooden door frame with a metallic clunk that the cloth of his coat muffled. He straightened up and buttoned his coat shut. He'd have to watch that. Good thing it happened the first time where it didn't matter.

Ma came in out of the kitchen. She smiled at him and he grinned back. "Hiya, Ma. Didn't think I'd drop off. Should have told you to wake me, but 'sall right. I got time."

Ma's smile faded. "Time for what, Eddie?"

He grinned at her. "Heavy date." The grin faded a bit. "What's the matter, Ma?"

"Must you go out, Eddie? I--I just got through the dishes and I thought maybe you'd play some double solitaire with me when you woke up."

It was her tone of voice that made him notice her face. It came to him, quite suddenly, that Ma looked *old.* He said, "Gee, Ma, I wish I could, but--" Gram's rocker creaked across the silence.

"Johnny was here, Eddie," said Gram's voice. "He said--"

Ma cut in quickly. She'd seen the puzzled look on Ed-die's face at the name "Johnny." He didn't know who Johnny was; and Gram thought Butch Everard was still little Johnny, who'd played out front in a red wagon--

"Johnny Murphy," said Ma, blanketing out whatever Gram was going to say. "He's--you don't know him, I guess. Just here on an errand." She tried to make it sound casual. She managed a smile again. "How about that double solitaire, Eddie boy? Just a game or two."

He shook his head. "Heavy date, Ma," he said again.

He really felt sorry he couldn't. Well, maybe from now on he'd be able to make it up to Ma. He could buy her things, and--well, if he really got up there he could buy a place out at the edge of town and put her and Gram in it, in style. Bigshots did things like that for their folks, didn't they?

Gram was walking out to the kitchen. Eddie's eyes fol-lowed her because they didn't quite want to meet Ma's eyes, and then Eddie remembered what Gram had started to say about some Johnny.

"Say," he said, "Johnny--Gram didn't mean Butch, did she? Was Butch here for me?"

Ma's eyes were on him squarely now, and he forced himself to meet them. She said, "Is your 'heavy date' with Butch, Eddie? Oh, Eddie, he's--" Her voice sounded a little choked.

"Butch is all right, Ma," he said with a touch of de-fiance. "He's a good guy, Butch is. He's--"

He broke off. Damn. He hated scenes.

"Eddie boy," Gram spoke from the kitchen doorway.

It was a welcome interruption. But she had a tablespoon of that awful sulphur and molasses of hers. Oh, well, good old Gram's goofy ideas were saving him from a scene this time. He crossed over and took the vile stuff off the spoon. "Thanks, Gram. 'Night, Ma. Don't wait up." He started for the door. But it wasn't that easy. She caught at his sleeve. "Eddie, please. Listen--"

Hell, it would be worse if he hung around and argued. He jerked his sleeve free and was out of the door before she could stop him again. He could have hung around for half an hour almost, but not if Ma was going to take on like that. He could sit in the jalop' till it was time to go meet the bunch.

Ma started for the door and then stopped. She put her hands up to her eyes, but she couldn't cry. If she could only bawl or-- But she couldn't talk to Gram. She couldn't share her troubles, even.

"You take your tonic, Elsie?"

"Yeah," said Ma dully. Slowly she went to the table and sat down before it. She took a deck of cards from its drawer and began to pile them for a game of solitaire. She knew there was no use her even thinking about trying to go to bed until Eddie came home. No matter how late it was.

Gram came back and went over to the window. Some-times she'd look out of that window for an hour at a time. When you're old it doesn't take much to fill in your time.

Ma looked at Gram and envied her. When you were old you didn't mind things, because you lived mostly in the past, and the present went over and around you like water off a duck's back.

Almost desperately, Ma tried to keep her mind on beating the solitaire game. There were other games you didn't know how to try to beat.

She failed. Then she played out a game. Then she was stuck without even an ace up. She dealt them out again.

She was putting a black ten on a red jack, and then her hand jerked as she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Was Eddie coming back?

But no, not Eddie's footsteps. Ma glanced up at the clock before she turned back to the game. Ten-thirty. It was about Gram's bedtime.

The footsteps that weren't Eddie's were coming toward the door. They stopped outside. There was a heavy knock.

Ma's hand went to her heart. She didn't trust her legs to stand on. She said, "Come in."

A policeman came in and closed the door behind him. Ma saw only that uniform, but she heard Gram's voice:

"It's Dickie Wheeler. How are you, Dickie?"

The policeman smiled briefly at Gram. "Captain Wheel-er now, Gram," he said, "but I'm glad it's still Dickie to you."

Then his face changed as he turned to Ma. "Is Eddie here, Mrs. Murdock?"

Ma stood up slowly. "No--he--" But there wasn't any answer she could make that was as important as *knowing*. "Tell me! What?"

"Half hour ago," said Captain Wheeler, "four men held up the Bijou box office, just as it was closing. Squad car was going by, and--well, there was shooting. Two of the men were killed, and a third is dying. The other got away."

"Eddie-"

He shook his head. "We know the three. Butch Everard, Slim Ragoni, a guy named Walters. The fourth one--They were wearing masks. I hoped I'd find Eddie was home. We know he's been running with those men."

Ma stood up. "He was here at ten. He left just a few minutes ago. He--"

Wheeler put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't say that, Ma." He didn't call her Mrs. Murdock now, but neither of them noticed. "The man who got away was wounded, in the arm. If Eddie comes home sound, he won't need any alibi."

"Dickie," Gram said, and the rocker stopped creaking. "Eddie--he's a good boy. After tonight he'll be all right."

Captain Wheeler couldn't meet her eyes. After tonight --well, he hadn't told them quite all of it. One of the squad-car cops had been killed too. The man who got away would burn for that.

But Gram's voice prattled on. "He's just a little boy, Dickie. A little boy lost. You take him down to head-quarters and he'll get a scare. Show him the men who were killed. He needs a lesson, Dickie."

Ma looked at her. "Hush, Gram. Don't you see, it's-- Why didn't I stop him tonight, somehow?"

"He had a gun in his pocket tonight, Elsie," said Gram. "When he came out of his room I heard it hit the door. And with what you said about Johnny Everard--"

"Gram," said Ma wearily, "go to bed." There wasn't any room left in Ma for anger. "You're just making it worse."

"But, Elsie. Eddie didn't go. I'm trying to tell you. He's in his car, right across the street, right now. He's been there."

Wheeler looked at her sharply. Ma wasn't quite breath-ing.

Gram nodded. There were tears in her eyes now. "I knew we had to stop him," she said. "Those sleeping powders you have, Elsie. I put four of them in that sul-phur 'n' molasses I gave him. I knew they'd work quick, and I watched out the window. He stumbled going across the street, and he got in his car, but he never started it. Go down and get him, Dickie Wheeler, and when you get him awake enough you do like I told you to."

Whistler's Murder

The ancient but highly polished automobile turned in at the driveway of the big country house. It came to a stop exactly opposite the flagged walk that led to the porch of the house.

Mr. Henry Smith stepped from the car. He took a few steps toward the house and then paused at the sight of a wreath on the front door. He murmured something to himself that sounded suspiciously like, "Dear me," and stood for a moment. He took off his gold-rimmed pince-nez glasses and polished them carefully.

He replaced the glasses and looked at the house again. This time his gaze went higher. The house had a flat roof surmounted by a three-foot parapet. Standing on the roof behind the parapet, looking down at Mr. Smith, was a big man in a blue serge suit. A gust of wind blew back the big man's coat and Mr. Smith saw that he wore a re-volver in a shoulder holster. The big man pulled his coat together, buttoned it shut, and stepped back out of sight. This time, quite unmistakably, Mr. Smith said, "Dear me!"

He squared his gray derby hat, went up onto the porch, and rang the doorbell. After about a minute, the door opened. The big man who had been on the roof opened it, and frowned clown at Mr. Smith. He was well over six feet tall, and Mr. Smith was a scant five-six.

"Yeah?" said the big man.

"My name is Henry Smith," answered Mr. Smith. "I would like to see Mr. Walter Perry. Is he home?"

"No."

"Is he expected back soon?" asked Mr. Smith. "I ... ah . . . have an appointment with him. That is, not exactly an appointment. I mean, not for a specific hour. But I talked to him on the telephone yesterday and he suggested that I call sometime this afternoon." Mr. Smith's eyes flickered to the funeral wreath on the open door. "He isn't. . . ah--"

"No," said the big man. "His uncle's dead, not him."

"Ah, murdered?"

The big man's eyes opened a little more widely. "How did you know that? The papers haven't--"

"It was just a guess," Mr. Smith said. "Your coat blew back when you were on the roof and I saw you were wear-ing a gun. From that and your ... ah ... general appear-ance, I surmise that you are an officer of the law, possibly the sheriff of this county. At least, if my guess of murder is correct, I hope that you are an officer of the law and not.. . ah--"

The big man chuckled. "I'm Sheriff Osburne, not the murderer." He pushed his hat back farther on his head. "And what was your business with Walter Perry, Mr. . . . uh-?"

"Smith," said Mr. Smith. "Henry Smith, of the Phalanx Insurance Company. My business with Walter Perry con-cerned life insurance. My company, however, also handles fire, theft, and casualty insurance. We're one of the oldest and strongest companies in the country."

"Yeah, I've heard of the Phalanx. Just what did Walter Perry want to see you about? Wait, come on in. No use talking in the doorway. There's nobody here."

He led the way across the hall, into a large, luxuriously furnished room in one corner of which stood a mahogany Steinway grand. He waved Mr. Smith to an overstaffed sofa and perched himself on the bench of the piano.

Mr. Smith sat down on the plush sofa and placed his gray derby carefully beside him. "The

crime," he said, "I take it, would have occurred last night. And you suspect Walter Perry, are holding him?"

The sheriff's head tilted slightly to one side. "And from what," he wanted to know, "do you take all that?"

"Obviously," said Mr. Smith, "it had not occurred when I talked to Walter Perry late yesterday, or he would certainly have mentioned it. Then, if the crime had oc-curred today, I would expect more activity about, coroners, undertakers, deputies, photographers. The discovery must have occurred no later than early this morning for all that to be over with, and the ... ah ... remains taken away. I take it that they are, because of the wreath. That would indicate that a mortician has been here. Did you say we had the house to ourselves? Wouldn't an estate of this size require servants?"

"Yeah," answered the sheriff. "There's a gardener some-where around and a groom who takes care of the horses --Carlos Perry's hobby was raising and breeding horses. But they aren't in the house--the gardener and the groom, I mean. There were two inside servants, a housekeeper and a cook. The housekeeper quit two days ago and they hadn't hired a new one yet, and the cook-- Say, who's questioning who? How did you know we were holding Walter on suspicion?"

"A not illogical inference, Sheriff," said Mr. Smith. "His absence, your manner, and your interest in what he wanted to see me about. How and when was Mr. Carlos Perry killed?"

"A little after two o'clock, or a little before, the coroner says. With a knife, while he was in bed asleep. And no-body in the house."

"Except Mr. Walter Perry?"

The sheriff frowned. "Not even him, unless I can figure out how-- Say, who's questioning who, Mr. Smith? Just what was your business with Walter?"

"I sold him a policy--not a large one, it was for three thousand dollars--a few years ago while he was attend-ing college in the city. Yesterday, I received a notice from the main office that his current premium had not been paid and that the grace period had expired. That would mean loss of the policy, except for a cash surrender value, very small, considering that the policy was less than three years old. However, the policy can be reinstated within twenty-four hours after expiration of the grace period, if I can collect his premium and have him sign a statement that he is in good health and has had no serious illness since the policy date. Also, I hoped to get him to increase the amount... ah-- Sheriff, how can you possibly be certain that there was no one else in the house at the time Mr. Perry was killed?"

"Because," said the big man, "there were two men on the house."

"On the house? You mean, on the roof?"

The sheriff nodded glumly. "Yeah," he answered. "Two private detectives from the city, and they not only alibi each other--they alibi everybody else, including Mr. Addison Simms of Seattle." He grunted. "Well, I hoped your reason for seeing Walter would tie in somewhere, but I guess it doesn't. If anything comes up, I can reach you through your company, can't I?"

"Of course," said Mr. Smith. He made no move to go. The sheriff had turned around to the keyboard of the Steinway grand. With a morose finger, he picked out the notes of "Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater."

Mr. Smith waited patiently until the concert was fin-ished.

Then he asked, "Why were two detectives on the roof, Sheriff? Had there been a warning message or a threat of some sort?"

Sheriff Osburne turned around on the piano bench and regarded the little insurance agent glumly.

Mr. Smith smiled deprecatingly. He said, "I hope you don't think I'm interfering, but can't you see that it's part of my job, part of my duty to my company, to solve this crime, if I can?"

"Huh? You didn't have insurance on the old guy, did you?"

"No, just on young Walter. But the question arises--is Walter Perry guilty of murder? If he is, I would be doing my employer a disservice to go out of my way to renew his policy. If he is innocent, and I do not remind him that his policy is about to lapse, I am doing a disservice to a client. So I hope you see that my curiosity is not merely ... ah ... curiosity."

The sheriff grunted.

"There was a threat, a warning?" Mr. Smith asked.

The sheriff sighed deeply. "Yeah," he said. "Came in the mail three days ago. Letter saying he'd be murdered unless he made restitution to all the people he'd gypped out of money on songs he'd stolen--pirated, I think they call it in that game--from them. He was a song publisher, you know."

"I recall his nephew having mentioned it. Whistler and Company, isn't it? Who is Mr. Whistler?"

"There ain't any," replied the sheriff. "It's a long-- All right, I might as well tell you. Carlos Perry used to be in vaudeville, a solo act, whistling. Way back when, when there was vaudeville. When he took on a girl assistant, he billed himself as Whistler and Company, instead of using his name. See?"

"And then he got into song publishing, and used the same name for a company name. I see. And did he really cheat his clients?"

The sheriff said, "I guess he did, all right. He wrote a couple songs himself that went fairly well, and used the money he got from 'em to set himself up in publishing. And I guess his methods were crooked, all right. He was sued about a dozen times, but usually came out on top and kept right on making hay. He had plenty. I wouldn't say he was a millionaire, but he must have been half of one, anyway.

"So three days ago, this threatening letter comes in the mail, and he showed it to us and wanted protection. Well, I told him we'd work on finding out who sent the letter, but that the county couldn't afford to assign anybody to permanent protection duty at his place and if he wanted that, he'd have to hire it done. So he went to the city and hired two men from an agency."

"A reputable one?"

"Yeah, the International. They sent Krauss and Roberts, two of their best men."

The sheriff's hand, resting on the keyboard, struck what he probably intended as a chord. It wasn't. Mr. Smith winced slightly.

"Last night," the sheriff went on, "as it happened, no-body was in or around the place here except the boss--I mean, Carlos Perry--and the two International ops. Walter was staying overnight in the city, went to see a show and stayed at a hotel, he says. We've checked. He went to the hotel all right, but we can't prove he stayed in his room, or that he didn't. Checked in about midnight, and left a call for eight. He could've made it here and back, easy.

"And the servants--well, I'd told you the housekeeper had quit and not been replaced yet. Just coincidence the other three all happened to be away. The cook's mother's critically sick; she's still away. It was the gardener's night off; he spent it with his sister and her husband in Dartown, like he always does. The other guy, the horse trainer or groom or whatever the devil you'd call him, went to town to see a doctor about an infected foot he'd got from step-ping on a nail. Drove in in Perry's truck and the truck broke down. He phoned and Perry told him to have it fixed at an all-night garage, sleep in town, and bring it back in the morning. So, outside of horses and a couple cats, the only people around last night were Perry and the two private ops."

Mr. Smith nodded gravely. "And the coroner says the murder happened around two o'clock?"

"He says that's fairly close, and he's got something to go by, too. Perry turned in about midnight, and just before he went to his room, he ate a snack out of the refrigerator. One of the ops, Roberts, was in the kitchen with him and can verify what he ate and when. So--you know how a coroner can figure time of death, I guess--how far diges-tion has proceeded. And--"

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Smith.

"Let's go up on the roof," suggested the sheriff. "I'll show you the rest of it, easier'n I can tell you."

He got up from the piano bench and went toward the stairs, Mr. Smith following him like a very small tail on a very large comet. The sheriff talked back over his shoulder:

"So at midnight Perry turns in. The two ops search the place thoroughly, inside and out. There ain't nobody around then. They'll swear to that, and like I said, they're good men."

"And," said Mr. Smith cheerfully, "if someone was al-ready hiding on the premises at midnight, it couldn't have been Walter Perry. You verified that he checked in at a hotel at midnight."

"Yeah," the sheriff rumbled. "Only, there wasn't no-body around. Roberts and Krauss say they'll turn in their licenses if there was. So they went up, this way, to the roof, because it was a moonlight night

and that's the best place to watch from. Up here."

They had climbed the ladder from the back second-floor hallway through the open skylight and now stood on the flat roof. Mr. Smith walked over to the parapet.

Sheriff Osburne waved a huge hand. "Lookit," he said, "you can see all directions for almost a quarter of a mile, farther than that most ways. There was moonlight, not bright enough to read by, maybe, because the moon was low in the sky, but both the International men were on this roof from around midnight to half past two. And they swear nobody crossed any of those fields or came along the road."

"They were both watching all that time?"

"Yeah," the sheriff answered. "They were gonna take turns, and it was Krauss's turn off first, but it was so nice up there on the roof, and he wasn't sleepy, that he stuck around talking to Roberts instead of turning in. And while they weren't watching all directions every second--well, it'd take anybody time to cross the area where they could've seen him. They say it couldn't have been done."

"And at two-thirty?"

The sheriff frowned. "At two-thirty Krauss decided to go downstairs and take a nap. He was just going through the skylight there when the bell started to ring--the tele-phone bell, I mean. The phone's downstairs, but there's an extension upstairs and it rings both places.

"Krauss didn't know whether to answer it or not. He knew out in the country here, there are different rings for different phones and he didn't know whether it was Perry's ring or not. He went back up on the roof to ask Roberts if he knew, and Roberts did know, and it was Perry's ring on the phone, so Krauss went down and answered it.

"It wasn't anything important; it was just a misunder-standing. Merkle, the horse guy, had told the all-night garage he'd phone to find out if the truck was ready; he meant when he woke up in the morning. But the garage-man misunderstood and thought he was to call when he'd finished working on the truck. And he didn't know Merkle was staying in the village. He phoned out to the house to tell 'em the truck was ready. He's a kind of dumb guy, the one that works nights in the garage, I mean."

Sheriff Osburne tilted his hat back still farther and then grabbed at it as a vagrant breeze almost removed it entirely. He said, "Then Krauss got to wondering how come the phone hadn't waked Perry, because it was right outside his bedroom door and he knew Perry was a light sleeper; Perry'd told him so. So he investigated and found Perry was dead."

Mr. Smith nodded. He said, "Then, I suppose, they searched the place again?"

"Nope. They were smarter'n that. Good men, I told you. Krauss went back up and told Roberts, and Roberts stayed on the roof, watching, figuring maybe the killer was still around and he could see him leaving, see? Krauss went downstairs, phoned me, and while I was getting around here with a couple of the boys, he searched the place again, Roberts watching all the time. He searched the house and the barns and everywhere, and then when we got here, we helped him and went all over it again. There wasn't nobody here. See?"

Mr. Smith nodded again, gravely. He took off his gold-rimmed glasses and polished them, then walked around the low parapet, studying the landscape.

The sheriff followed him. He said, "Look, the moon was low in the northwest. That meant this house threw a shadow across to the barns. A guy could get that far, easy, but to and from the barns, he'd have to cross that big field as far as the clump of trees way down there at the edge of the road. He'd stick out like a sore thumb crossing that field.

"And outside of the barns, that there chunk of woods is the nearest possible cover he could've come from. It'd take him ten minutes to cross that field, and he couldn'ta done it."

"I doubt," observed Mr. Smith, "that any man would have been so foolish as to try. The moonlight works both ways. I mean, he could have seen the men on the roof, easily, unless they were hiding down behind the parapet. Were they?"

"Nope. They weren't trying to trap anybody. They were just watching, most of the time sitting on the parapet, one facing each way, while they talked. Like you say, he could've seen them just as easy as they could've seen him."

"Um-m-m," said Mr. Smith. "But you haven't told me why you're holding Walter Perry. I

presume he inherits-- that would give him a motive. But, according to what you tell me about the ethics of Whistler and Company, a lot of other people could have motives."

The sheriff nodded glumly. "Several dozen of 'em. Es-pecially if we could believe that threatening letter."

"And can't you?'

"No, we can't. Walter Perry wrote it and mailed it to his uncle. We traced the typewriter he used and the stationery. And he admits writing it."

"Dear me," declared Mr. Smith earnestly. "Does he say why?"

"He does, but it's screwy. Look, you want to see him anyway, so why don't you get his story from him?"

"An excellent idea, Sheriff. And thank you very much."

"It's all right. I thought maybe thinking out loud would give me some idea how it was done, but it ain't. Oh, well. Look, tell Mike at the jail I said you could talk to Walter. If Mike don't take your word for it, have him phone me here. I'll be around for a while."

Near the open skylight, Mr. Henry Smith paused to take a last look at the surrounding country. He saw a tall, thin man wearing denim coveralls ride out into the field from the far side of the barn.

"Is that Merkle, the trainer?" he asked. "Yep," said the sheriff. "He exercises those horses like they was his own kids. A good guy, if you don't criticize his horses--don't try that."

"I won't," said Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith took a last lingering look around, then went down the ladder and the stairs and got back into his car. He drove slowly and thoughtfully to the county seat.

Mike, at the jail, took Mr. Smith's word that Sheriff Osburne had given permission for him to talk to Walter Perry.

Walter Perry was a slight, grave young man who wore horn-rimmed glasses with thick lenses. He smiled rue-fully at Mr. Smith. He said, "It was about renewing my policy that you wanted to see me, wasn't it? But you won't want to now, of course, and I don't blame you."

Mr. Smith studied him a moment. He asked, "You didn't ... ah ... kill your uncle, did you?"

"Of course not."

"Then," Mr. Smith told him, "just sign here." He pro-duced a form from his pocket and unscrewed the top of his fountain pen. The young man signed, and Mr. Smith folded the paper carefully and put it back in his pocket.

"But I wonder, Mr. Perry," said Mr. Smith, "if you would mind telling me just why you ... ah--Sheriff Osburne tells me that you admit sending a letter threatening your uncle's life. Is that right?"

Walter Perry sighed. He said, "Yes, I did."

"But wasn't that a very foolish thing to do? I take it you never intended to carry out the threat."

"No, I didn't. Of course it was foolish. It was crazy. I should have seen that it would never work. Not with my uncle." He sighed again and sat down on the edge of the cot in his cell. "My uncle was a crook, but I guess he wasn't a coward. I don't know whether that's to his credit or not. Now that he's dead, I hate to--"

Mr. Smith nodded sympathetically. He said, "Your uncle had, I understand, cheated a great many song writers out of royalties from their creations. You thought you might frighten him into making restitution to the ones he had cheated?"

Walter Perry nodded. "It was silly. One of those crazy ideas one gets. It was because he got well."

"Got well! I'm afraid I don't--"

"I'd better tell you from the beginning, Mr. Smith. It was two years ago, about the time I graduated from col-lege--I worked my way through; my uncle didn't foot the bill--that I first learned what kind of an outfit Whistler and Company was. I happened to meet some former friends of my uncle--old-time vaudeville people who had been on the circuits with him. They were plenty bitter. So I started investigating, and found out about all the law-suits he'd had to fight, and--well, I was convinced.

"I was his only living relative, and I knew I was his heir, but if his money was crooked

money--well, I didn't want it. He and I had a quarrel and he disinherited me, and that was that. Until a year ago, I learned--"

He stopped, staring at the barred door of the cell. "You learned what?" Mr. Smith prompted.

"I learned, accidentally, that my uncle had some kind of cardiac trouble and didn't have long to live, according to the doctor. Probably less than a year. And--well, it's probably hard for anybody to believe that my motives were good, but I decided that under those circumstances I was missing a chance to help the people my uncle had cheated--that if I was still his heir, I could make restitu-tion after his death of the money he had stolen from them. You see?"

Walter Perry looked up at the little insurance agent from his seat on the cot, and Mr. Smith studied the young man's face, then nodded.

"So you effected a reconciliation?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Smith. It was hypocritical, in one way, but I thought it would enable me to square off those crimes. I didn't want his money, any of it. But I was sorry for all those poor people he'd cheated and--well, I made myself be hypocritical for their sake."

"You know any of them personally?"

"Not all, but I knew I could find most of the ones I didn't know through the records of the old lawsuits. The ones I met first were an old vaudeville team by the name of Wade and Wheeler. I met a few others through them, and looked up a few others. Most of them hated him like poison, and I can't say I blame them."

Mr. Smith nodded sympathetically. He said, "But the threatening letter. Where does that fit in?"

"About a week ago, I learned that his heart trouble was much better. They'd discovered a new treatment with one of the new drugs, and while he'd never be in perfect health, there was every chance he had another twenty years or so to live--he was only forty-eight. And, well, that changed things."

The young man laughed ruefully. He went on, "I didn't know if I could stand up under the strain of my hypocrisy for that long, and anyway, it didn't look as though restitu-tion would come in time to do any good to a lot of the people he owed money to. Wade and Wheeler, for in-stance, were older than my uncle, a few years. He could easily outlive them, and some of the others. You see?"

"So you decided to write a letter threatening his life, pretending to come from one of the people he'd cheated, thinking it might scare him into giving them their money now?"

"Decided," said Walter Perry, "is hardly the word. If I'd thought about it, I'd have realized how foolish it was to hope that it would do any good. He just hired detectives. And then he was murdered, and here I am in a beautiful jam. Since he knows I wrote that letter, I don't blame Osburne for thinking I must have killed him, too."

Mr. Smith chuckled. He told him, "Fortunately for you, the sheriff can't figure out how anybody could have killed him. Ah... did anyone know about your hoax, the threaten-ing letter? That is, of course, before the sheriff traced it to you and you admitted writing and sending it?"

"Why, yes. I was so disappointed in my uncle's reaction to receiving it that I mentioned it to Mr. Wade and Mr. Wheeler, and to a few of the others my uncle owed royal-ties to. I hoped they could suggest some other idea that might work better. But they couldn't."

"Wade and Wheeler--they live in the city?" "Yes, they're out of vaudeville now, of course. They get by doing bit parts on television."

"Um-m-m," said Mr. Smith. "Well, thank you for signing the renewal on your policy. And when you are out of here, I'd like to see you again to discuss the possibility of your taking an additional policy. You are planning to be mar-ried, you mentioned yesterday?"

"I was, yesterday," replied Walter Perry. "I guess I still am, unless Osburne pins a murder on me. Yes, Mr. Smith, I'll be glad to discuss another policy, if I get out of this mess."

Mr. Smith smiled. He said, "Then it seems even more definitely to the interest of the Phalanx Insurance Company to see that you are free as soon as possible. I think I shall return and talk to the sheriff again."

Mr. Henry Smith drove back to the Perry house even more slowly and thoughtfully than he had driven away from it. He didn't drive quite all the way. He parked his ancient vehicle almost a quarter of a

mile away, at the point where the road curved around the copse of trees that gave the nearest cover.

He walked through the trees until, near the edge of the copse, he could see the house itself across the open field. The sheriff was still, or again, on the roof.

Mr. Smith walked out into the open, and the sheriff saw him almost at once. Mr. Smith waved and the sheriff waved back. Mr. Smith walked on across the field to the barn, which stood between the field and the house itself.

The tall, thin man whom he had seen exercising the horse was now engaged in currying a horse.

"Mr. Merkle?" asked Mr. Smith, and the man nodded. "My name is Smith, Henry Smith. I am ... ah ... attempt-ing to help the sheriff. A beautiful stallion, that gray. Would I be wrong in guessing that it is a cross between an Arabian and a Kentucky walking horse?"

The thin man's face lighted up. "Right, mister. I see you know horses. I been having fun with those city dicks all week, kidding 'em. They think, because I told 'em, that this is a Clyde, and that chestnut Arab mare is a Percheron. Found out yet who killed Mr. Perry?"

Mr. Smith stared at him. "It is just possible that we have, Mr. Merkle. It is just barely possible that you have told me how it was done, and if we know that--"

"Huh?" said the trainer. "I told you?"

"Yes," returned Mr. Smith. "Thank you."

He walked on around the barn and joined the sheriff on the roof.

Sheriff Osburne grunted a welcome. He said, "I saw you the minute you came out into the open. Dammit, nobody could have crossed that field last night without being noticed."

"You said the moonlight was rather dim, did you not?" "Yeah, the moon was low, kind of, and--let's see, was it a half moon?"

"Third quarter," said Mr. Smith. "And the men who crossed that field didn't have to come closer than a hundred yards or more until they were lost in the shadow of the barn."

The sheriff took off his hat and swabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. He said, "Sure, I ain't saying you could recognize anybody that far, but you could see-- Hey, why'd you say the men who crossed that field? You mean, you think--"

"Exactly," cut in Mr. Smith, just a bit smugly. "One man could not have crossed that field last night without being noticed, but two men could. It seems quite absurd, I will admit, but by process of elimination, it must have been what happened."

Sheriff Osburne stared blankly.

"The two men," said Mr. Smith, "are named Wade and Wheeler. They live in the city, and you'll have no difficulty finding them because Walter Perry knows where they live. I think you'll have no difficulty proving that they did it, once you know the facts. For one thing, I think you'll find that they probably rented the ... ah ... where-withal. I doubt if they have their own left, after all these years off the stage."

"Wheeler and Wade? I believe Walter mentioned those names, but--"

"Exactly," said Mr. Smith. "They knew the setup here. And they knew that if Walter inherited Whistler and Company, they'd get the money they had coming, and so they came here last night and killed Mr. Carlos Perry. They crossed that field last night right under the eyes of your city detectives."

"I'm crazy, or you are," declared Sheriff Osburne.

"How?"

Mr. Smith smiled gently.

He said, "On my way up through the house just now, I verified a wild guess. I phoned a friend of mine who has been a theatrical agent for a great many years. He re-membered Wade and Wheeler quite well. And it's the only answer. Possibly because of dim moonlight, distance, and the ignorance of city-bred men who would think nothing of seeing a horse in a field at night when the horse should be in the barn. Who wouldn't, in fact, even see a horse, to remember it."

"You mean Wade and Wheeler--"

"Exactly," said Mr. Smith, this time with definite smug-ness in his voice. "Wade and Wheeler, in vaudeville, were the front and back ends, respectively, of a comedy horse."

Satan One-and-a-Half

Maybe you know how it is, when a man seeks solitude to do some creative work. As soon as he gets solitude, he finds it gives him the willies to be alone. Back in the middle of everything, he thought, "If I could only get away from everybody I know, I could get something done." But let him get away-and see what happens.

I know; I'd had solitude for almost a week, and it was giving me the screaming meamies. I'd written hardly a note of the piano concerto I intended composing. I had the opening few bars, but they sounded suspiciously like Gershwin.

Here I was in a cottage out at the edge of town, and that cottage had seemed like what the doctor ordered when I rented it. I'd given my address to none of my pals, and so there were no parties, no jam sessions, no distractions.

That is, no distractions except loneliness. I was finding that loneliness is worse than all other distractions com-bined.

All I did was sit there at the piano with a pencil stuck behind my ear, wishing the doorbell would ring. Anybody. Anything. I wished I'd had a telephone put in and had given my friends the number. I wished the cottage would turn out to be haunted. Even that would be better.

The doorbell rang.

I jumped up from the piano and practically ran to an-swer it.

And there wasn't anybody there. I could see that without opening the door, because the door is mostly glass. Unless someone had rung the bell and then run like hell to get out of sight.

I opened the door and saw the cat. I didn't pay any particular attention to it though. Instead, I stuck my head out and looked both ways. There wasn't anybody in sight except the man across the street mowing his lawn.

I turned to go back to the piano, and the doorbell rang again.

This time I wasn't more than a yard from the door. I swung around, opened it wide, and stepped outside.

There wasn't anybody there, and the nearest hiding place--around the corner of the house--was too far away for anybody to have got there without my seeing him. Unless the cat.

I looked down for the cat and at first I thought it, too, had disappeared. But then I saw it again, walking with graceful dignity along the hallway, inside the house, to-ward the living room. It was paying no more attention to me than I had paid to it the first time I'd looked out the door.

I turned around again and looked up and down the street, and at the trees on my lawn, at the house next door on the north, and at the house next door on the south. Each of those houses was a good fifty yards from mine and no one could conceivably have rung my bell and run to either of them.

Even leaving out the question of *why* anyone should have done such a childish stunt, nobody could have.

I went back in the house, and there was the cat curled up sound asleep in the Morris chair in the living room. He was a big, black cat, a cat with character. Somehow, even asleep, he seemed to have a rakish look about him.

I said, "Hey," and he opened big yellowish-green eyes and looked at me. There wasn't any surprise or fear in those handsome eyes; only a touch of injured dignity. I said, "Who rang that doorbell?" Naturally, he didn't answer.

So I said, "Want something to eat, maybe?" And don't ask me why he answered that one when he wouldn't answer the others. My tone of voice, perhaps. He said, "Miaourr ..." and stood up in the

chair.

I said, "All right, come on," and went out into the kitchen to explore the refrigerator. There was most of a bottle of milk, but somehow my guest didn't look like a cat who drank much milk. But luckily there was plenty of ground meat, because hamburgers are my favorite food when I do my own cooking.

I put some hamburger in a bowl and some water in another bowl and put them both on the floor under the sink. He was busily working on the hamburger when I went back into the front hallway to look at the doorbell.

The bell was right over the front door, and it was the only bell in the house. I couldn't have mistaken a tele-phone bell because I didn't have a phone, and there was a knocker instead of a bell on the back door. I didn't know where the battery or the transformer that ran the bell was located, and there wasn't any way of tracing the wir-ing without tearing down the walls.

The push button outside the door was four feet up from the step. A cat, even one smart enough to stand on its hind legs, couldn't have reached it. Of course, a cat could have jumped for the button, but that would have caused a sharp, short ring. Both times, the doorbell had rung longer than that.

Nobody could have rung it from the outside and got away without my seeing him. And, granting that the bell could be short-circuited from somewhere inside the house, that didn't get me an answer. The cottage was so small and so quiet that it would have been impossible for a win-dow or a door to have opened without my hearing it.

I went outside again and looked around, and this time I got an idea. This was an ideal opportunity for me to get acquainted with the girl next door--an opportunity I'd been waiting for since I'd first seen her a few days ago.

I cut across the lawn and knocked on the door.

Seeing her from a distance, I'd thought she was a knock-out. Now, as she opened the door and I got a close look, I knew she was.

I said, "My name is Brian Murray. I live next door and I-"

"And you play with Russ Whitlow's orchestra." She smiled, and I saw I'd underestimated how pretty she was. Strictly tops. "I was hoping we'd get acquainted while you were here. Won't you come in?"

I didn't argue about that. I went in, and almost the first thing I noticed inside was a beautiful walnut grand piano. I asked, "Do you play, Miss--?"

"Carson. Ruth Carson. I give piano lessons to brats with sticky fingers who'd rather be outside playing ball or skip-ping rope. When I heard Whitlow on the radio a few nights ago, the piano sounded different. Aren't you still--?"

"I'm on leave," I explained. "I had rather good luck with a couple of compositions a year ago, and Russ gave me a month off to try my hand at some more." "Have you written any?"

I said ruefully, "To date all I've set down is a pair of clef signs. Maybe now ..." I was going to say that maybe now that I'd met her, things would be different. But that was working too fast, I decided.

She said, "Sit down, Mr. Murray. My uncle and aunt will be home soon, and I'd like you to meet them. Mean-while, would you care for some tea?"

I said that I would, and it was only after she'd gone out into the kitchen that I realized I hadn't asked the question I'd come to ask. When she came back, I said:

"Miss Carson, I came to ask you about a black cat. It walked into my house a few minutes ago. Do you know if it belongs to anybody here in the neighborhood?"

"A black cat? That's odd. Mr. Lasky owned one, but outside of that one, I don't know of any around here."

"Who is Mr. Lasky?"

She looked surprised. "Why, didn't you know? He was the man who lived in that cottage before you did. He died only a few weeks ago. He--he committed suicide."

The faintest little shiver ran down my spine. Funny, in a city, how little one knows about the places one lives in. You rent a house or an apartment and never think to wonder who has lived there before you or what tragedies have been enacted there.

I said, "That might explain it. I mean, if it's his cat. Cats become attached to people. It would explain why the cat--"

"I'm afraid it doesn't," she said. "The cat is dead, too. I happened to see him bury it in your back yard, under the maple tree. It was run over by a car, I believe."

The phone rang, and she went to answer it. I started thinking about the cat again. The way it had walked in, as though it lived there--it was a bit eerie, somehow. If it were my predecessor's cat, that would explain its apparent familiarity with the place. But it couldn't be my predeces-sor's cat. Unless he'd had more than one ...

Ruth Carson came back from the hallway. She said, "That was my aunt. They won't be home until late tonight, so probably you won't get to meet them until tomorrow. That means I'll have to get my own dinner, and I hate to eat alone. Will you share it with me, Mr. Murray?"

That was the easiest question I'd ever had to answer in my life.

We had an excellent meal in the breakfast nook in the kitchen. We talked about music for a while, and then I told her about the cat and the doorbell.

It puzzled her almost as much as it had puzzled me. She said, "Are you sure some child couldn't have rung it for a prank, and then ducked out of sight before you got there?"

"I don't see how," I said. "I was just inside the door the second time it rang. Tell me about this Mr. Lasky and about his cat."

She said, "I don't know how long he lived there. We moved here just a year ago, and he was there then. He was rather an eccentric chap, almost a hermit. He never had any guests, never spoke to anyone. He and the cat lived there alone. I think he was crazy about the cat."

"An old duck?" I asked.

"Not really old. Probably in his fifties. He had a gray beard that made him look older."

"And the cat. Could he possibly have had two black cats?"

"I'm almost positive he didn't. I never saw more than the big black torn he called Satan. And there was no cat around during the week after it was killed."

"You're positive it died?"

"Yes. I happened to see him burying it, and it wasn't in a box or anything. And it was almost the only time I ever heard him speak; he was talking to himself, cursing about careless auto drivers. He took it hard. Maybe--"

She stopped, and I tried to fill in the blank. "You mean that was why he committed suicide a week later?"

"Oh, he must have had other reasons, but I imagine that was a factor. He left a suicide note, I understand. It was in the papers, at the time. There was one particularly unhappy circumstance about it. He wrote the note and then took poison. But before the poison had taken effect, he regretted it or changed his mind; he telephoned the police and they rushed an ambulance and a doctor--but he was dead when they got there."

For an instant I wondered how he could have phoned the police from a house in which there was no telephone. Then I remembered that there had been one, taken out before I moved in. The rental agency had told me so, and that the wiring was already there in case I wanted one installed. For privacy's sake I'd decided against having it done.

We'd finished our meal, and I insisted on helping with the dishes. Then I said, "Would you like to meet the cat?"

"Of course," she said. "Are you going to let him stay?"

I grinned. "The question seems to be whether he's going to let me stay. Come on; maybe you can give me a recom-mendation."

We were right by her kitchen door, so we cut across the back yards into my kitchen. All the hamburger I'd put under the sink was gone. The cat was back in the Morris chair, asleep again. He blinked at us as I turned on the light.

Ruth stood there staring at him. "He's a dead ringer for Mr. Lasky's Satan. I'd almost swear it's the same. But it *couldn't* be!"

I said, "A cat has nine lives, you know. Anyway, I'll call him Satan. And since the question arises whether he's Satan One or Satan Two, let's compromise. Satan One-and-a-Half. So, Satan One-and-a-Half, you've got the only com-fortable chair in this room. Mind giving it up for a lady?"

Whether he minded or not, I picked him up and moved him to a straight chair. Satan One-and-a-Half promptly jumped down to the floor from his straight chair, went back to the Morris, and jumped up on Ruth's lap.

I said, "Shall I shut him in the kitchen?"

"No, don't. Really, I like cats." She was stroking his fur gently, and the cat promptly curled into a black ball of fur and went to sleep.

"Anyway," I said, "he's got good taste. But now you're stuck. You can't move without waking him, and that would be rude."

She smiled. "Will you play for me? Something of your own, I mean. Did you mean it literally when you said you'd composed nothing since you've been here, or were you being modest?"

I looked down at the staff paper on the piano. There were a few bars there, an opening. But it wasn't any good. I said, "I wasn't being modest. I can compose, when I have an idea. But I haven't had an idea since I've been here."

She said, "Play the 'Black Cat Nocturne.'"

"Sorry, I don't know--"

"Of course not. It hasn't been written yet."

Then I got what she was talking about, and it began to click.

She said, "A doorbell rings, but nobody is there. The ghost of a dead black cat walks in and takes over your house. It--"

"Enough," I said, very rudely. I didn't want to hear any more. All I needed was the starting point.

I hit a weird arpeggio in the base, and it went on from there. Almost by itself, it went on from there. My fingers did it, not my mind. The melody was working up into the treble now, with a soft dissonant thump-thump in the accompaniment that was like a cat walking across the skin of a bass drum and-- The doorbell rang.

It startled me and I hit about the worst discord of my career. I'd been out of the world for maybe half a minute, and the sudden ring of that bell was as much of a jolt as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice water on me.

I saw Ruth's face; it, too, was startled looking. And the cat lying in her lap had raised its head. But its yellow-green eyes, slitted against the light, were inscrutable.

The bell rang again, and I shoved back the piano bench and stood up. Maybe, by playing, I'd hypnotized myself into a state of fright, but I was afraid to go to that door. Twice before, today, that doorbell had rung. Who, or what, would I find there this time?

I couldn't have told what I was afraid of. Or maybe I could, at that. Down deep inside, we're all afraid of the supernatural. The last time that doorbell had rung, maybe a dead cat had come back. And now--maybe its owner .. .

I tried to be casual as I went to the door, but I could tell from Ruth's face that she was feeling as I did about it. That damn music! I'd picked the wrong time to get my-self into a mood. If I went to the door and nobody was there, I'd probably be in a state of jitters the rest of the night.

But there was someone there. I could see, the moment I stepped from the living room into the hallway, that there was a man standing there. It was too dark for me to make out his features, but, at any rate, he didn't have a gray beard.

I opened the door.

The man outside said, "Mr. Murray?"

He was a big man, tall and broad-shouldered, with a very round face. Right now it was split by an ingratiating smile. He looked familiar and I knew I'd seen him before, but I couldn't place him. I did know that I didn't like him; maybe I was being psychic or maybe I was being silly, but I felt fear and loathing at the sight of him.

I said, "Yes, my name is Murray."

"Mine's Haskins. Milo Haskins. I'm your neighbor across the street, Mr. Murray."

Of course, that was where I'd seen him. He'd been mow-ing the lawn over there this afternoon, when the cat came.

He said, "I'm in the insurance game, Mr. Murray. Some-time I'd like to talk insurance with you, but that isn't what I came to see you about tonight. It's about a cat, a black cat."

"Yes?"

"It's mine," he said. "I saw it go in your door today, just before I went in the house. I came over just as soon as I could to get it."

"Sorry, Mr. Haskins," I told him. "I fed it and then let it out the back door. Don't know where it went from here."

"Oh," he said. He looked as though he didn't know whether or not to believe me. "Are you sure it didn't come back in a window or something? Would you mind if I helped you look around?"

I said, "I'm afraid I would mind, Mr. Haskins. Good night."

I stepped back to close the door, and then something soft rubbed against my leg. At the same instant, I saw Haskins's eyes look down and then harden as they came up and met mine again.

He said, "So?" He bent and held out a hand to the cat. "Here, kitty. Come here, kitty."

Then it was my turn to grin, because the cat clawed his fingers.

"Your cat, eh?" I said. "I thought you were lying, too, Haskins. That's why I wouldn't give you the cat. I'll change my mind now; you can have him if he goes with you will-ingly. But lay a hand on him, and I'll knock your block off."

He said, "Damn you, I'll--"

"You'll do nothing but leave. I'll stand here, with the door open, till you're across the street. The cat's free to follow you, if he's yours."

"It's my cat! And damn it, I'll--"

"You can get a writ of replevin, tomorrow," I said. "That is, if you can prove ownership."

He glared a minute longer, opened his mouth to say something, then reconsidered and strode off down the walk. I closed the door, and the cat was still inside, in the hallway.

I turned, and Ruth Carson was in the hallway too, be-hind me. She said, "I heard him say who he was and what he wanted, and when the cat jumped down and went to-ward the door, I--"

"Did he see you?" I asked.

"Why, yes. Shouldn't I have let him?"

"I--I don't know," I said. I did know that I wished he hadn't seen her. Somehow, somewhere, I sensed danger in this. There was danger in the very air. But to whom, and why?

We went back into the living room, but I didn't sit on the piano bench this time; I took a chair instead. Music was out for tonight. That ringing doorbell and the episode that had followed had ended my inclination to improvise as effectively as though someone had chopped up the piano with an ax. Ruth must have sensed it; she didn't suggest that I play again.

I said, "What do you know about our pleasant neighbor, Milo Haskins?"

"Very little," she said. "Except that he's lived there since before we moved into the neighborhood last year. He has a wife--a rather unpleasant woman--but no children. He does sell insurance. Mostly fire insurance, I believe."

"Does he own a cat, that you know of?"

She shook her head. "I've never seen one. I've never seen any black cat in this neighborhood except Mr. Lasky's, and--" She turned to look at Satan One-and-a-Half, who was lying on his back on the rug, batting a fore-paw, at nothing apparently.

I said, "Cat, if you could only talk. I wish I knew whether--" I stood up abruptly. "To what side of that maple tree and how far from it did Mr. Lasky bury that cat?"

"Are you going to ... ?"

"Yes. There's a trowel and a flashlight in the kitchen, and I'm going to make sure of something, right now."

"I'll show you, then."

"No," I said. "Just tell me. It might not be pleasant. You wait here."

She sat down again. "All right. On the west side of the tree, about four feet from the trunk."

I found the trowel and the flashlight and went out into the yard.

Five minutes later I came in to report.

"It's there," I told her, without going into unpleasant details. "As soon as I wash up, I'd like to use your phone. May I?"

"Of course. Are you going to call the police?" "No. Maybe I should--but what could I tell them?" I tried to laugh; it didn't quite go over. This wasn't funny. Whatever else it was, it wasn't funny. I said, "What time do you expect your aunt and uncle home?"

"No later than eleven."

I said, "For some reason, this Haskins is interested in that cat. Too interested. If he sees us leave here, he might come in and get it, or kill it, or do whatever he wants to do with it. I can't even guess. We'll sneak out the back way and get to your place without his seeing us, and we'll leave the lights on here so he won't know we've left." "Do you really think something is--is going to happen?"

"I don't know. It's just a feeling. Maybe it's just because the things that have happened don't make sense that I have an idea it isn't over yet. And I want you out of it."

I washed my hands in the kitchen, and then we went outside. It was quite dark out there, and I was sure we couldn't be seen from the front as we cut across the lawn between the houses.

We'd left the light burning in her kitchen. I said, "I noticed before where your phone is. I'll use it without turning on the light. I just want to see if I can get any information that will clear this up."

I phoned the *News* and asked for Monty Billings who is on the city desk, evenings. I said, "This is Murray. Got time to look up something for me?"

"Sure. What?"

"Guy named Lasky. Committed suicide at 4923 Deverton Street, three or four weeks ago. Everything you can find out. Call me back at--" I used my flashlight to take the number off the base of the phone-- "at Saunders 4848."

He promised to call back within half an hour and I went out into the kitchen again. Ruth was making coffee for us.

"I'm going back home after that phone call comes," I told her. "And you'd better stay here. Your uncle has a key, of course?"

She nodded.

"Then lock all the doors and windows when I leave. If you hear anyone prowling around or anything, phone for the police, or yell loud enough so I can hear you."

"But why would anyone--?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, except that Haskins knows you were at my place. He might think the cat is here, or something. I haven't anything to work on except a hunch that something's coming. I don't want you in on it."

"But if you really think it's dangerous, *you* shouldn't..."

We'd argued our way through two cups of coffee apiece by the time the phone rang.

It was Monty. He said, "It was three weeks ago last Thursday, on the fourteenth at around midnight. Police got a frantic call from a man who said he'd taken morphine and changed his mind and would they rush an ambulance or a doctor or something. Gave his name as Colin Lasky, and the address you mentioned. They got there within eight minutes, but it was too late."

"Left a suicide note, I understand. What was in it?" "Just said he was tired of living and he'd lost his last friend the week before. The police figured out he meant his cat. It had been killed about that time, and nobody knew of him having any friend but that. He'd lived there over ten years and hadn't made any friends. Hermit type, maybe a little wacky. Oh, yeah--and the note said he pre-ferred cremation and that there was enough money in a box in his bureau to cover it."

"Was there?"

"Yes. There was more than enough; five hundred and ten dollars, to be exact. There wasn't any will, and there wasn't any estate, except the money left over after the cremation, and some furniture. The

landlord, the guy who owned the house and had rented it to Lasky, made the court an offer for the furniture and they accepted it. Said he was going to leave it in the house, and rent the place furnished."

I asked, "What happens to the money?"

"I dunno. Guess if no heir appears and no claims are made against the estate, the state keeps it. It wouldn't amount to very much."

"Did he have any source of income?"

"None that could be found. The police guess was that he'd been living on cash capital, and the fact that it had dwindled down to a few hundred bucks was part of why he gave himself that shot of morphine. Or maybe he was just crazy."

"Shot?" I asked. "Did he take it intravenously?"

"Yes. Say, the gang's been asking about you. Where are you hiding out?"

I almost told him, and then I remembered how close I had come this evening to getting a composition started. And I remembered that I wasn't lonesome any more, either.

I said, "Thanks, Monty. I'll be looking you up again some of these days. If anyone asks, tell 'em I'm rooming with an Eskimo in Labrador. So long."

I went back to Ruth and told her. "Everything's on the up and up. Lasky's dead, and the cat is dead. Only the cat is over in my living room."

I went across the back way, as I had come, and let my-self in at the kitchen door. The cat was still there, asleep again in the Morris chair. He looked up as I came in, and damn if he didn't say "Miaourr?" again, with an interroga-tive accent.

I grinned at him. "I don't know," I admitted. "I only wish you could talk, so you could tell me."

Then I turned out the lights, so I could see out better than anyone outside could see in. I pulled a chair up to the window and watched Ruth's house.

Soon the downstairs light went out, and an upstairs one flashed on. Shortly after that I saw a man and woman who were undoubtedly Ruth's uncle and aunt let themselves in the front door with a key. Then, knowing she was no longer alone over there, I made the rounds of my own place.

Both front and back doors were locked, with the key on the inside of the front door, and a strong bolt in ad-dition to the lock was on the back door. I locked all the windows that would lock; two of them wouldn't.

On the top ledge of the lower pane of each of those two windows, I set a milk bottle, balanced so it would fall off if anyone tried to raise the sash from the outside. Then I turned out the lights.

Yellow eyes shone at me from the seat of the Morris chair. I answered their plain, if unspoken, question. "Cat, I don't know why I'm doing this. Maybe I'm crazy. But I think you're bait, for someone, or something. I aim to find out."

I groped my way across the room and sat down on the arm of his chair. I rubbed my hand along his sleek fur until he purred, and then, while he was feeling communi-cative, I asked him, "Cat, how did you ring that doorbell?" Somehow there in the quiet dark I would not have been too surprised if he had answered me.

I sat there until my eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and I could see the furniture, the dark plateau of the grand piano, the outlines of the doorways. Then I walked over to one of the windows and looked out. The moon was on the other side of the house; I could see into the yard, but no one outside would be able to see me standing there.

Over there, diagonally toward the alley, in the shadow of the group of three small linden trees-- Was that a darker shadow? A shadow that moved slightly as though a man were standing there watching the house?

I couldn't be sure; maybe my eyes and my imagination were playing tricks on me. But it was just where a man would stand, if he wanted to keep an eye on both the front and back approaches of the cottage.

I stood there for what seemed to be a long time, but at last I decided that I'd been mistaken. I went back to the Morris chair. This time I put Satan One-and-a-Half down on the floor and used the chair myself. But I'd scarcely settled myself before he had jumped up in my lap. In the stillness of the

room, his purring sounded like an outboard motor. Then it stopped and he slept.

For a while there were thoughts running through my mind. Then there were only sounds--notes. My fingers itched for the piano keys, and I wished that I hadn't started this damnfool vigil. I *had* something, and I wanted to turn on the lights and write it down. But I couldn't do that, so I tried memorizing it.

Then I let my thoughts drift free again, because I knew I had what I'd been trying to get. But my thoughts weren't free, exactly. They seemed to belong to the girl, Ruth Carson. . . .

I must have been asleep, because she was sitting there in the room with me, but she wasn't paying any attention to me. We were both listening respectfully to the enormous black cat which was sitting on the piano while it told us how to ring doorbells by telekinesis.

Then the cat suggested that Ruth come over and sit on my lap. She did. A very intelligent cat. It stepped down from the top of the piano onto the keyboard and began to play, by jumping back and forth among the keys. The cat led off with "La Donna e Mobile" and then--of all tunes to hear when the most beautiful girl in the world is sitting on your lap--he started to play "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Of course Ruth stood up. I tried to stand, too, but I couldn't move. I struggled, and the struggle woke me.

My lap *was* empty. Satan One-and-a-Half had just jumped off. It was so quiet that I could hear the soft pad of his feet as he ran for the window. And there was a sound at the window.

There was a face looking through the glass--the face of a man with a white beard!

My hunch had been right. Someone had come for the cat. Lasky, who was dead of morphine, had come back for his black cat which had been run over by an auto and was buried in the back yard. It didn't make sense, but there it was. I wasn't dreaming now.

For an instant I had an eerie feeling of unreality, and then I fought through it and jumped to my feet. The cat, at least, was real.

The window was sliding upward. The cat was on its hind feet, forepaws on the window sill. I could see its alert head with pointed black ears silhouetted against the gray face on the other side of the window.

Then the precariously balanced milk bottle fell from the upper ledge of the window. Not onto the cat, for it was in the center, and I'd made the bottle less conspicuous by putting it to one side. While the window was still open only a few inches, the milk bottle struck the floor inside. It shattered with a noise that sounded, there in the quiet room, like the explosion of a gigantic bomb.

I was running toward the window by now, and jerking the flashlight out of my pocket as I ran. By the time I got there, the man and the cat were both gone. His lace had vanished at the sound of the crash, and the cat had wriggled itself through the partly open window and vanished after him.

I threw the window wide, hesitating for an instant whether or not to vault across the sill into the yard. The man was running diagonally toward the alley, and the cat was running with him. Their course would take them past the linden trees where I'd thought, earlier, I'd seen the darker shadow of a watcher.

Half in and half out of the window, still undecided whether this was my business or not, I flipped the switch of my flashlight and threw its beam after the fleeing figure.

Maybe it was my use of that flashlight that caused the death of a man. Maybe it wouldn't have happened other-wise. Maybe the man with the beard would have run past the watcher in the trees without seeing him. And certainly, as we learned afterward, the watcher had no good reason to have made his presence known.

But there he was, in the beam of my flashlight--the second man, the one who'd been hiding among the lindens. It was Milo Haskins.

The bearded man had been running away from the house; now at the sight of Haskins standing there between him and the alley, directly in his path, he pulled up short. His hand went into a pocket for a gun.

So did Haskins's hand, and Haskins fired first. The bearded man fell.

There was a black streak in the air, and the cat had launched itself full at the pasty moonface of

Milo Haskins. He fired at the cat as it flew through the air at his face, but he shot high; the bullet shattered glass over my head. The bearded man's gun was still in his hand, and he was down, but not unconscious. He raised himself up and care-fully shot twice at Haskins.

I must have got out of the window and run toward them, for I was there by that time. Haskins was falling. I made a flying grab at the bearded man's automatic, but the man with the beard was dead. He'd fired those last two shots, somehow, on borrowed time.

I scooped up Haskins's revolver. The cat had jumped clear as he had fallen; it crouched under the tree.

I bent over Haskins. He was still alive but badly hurt.

Lights were flashing on in neighboring houses, and windows were flying up. I stepped clear of the trees and saw Ruth Carson's face, white and frightened, leaning out of an upper window of her house.

She called, "Brian, are you all right? What happened?"

I said, "I'm all right. Will you phone for a police ambu-lance?"

"Aunt Elsa's already phoning the police. I'll tell her."

We didn't learn the whole story until almost noon the next day, when Lieutenant Decker called. Of course we'd been making guesses, and some of them were fairly close.

I let Lieutenant Becker in and he sat down--not in the Morris chair--and told us about it. He said, "Milo Haskins isn't dying, but he thought he was, and he talked. Lasky was Walter Burke." He stopped as though that ought to make sense to us, but it didn't, so he went on:

"He was famous about fifteen years ago--Public Enemy Number Four. Then no one heard of him after that. He simply retired, and got away with it.

"He moved here and took the name of Lasky, and be-came an eccentric cuss. Not deliberately; he just naturally got that way, living alone and liking it."

"Except for the cat," I said.

"Yeah, except for the cat. He was nuts about that cat. Well, a year or so ago, this Haskins found out who his neighbor across the street was. He wrote a letter to the police about it, put the letter in a deposit box, and started in to blackmail Lasky, or Burke."

"Why a letter to the police?" Ruth asked. "I don't see--"

I explained that to her. "So Lasky couldn't kill him and get clear of the blackmail that way. If he killed Haskins, the letter would be found. Go on, Lieutenant."

"Burke had to pay. Even if he ran out, Haskins could put the police on his trail and they might get him. So he finally decided to fool Haskins--and everybody else--into think-ing he was dead. He wanted to take the cat with him, of course, so the first thing he did was to fake its death. He boarded it out to a cat farm or cat kennel or whatever it would be, and got another black cat, killed it, and buried it so people would notice. Also that gave color to the idea of his committing suicide. Everybody knew he was crazy about the cat.

"Then, somewhere, maybe by advertising, he found a man about his age and build, and with a beard. He didn't have to resemble Lasky otherwise, the way Lasky worked it.

"I don't know on what kind of a story Lasky got the other guy here, but he did, and he killed him with mor-phine. Meanwhile, he'd written the suicide note, timed his phone call to the police telling them he'd taken mor-phine, and then ducked out--with, of course, the balance of his money. When the police got here, they found the corpse."

"But wouldn't they have got somebody to identify it?" The lieutenant shrugged. "I suppose, technically, they should have. But there wasn't any relative or friend to call in. And there didn't seem to be any doubt. There was the suicide note in Lasky's handwriting, and he'd phoned them. I guess it simply never occurred to anyone that further identification was necessary.

"And none of his neighbors, except maybe Haskins, knew him very well. He'd probably trimmed the other guy's beard and hair to match his, and probably if any neighbor had been called down to the morgue, they might have made identification. A man always looks different anyway, when he's dead."

I said, "But last night why did Haskins--?"

"Coming to that," said the lieutenant. "Somehow the cat got lost from Lasky. I mean Burke. Maybe he just got around to calling for it where it'd been boarded, and found it had got away, or maybe he lost it himself, traveling, be-fore it got used to a new home. Anyway, he figured it'd find its way back here, and that's why he took the risk of coming back to get it. See?"

"Sure. But what about Haskins?" I asked.

"Haskins must have seen the cat come back," said the lieutenant.

I nodded, remembering that Haskins had been mow-ing his lawn when I'd gone to the door.

"He realized it was Lasky's cat and that Lasky had tricked him. If the cat was alive, probably Lasky was too.

He figured Lasky would come back for the cat, and he watched the house for that reason. First he tried to get you to give him the cat by saying it was his. He figured he'd have an ace in the hole if he had the cat himself.

"He didn't intend to kill Lasky; he had no reason to. He just wanted to follow him when he left, and find out where he was and under what identity, so he could resume the blackmail. But Lasky saw him there when you turned on the flashlight. Lasky went for a gun. Haskins had brought one because he knew he was dealing with a dangerous man. He beat Lasky, I mean Burke, to the draw. That's all."

That explained everything--except one thing. I said, "Haskins was too far away to have rung my doorbell. Burke wasn't there. Who rang it?"

"The cat," said Lieutenant Becker simply.

"Huh? *How?* The button was too high for it to--"

The lieutenant grinned. He said, "I told you Lasky was crazy about that cat. It had a doorbell of its own, down low on one side of the door frame, so when he let it out it wouldn't have to yowl to get back in. It could just ring the bell with its paw. He'd taught it to do that when it wanted in."

"I'll be damned," I said. "If I'd thought to look--"

"Black cats look pretty much alike," said the lieutenant, "but that was how Haskins knew this was Lasky's cat. From across the street he saw it ring that trick doorbell."

I looked at the cat and said, "Satan," and he opened his eyes. "Why didn't you explain that, damn you?" He blinked once, and then went back to sleep. I said, "The laziest animal I ever saw. Say, Lieutenant, I take it nobody's going to claim him."

"Guess not. You and your wife can buy a license for him if you want to keep him."

I looked at Ruth to see how she liked being mistaken for my wife. There was a slight flush in her cheeks that wasn't rouge.

But she smiled and said, "Lieutenant, I'm not--"

I said, "Can't we get two licenses while we're at it?" I wasn't kidding at all; I meant it. And Ruth looked at me and I read something besides surprise in her face--and then remembered the lieutenant was still around.

I turned to him. "Thanks for starting this, Lieutenant, but I don't need a policeman to help me the rest of the way--if you know what I mean."

He grinned, and left.

Tell 'Em, Pagliaccio!

Pop Williams rolled them out and they came snake-eyes again. He spoke eloquently and bitterly about the matter while he watched Whitey Harper pick up the two quarters and the jig next to him pick up the two dimes.

Pop reached for the dice, and then looked into his left hand to see how much of his capital remained. A dime and a quarter were there.

He tossed down the two-bit piece and Whitey covered it.

Pop rolled a five-three. "Eighter from Decatur," he said. "Shoot the works." He dropped the other coin in his hand, and the jig covered. Pop whispered softly to the cubes and let them travel.

Four and a trey for seven.

He grunted and stood up.

Valenti, the daredevil, had been leaning against a quarter-pole, watching the crap game with bland amuse-ment. He said, "Pop, you ought to know better than to buck those dice of Whitey's."

Whitey, the dice in his hand, looked up angrily, and his mouth opened, then went shut again at the sight of those shoulders on Valenti. Shoulders whose muscles bulged through the thin polo shirt he wore. Valenti would have made two of Whitey Harper, who ran the penny-pitch, and he'd have made three of Pop Williams.

But Valenti said, "I was just kidding, Whitey."

"Don't like that kind of kidding," said Whitey. He looked for a moment as though he were going to say something more, and then he turned back to the game.

Pop Williams went on out of the tent and leaned against the freak-show picket fence, looking down the midway. Most of the fronts were dark, and all the rides had closed down. Up near the front gate, a few of the ball games and wheels were still running to a few late suckers.

Valenti was standing beside him. "Drop much, Pop?"

Pop shook his head. "A few bucks."

"That's a lot," said Valenti, "if it's all you had. That's the only time it's fun to gamble. I used to be dice-nutty. Now I got a few G's ahead and a few tied up in that stuff--" he waved a hand toward the apparatus for the free show in the center of the midway-- "and so there's no kick in shooting two bits."

Pop grunted. "You can't say you don't gamble, though, when you high-dive off a thing like that, into practically a goldfish bowl."

"Oh, that kind of gambling, sure. How's the old girl?"

"Lil? Swell. Blast old man Tepperman--" He broke off into grumbling.

"Boss been riding you again about her?"

"Yeah," said Pop. "Just because she's been cantankerous for a few days. Sure, she gets cantankerous once in a while. Elephants are only human, and when Tepperman gets seventy-five years old, he's not going to be as easygoing as old Lil is, drat him."

Valenti chuckled.

" 'Tain't funny," said Pop. "Not this time. He's talking about selling her off."

"He's talked like that before, Pop. I can see his point of view. A tractor--"

"He's got tractors," said Pop bitterly. "And none of 'em can shove a wagon outta mud like Lil can. And a tractor can't draw crowds like a bull can, neither. You don't see people standing around watching a tractor. And a tractor ain't got flash for parades, not like a bull has."

To circus and carney, all elephants are bulls, regard-less of sex.

Valenti nodded. "There's that. But look what happened in the last parade. She gets out of line, and goes up on a parking lot and--"

"That damn Shorty Martin. He don't know how to handle a bull, but just because he's dark and you put a turban on him and he looks like a *mahout,* the boss puts him on Lil for the parade. Lil can't stand him. She told me-- Aw, nuts."

"You need a drink," said Valenti. "Here." He held out a silver-plated flask. Pop drank. "Smooth," he said. "But kind of weak, ain't it?"

Valenti laughed. "Hundred-proof Scotch. You must be drinking that stuff they sell two bits a pint at the jig show." Pop nodded. "This ain't got enough fusel oil, or some-thing. But thanks. Guess I'll go see if Lil's okay."

He went around back of the Dip-a-Whirl to where he'd staked the bull. Lil was there, and she was peacefully asleep.

She opened little piggy eyes, though, as Pop walked up to her.

He said, "Hiya, girlie. G'wan back to shuteye. We got to tear-down tomorra night. You won't get much then." His hand groped in his pocket and came out with the two lumps of sugar he'd swiped from the cookhouse.

The soft, questing tip of her trunk nuzzled his palm and took the sugar.

"Damn ya," Pop said affectionately.

He stared at the huge dim bulk of the bull. Her eyes had closed again.

"Trouble with you," he said, "you got temperament. But listen, old girl, you can't have temperament no more. That's for prima donnas, that is, and you're a working bull."

He pretended she'd said something. "Yeah, I know. You didn't used to be-- But then me, I wasn't always a bull man, either. Me, I was a clown once. Remember, baby?

"And now you're just an ol' hay-burner for shoving wagons; and me, I ain't so young myself. I'm fifty-eight, Lil. Yeah, I know you got fifteen years on me, and maybe more'n that if the truth was known, but you don't get drunk like I do, and that makes us even."

He patted her trunk and the big ears flapped once, in lazy appreciation.

"That there Shorty Martin," said Pop. "Baby, does he tease you, or anything? Wish *I* could ride you in the parade, drat it. You'd be all right then, wouldn't you, baby?"

He grinned. "Then that there Shorty would be mahout of a job!"

But Lil didn't appreciate puns, he realized. And jokes didn't change the fact that pretty soon he was going to be out of a job because Tepperman Shows was going to sell Lil. If they could find a place to sell her. If they couldn't-- Well, he didn't want to think about that.

Disconsolately, he walked over to the jig village back of the Harlem Casino.

"Hi, Mista' Pop," said Jabez, the geek. "Lookin" kinda low."

"Jabe," said Pop, "I'm so low I could wear stilts and walk under a sidewall 'thout lifting it."

Jabez laughed, and Pop got a pint on the cuff.

He took a swig and felt a little better. That stuff had authority to it. More you paid for liquor, the weaker it was. He'd tasted champagne once, even, and it had tasted like soda pop. This stuff--

"Thanks, Jabe," he said. "Be seeing you."

He strolled back to the crap game. Whitey Harper stood up as Pop came under the sidewall.

"Bust," Whitey said. "Keep track of those dice for me, Bill. I'll get 'em later. Hi, Pop. Stake me to Java?"

Pop shook his head. "But have a slug of what's good for what ails you. Here."

Whitey took the offered drink and headed for the cookhouse. Pop borrowed a quarter from Bill Rendelman, the merry-go-round man, who was now winner in the crap game. He took two come-bets, one for fifteen and one for ten, and lost both.

Nope, tonight wasn't his night.

Somewhere toward town, a clock boomed midnight. Pop decided he might as well turn in and call it a night. He could finish what was left of the pint in his bunk.

He was feeling swell now. And, as always, when he was in that first cheerful, happy stage of inebriation, he sang, as he crossed the deserted midway, the most lugubrious song he knew. The one and only grand opera song he knew. The aria from *Pagliaccio.*

"--and just make light of your crying
and your tears.
Come--smile, then, Pagliaccio, at the
heart that is broken;
Smile at the grief that has haunted your years!"

Yeah, that guy Pagliaccio was a clown, too, and he knew what it was all about. Life was beautifully sad for a clown; it was more beautifully sad for an ex-clown, and most sadly beautiful of all for a drunken ex-clown.

"I *must clown to get ri-i-d of my unhappiness--"*

He'd finished the third full rendition by the time, still fully dressed except for his shoes, he'd crawled into his bunk under the No. 6 wagon back of the Hawaiian show. He forgot all about finishing what was left of the liquor.

Overhead the dim, gibbous moon slid out of sight be-hind skittering clouds, and the outside ring of the lot, shielded by tents from the few arcs left burning on the midway, became black mystery. Blackness out of which the tents rose like dim gray monsters in the still, breath-less night. The murderous night--

Someone was shaking him. Pop Williams opened one eye sleepily. He said, "Aw, ri'. Wha' time zit?" And closed the eye again.

But the shaking went on. "Pop! Wake up! Lil killed--"

He was sitting bolt upright then. His eyes were wide, but they wouldn't focus. The face in front of them was a blur, but the voice was Whitey Harper's voice.

He grabbed at Whitey's shoulder to steady himself. "Huh? You said--"

"Your bull killed Shorty Martin. Pop! Wake up!"

Wake up? Hell, he was wider awake than he'd ever been in his life. He was out of bed, almost falling on Whitey as he clambered down from the upper bunk. He jammed his feet into his shoes so that their tongues doubled back over the instep; he didn't stop to pull or tie the laces. And he was off, running.

There were other people running, too. Quite a few of them. Some of them from the sleeping cars, some of them from tents along the midway where a good many slept in hot weather. Some running from the brightly lighted cookhouse up at the front of the midway.

When he got to the Hawaiian show, Pop stole a glance around behind him to see if Whitey Harper were in sight. He wasn't.

So Pop ducked under the Hawaiian show sidewall, and came out at the side of the tent instead of the front of it, and doubled back to Tepperman's private trailer. Of course, Tepperman's wife might still be there, but there was something Pop had to do and had to do quick, be-fore he went to the bull. And in order to do it, he had to gamble that the boss's trailer would be empty.

It was. And it took him only a minute to find the high-powered rifle he was after. Holding it tight against his body, he got it under the Hawaiian show top without being seen. And hid it under the bally cloth of the platform.

It wasn't a very good hiding place. Someone would find it by tomorrow noon, but then again by tomorrow noon it wouldn't matter. They'd be able to get another gun by then. But this one was the only one available tonight that was big enough.

And then a minute later, Pop was pushing his way through the ring of people around old Lil. A ring that held a very respectful distance from the elephant.

Pop's first glance was for Lil, and she was all right. What-ever flare of temper or cantankerousness she'd had, it was gone now. Her red eyes were unconcerned and her trunk swung gently.

Doc Berg was bending over something that lay on the ground a dozen feet from the bull. Tepperman was stand-ing looking on. Someone called out something to Pop, and Tepperman whirled.

His voice was shrill, almost hysterical. "I told you that damn bull--" He broke off and stood there glaring.

"What happened?" Pop asked mildly.

"Can't you see what happened?" He looked back down at Doc Berg, and Berg's glasses caught and reflected the beam of somebody's flashlight as he nodded.

"Three ribs," he said. "Neck dislocated, and the skull crushed where it hit against that stake. Any one of those things could've killed him."

Pop shook his head, whether in grief or negation he didn't know himself.

He asked again, "What happened? Was Shorty tormentin' her?"

"Nobody saw it," Tepperman snapped.

"Hm-m-m," said Pop. "That where you found him? Don't seem likely Lil'd have throwed him that far if she did it."

"What do you mean, *if* she did it?" Tepperman asked coldly. "No, he was lying with his head against the stake, if you got to know."

"He must've been teasin' her," Pop insisted. "Lil ain't no killer. Maybe he give her some pepper to eat, or--"

He walked up to Lil and patted her trunk. "You shouldn'ta done it, old girl. But-- Damn, I wisht you could talk."

The carney proprietor snorted. "Better stay away from that bull till we shoot her."

Pop winced. That had been the word he'd been waiting for, and it had come.

But he didn't argue it; he knew there wasn't any use, now. Maybe later, when Tepperman's anger had cooled, there'd be a chance. An outside chance.

Pop said, "Lil's all right, Mr. Tepperman. She wouldn't hurt a fly. If she did ... uh ... do that, she sure had some reason. Some good reason. There was something wrong about that there Shorty. You should've never let him ride her in the parade, even. She never did like--" And realiz-ing that, by emphasizing Lil's dislike of Shorty, he was damaging his own case, Pop let it die there.

There was, blocks away, the clang of an ambulance bell.

Tepperman had turned back to the doc. He asked, "Had Shorty been drinking, Doc?"

But Berg shook his head. "Don't seem to be any smell of liquor on him."

Pop's hopes went lower. If Shorty'd been drunk, it would have made it more likely he'd been teasing the bull de-liberately. Still, if he hadn't, why'd he gone by there at all? Especially, at that time of--

"What time is it?" Pop asked.

"Almost one." It was the doctor who answered. Earlier than Pop thought; he must have barely gone to sleep when it happened. No wonder so many of the carneys were still awake.

The ambulance drove up, collected the thing on the ground, and drove off again. Some of the crowd was drift-ing away already

Pop tried again. "That Shorty was a crook anyway, Mr. Tepperman. Didn't he get hisself arrested when we was playin' Brondale a few days ago?"

"What are you driving at, Pop?"

Pop Williams scratched his head. He didn't know. But he said, "Only that if Lil did anything to him, she musta sure had a reason. I don't know what, but--"

The carney owner glowered him to silence.

"Wait here," he said, "and keep an eye on that bull. I'm going to shoot her before she kills anybody else."

He strode off.

Pop patted the rough hide of Lil's shoulder. "Don't worry, old girl. He won't find it." He said it softly, so none of the other carneys would hear. He tried to make his voice cheerful, but he knew he'd given Lil only a stay of execution. If Tepperman hadn't found that gun by day-light, he could easily get another at one of the local stores.

Somebody called out, "Better stay away from that bull, Pop."

It was Whitey Harper's voice.

Pop said, "Nuts. Lil wouldn't hurt a fly." Then, so he wouldn't have to yell, he walked over to where Whitey was standing at a safe distance from the bull. He said, "Whitey, what was it Shorty Martin was pinched for back in Brondale early this week?"

"Nothing. Suspicion, that's all. They let him go right away."

"Suspicion of what?"

"There was a snatch that the coppers were all excited about. They were picking up every stranger wandering down the stem. Lot of carneys got questioned."

"They find the guy who got snatched?"

"It was a kid--the banker's kid. Haven't found him yet that I heard about. Why?"

"I dunno," said Pop. He was trying to find a straw to grasp at, but he didn't know how to explain that to Whitey. He asked, "Did Shorty have any enemies? On the lot, I mean."

"Not that I know of, Pop. Unless it was Lil. And you."

Pop grunted disgustedly, and went back to Lil. He said, "Don't worry, old girl," quite unnecessarily. Lil didn't seem to be worrying at all. But Pop Williams was.

Tepperman came back. Without the rifle.

He said, "Some blankety-blank stole my gun, Pop. Won't be able to do anything till morning. Can you stay here and keep an eye on the bull?"

"Sure, Mr. Tepperman. But listen, do you got to--?" "Yes, Pop, we got to. When a bull once kills it doesn't pay to take any more chances. It wasn't your fault though, Pop; you can stay on and help with canvas or--"

"Nope," said Pop Williams. "Beckon I'm quitting, Mr. Tepperman. I'm strictly a bull man. I'm quitting."

"But you'll stay till tomorrow?"

"Yeah," said Pop. "I'll stay till tomorrow." He watched Tepperman walk away.

Yeah, he'd stay till tomorrow all right. Just let anybody try to get him off the lot, while there was a chance to save the old gal. A Chinaman's chance.

After that-- Oh, hell, why worry about after that? The arcs on the midway were blurring a bit, and he wiped the back of his sleeve across his eyes. And then, be-cause he knew Tepperman was right, and because he had to blame somebody he muttered, "That damn Shorty!" What business had Shorty to come monkeying around Lil when she was asleep for the night, and what had he done to her?

He turned to look at her, and she was sleeping as peace-fully as a baby. Old Lil a killer?

Hey, wait! Maybe she wasn't! He'd argued against it, but suddenly he realized that he'd really believed, down inside, that she had killed Shorty.

But would she have? Lil had a temper, all right. But when she got mad, she trumpeted. She hadn't let out a yip tonight. Drunk or sober, asleep or awake, he'd have heard her.

He said, "Lil, didn't you--?"

She opened her little red eyes sleepily and then closed them again. Damn, if she could only talk.

Who'd found Shorty's body, and where had Shorty been before that and what had he been doing? Maybe the answers to those questions could be important. Nobody else was asking them, either. Everybody else was going on--what did the coppers call it?--circumstantial evidence. Pop looked around for someone to ask those questions of, and there wasn't anybody there. He was alone, with Lil.

Somewhere a clock struck two.

He took a look at Lil's leg chain and at the stake it was fastened to. They were all right.

Walking softly, so as not to waken her, he picked his way through the dimness, around the Dip-a-Whirl and into the midway. On the soggy shavings of the path, he headed for the cookhouse.

Half a dozen carneys were sitting at tables or at the counter.

Whitey was there, and Whitey said, "Hi, Pop. Have cuppa Java?"

Pop nodded and sat down. He found he was sitting gingerly, as though the seat were hot, and realized it was because he was afraid Tepperman would see him here, when he'd promised to stay by the bull. But what if the boss did see him? This was his last night anyway, wasn't it? You can't fire a man who's already quit.

He made himself relax, and the hot coffee helped. He asked, "Anybody see what happened back there? I mean, what Shorty was doin' to the bull, or how come he went over there in the first place?"

"Nope," said Whitey Harper. "Shorty was in the freak-show top just after you left. That was the last I saw of him."

"Did he get in the game?" Pop asked. "Nope. Just watched a few minutes. Let's see; I came up here and borrowed a buck and went back. Shorty was there then, and left a few minutes later, somewhere around midnight. I dunno where he went from there."

One of the ride-boys at the counter said, "That must've been when I seen him. Coming out of the freak-show top, and he went over toward the Ferris wheel. Pete Boucher was working on the diesel. I

guess maybe he was going to talk to Pete."

"Was he sober?"

"Far as I could see," said the ride-boy. And Whitey nodded.

Pop finished his coffee and shambled out to look for Pete Boucher. He had no trouble finding him; Pete was still working on the recalcitrant engine.

"Hi, Pop," he said. "They gonna shoot the bull?"

"I guess so," said Pop. "Tepperman can't find his rifle, or he woulda done it tonight. Shorty stopped to talk to you a little after midnight, didn't he, Pete?"

"Yeah. Guess it was about then."

"Did he say anything about the bull, or about going over there?"

Boucher shook his head. "We just talked about tomor-row, whether it's going to be a good day or not. He wasn't here long. A few minutes."

"Say where he was going, maybe?"

"Nope. But I happened to notice. He went on across the midway and cut in between the dog stand and the geek show. Valenti's trailer's over there, back of the geek show. I guess he was maybe heading for Valenti's trailer."

Pop nodded. Getting close, he thought. From the trailer, Shorty must have gone direct to Lil, and no one would have seen him make that last lap of the journey. He'd have gone around the curve at the end of the midway, probably, in the darkness back of the tents.

He said, "I can't figure out why Lil-- Pete, what kind of mood was Shorty in when he was talkin' to you?"

"Cheerful. Kidding around. Said he was going to be rich tomorrow."

"He didn't... uh ... sound like he meant anything by it, did he?"

"Naw. What th' hell could he mean? Say, Pop, what are you gonna do after they shoot Lil?"

"I dunno, Pete. I dunno."

Pop strolled on across the soggy midway, past the big tank and the eighty-foot tower from which Valenti dived once an evening. Pop didn't look up at the tower. He had a touch of acrophobia--fear of heights. Enough to give him the willies at the thought of that dive.

He went back past the dog stand toward Valenti's trailer. It was dark, and he hesitated. Maybe Valenti and Bill Gruber, his partner, had both turned in and were asleep. Must be after two-thirty by now.

The trailer itself was a black shadow in the darkness.

Pop stood at the door, wondering whether he dared call out or knock. Maybe they weren't asleep yet.

He said, "Valenti," softly. Not loud enough to wake anyone already asleep, but loudly enough, he hoped, to be heard if either Valenti or Gruber were in there, and still awake.

There wasn't any answer. He was listening carefully, and he heard a sound he'd never have noticed otherwise. A soft and irregular breathing that puzzled him, because it didn't sound like an adult at all. Sounded like a kid. But neither Valenti nor Gruber had a kid. What would one be doing in the trailer?

That breathing wasn't normal, either, or he'd never be able to hear it, even in the dead silence of the night. But why--?

He hadn't heard the footsteps behind him.

Valenti's voice demanded, "Who's--? Oh, it's you, Pop. What you want?"

"Is that a kid in the trailer, Valenti?" Pop asked. "Sounds like one with the croup or something."

Valenti laughed. "You're hearing things, Pop. That's Bill. He's got a helluva cold, along with his asthma. Wait till I tell him you thought it was croup. What did you want?"

Pop shuffled his feet uneasily. "I... I just wanted to ask you a question or two about Shorty." He lowered his voice. "Say, maybe we oughtn't to talk here. If Bill's sick and asleep, we better not wake him."

"Sure," said Valenti. "Want to go up to the cookhouse?"

"I was just there. I better get back by the bull. Let's walk over that way."

Valenti nodded, and together they picked their way through the high, wet grass back of the tents, following, probably, the same path Shorty Martin had taken an hour or two ago. Maybe, Pop thought, Valenti could tell him--

In sight of the sleeping elephant, they stopped. Pop said, "I'm still trying to figure out what happened tonight, Valenti. Why Shorty came over here at all, and what made Lil grab him--if she did."

"What do you mean, if she did?"

"I dunno," said Pop, honestly. "Just that--well, she never done anything like that before. Pete Boucher said Shorty was heading for your trailer sometime after twelve. Did you see him then?"

Valenti nodded. "He wanted to know if Bill and I would go uptown with him. Neither of us wanted to. Then he went on over this way; that's the last I saw of him. Last anybody saw of him, I guess."

"Did he say why he was--?"

Pop's eyes, as he started the question, had been strain-ing past Valenti, out toward the edge of the lot. Someone was coming from that direction, and he couldn't quite make out who it was.

And then, right in the middle of the question, his voice trailed off into silence and his eyes went wide with be-wilderment.

Valenti had been lying to him. Bill Gruber, Valenti's partner, wasn't asleep in the trailer. Because it was Bill Gruber who was cutting across the lot toward them.

Valenti had lied, and there was a kid--

"What's the matter, Pop?" asked Valenti. "You look like you saw--" And then Valenti turned to see what Pop was looking at.

Bill's voice cut through the sudden silence, unconcern-edly. "Hi, Pop, how ya? Finally found a drugstore open, Val. I got-- Say, what's wrong with you guys?"

Valenti laughed as he turned back. "Pop, I was kidding you about--"

And those few words bridged the gap of his turning, and kept Pop off guard during the second when he might have yelled for help or started to run. And then that second was over, and Valenti's huge hand was over his mouth while Valenti swung him around.

And then, while Valenti's arm was tightening crushingly around his ribs, and Valenti's hand over Pop's mouth was bending his head backward, Pop knew what had happened to Shorty, and why. Too late now, he knew why Shorty had expected to be "rich" tomorrow. Shorty had found out that Valenti was holding the kid in the trailer and had gone to demand a cut on the ransom.

Yes, everything fell into place all at once. Banker's kid snatched at Brondale. Held, probably doped, in the trailer. Valenti, the only man with the carney strong enough to kill, as Shorty had been killed. And as Pop Williams was going to be killed right now. So the blame would fall on Lil.

Why, when he didn't really believe Lil had killed Shorty, hadn't he thought of Valenti? Valenti, who wouldn't shoot dice because it wasn't enough of a gamble for him. Who was strong enough to wring a man's neck like a farmer would wring a chicken's. Who had the nerve to dive eighty feet into a shallow tank every day--

And only a second ago, he could have yelled. He could have waked Lil, and she'd have pulled her stake and come running.

Too late, now. That hand over his mouth was like the iron jaw of a vise. His ribs and his neck-Only his feet were free. Frantically, he kicked back-ward with his heels. Frantically, he tried to make some sort of noise loud enough to wake Lil or to summon other help.

One heel caught Valenti's ankle, hard, but then the shoe fell off Pop's foot. He still hadn't taken time to tie them on after that desperate rush to get out of bed and hide Tepperman's rifle.

As the crushing pressure around his ribs tightened, he tried again to yell. But it was only a faint squeak, not so loud as their voices, which, in normal conversation a moment ago, had not disturbed the sleeping elephant.

Help, adequate help, ten feet away directly in front of him--but sound asleep.

And Valenti was standing with his legs braced wide apart. Pop couldn't even kick at the ankles of the man who was killing him. He tried, and almost lost his other shoe.

Then, in extremity, a last, desperate hope.

He kicked forward, instead of backward, with all that remained of his strength. And at the end of the kick, straightened his foot and let the shoe fly off.

Miraculously, it went straight. Lil grunted and awoke as the shoe thudded against her trunk.

For just an instant, her little eyes glared angrily at the tableau before her. Angry merely at being awakened, in so rude a manner.

And then--possibly from the helpless kicking motions of Pop's bare feet, or possibly from mere animal instinct, or because Pop had never hit her--it got across to her that Pop, whom she loved, was in trouble.

She snorted, trumpeted. And charged forward, jerking her stake out of the ground as though it had been em-bedded in butter.

Valenti dropped Pop Williams and ran. There's a limit to what even a daredevil can face, and a red-eyed, charg-ing elephant is past that limit. Way past.

Pop managed to gasp, "Atta girl," as Lil ran on over him, with that uncanny ability of elephants to step over things they cannot see. "Atta girl. Go get him"--as Pop scrambled to his feet behind her and wobbled after.

Around the Dip-a-Whirl and alongside the Hawaiian-show top, and Valenti was only a few yards in front, to-ward the midway. Valenti ducking under the ropes and Lil walking through them as though they were cobwebs. She trumpeted again, a blast of sound that brought carneys running from all parts of the lot and from the cars back on the railroad siding behind it.

There was terror on Valenti's face as he ran out into the open of the midway. Death's hot breath was on the back of his neck as he reached the area in the center of the midway where stood the tank and the diving tower. He scrambled up the ladder of the tower, evading by inches the trunk that reached up to drag him down.

Then Tepperman was there, and the carney grounds cop with a drawn revolver in his hand. And Pop was ex-plaining, the instant he had Lil quieted down. Somebody brought news that Bill Gruber was back of the Hawaiian-show top, out cold. Running, he'd apparently taken a header over a tent stake and smacked into a prop trunk.

Doc Berg started that way, but by that time enough of Pop's story was out and Tepperman sent him to Valenti's trailer instead. No hurry about reviving a man who was going to burn anyway; the kid came first.

The cop yelled to Valenti to come down and surrender.

But Valenti had his nerve back now. Pop had a hunch what was going to happen next, and made the excuse of taking Lil back where she belonged. He did it while" Va-lenti was thumbing his nose at the cop, and before Valenti poised himself on the diving platform--over the drained, empty tank eighty feet below.

"Smile, then, Pagliaccio, at the heart that is bro-ken--"

Pop Williams's voice, off-key and cracking, but plenty loud, preceded him along the path from the lot to the carnival cars. It was almost dawn, but what was that to a man who'd been told by the boss to sleep as late as he wanted to sleep. And who'd been given a ten-buck ad-vance on an increased wage and had spent it all. Scotch wasn't bad stuff, after all, although it took a lot of it.

Whitey was with him, and Whitey had tried Scotch, too. Whitey asked, "Who's this P-Pally-achoo you're yowl-ing about, Pop?"

"A clown, like me, Whitey. Di' I tell you Tepperman's gonna let me ride Lil in th' parade, in clown cos-coschume?"

"Only fifty times you told me."

"Oh," said Pop, and his voice boomed out again.

"Change into humor all this sor-row unspoken--"

A beautiful sentiment, no doubt, but not quite true. He hadn't been happier in fifty years.

Nothing Sinister

No one who lives a reasonably sane, law-abiding life ever thinks seriously of murder in connection with him-self. Nemesis is a gal who follows somebody else, follows him and catches up with him somewhere, and you read about it over your morning coffee. The name of the victim is just a name you never heard of. It couldn't be yours.

Or could it?

Take Carl Harlow. He was an ordinary-enough guy. And right up to the time the bullet hit him, he didn't know Nemesis was after him. He didn't guess it even then, un-til the second bullet--the one that missed--whined past his ear like a steel-jacketed hornet out of hell.

You couldn't blame Carl Harlow for not knowing. Cer-tainly, there hadn't been any buildup to murder. No warn-ing note printed on cheap stationery. When he'd driven home from the poker game the night before, no specters had perched gibbering on his radiator cap. No black cats had crossed his path. Nothing sinister.

In fact, he'd won seventeen dollars. Doubly sweet be-cause most of it was Doc Millard's money and although he liked Doc a lot, it served him right for the outrageous bills he'd sent. And a couple of bucks had been Tom Pryor's, and bank officers deserved robbing if anybody did.

True, he'd drunk too much. But he was used to that, and took it in his stride, now. He'd got up early this morning--Saturday morning--just as early as ever, and at break-fast he'd gone so far in righteousness as to split his winnings with Elsie, his wife. But maybe that was because Elsie would probably find out, from one of the other fellow's wives, how much he had won. Wilshire Hills has a grape-vine system that is second to none.

Nor did he see anything sinister in the fact that his boss--or rather, one of his two bosses--had assigned him to write copy for the Eternity Burial Vault account. Carl Harlow sat down and began to study the selling points of those vaults, and he waxed enthusiastic.

"Lookit, Bill," he said, "these burial vaults really *are* something! When you come to think about it, an ordinary coffin must disintegrate pretty darned quick. But these things are made of concrete--"

"Like your head!" snapped Bill Owen. "Don't sell *me* on the things; write it down-- Oh, hell, Carl, I'm sorry I'm so irritable. But you know why. Have you told Elsie yet?" Carl Harlow nodded soberly. "Told her last week, Bill. She took it like a sport, of course. Said I'd get another job as good or better. Wish I was that confident myself. It's hell to work for a place for twenty years and then have it fold up under you. Course, I've got savings, but-- I sup-pose it's certain for the first of the month?" "All too certain," said Bill Owen.

Carl took the Eternity account folders over to his desk and sat down to make a rough layout. And to write a catch line, something about eternal peace, only you could not use the word "eternal" because that was too close to the name of the company. And you shouldn't make any direct mention of corpses or death or decomposition. Nothing sinister.

It was tough copy to write. There was a dull throb in his head, too. A *thump-thump-thump* that Carl didn't recognize as the footsteps of Nemesis. Few of us recognize those footsteps. All they meant to Carl Harlow was: *"I've been drinking too much. I've got to cut down."* Even though he knew he wouldn't.

He knew that once you got the pick-me-up habit you were pretty near a goner. If, when you

woke up after a bit of too much, your first thought was to reach for a drink, then the stuff had you. But otherwise you stayed in a fog. And things went *thump-thump*.

He'd had his eye-opener this morning, of course, the first minute out of bed--but apparently it hadn't been enough. He took another now, from the bottle in the bot-tom drawer of his desk.

It cleared his head, and his hand became steadier. Hell, he had it already--an angle the Eternity account had never used! He thought it could be handled so they'd go for it in a big way. He started on the layout. Old English type for the catch line. His pencil went faster.

At ten-thirty he showed it to Bill Owen. "How's this?"

"Mm-m-m! Pretty good, I'd say. I'll send it around to them, in just that form."

"Okay, Bill. Anything else important? Bank closes at-noon today, and I got something to do there and thought I'd toddle along about eleven."

"Sure! Leave now, if you want."

"Say, Doc Millard and I are playing golf at two. Want to make it a threesome?"

Bill Owen grinned. "Where was your mind at the poker game? Tom Pryor and I mentioned we were dated in a foursome teeing off at three o'clock."

"Oh, sure, I forgot that. Well, guess I *will* run along now, instead of eleven. Elsie is going to her mother's this morn-ing, for overnight, and I got to forage my own food. Well, see you at the nineteenth hole."

He straightened his desk, and then decided to try call-ing home. Not that there was any real reason. "Oh, hello, honey," he said when Elsie answered. "Thought I might catch you before you left. Have a good weekend."

"I will, Carl; thanks for calling. Don't forget to take care of Tabby."

Carl Harlow chuckled. "Don't worry, honey. I'll put out the clock and wind the cat. Don't worry about me. . . . 'By."

And at the bank, the teller at the window boggled a bit at the check Carl handed in at the window. Carl had expected him to boggle; it was a ten-thousand-dollar check, and he would have been a bit disappointed if the money had been handed over without comment.

The teller said, "Just a minute, sir," and left his cage. When he came back, it was without the check, and he said, "Mr. Pryor would like to see you in his office, sir."

Carl Harlow went through the gate in the railing and back to Pryor's office. He said, "Hi, Tom! Suppose you want to inquisition me about that check." He dropped his hat on Pryor's littered desk and sat down in the chair the fat-and-forty little cashier waved him to.

He grinned at Tom. "Okay, okay," he said. "It's for an investment. I'm going to start a farm--to raise angleworms. With all the fishing that's done every summer, I figure I ought to clear--"

"Now, Carl, be serious," said Pryor. "First place, we usually require ten days' notice on savings withdrawals.

We never invoke that rule for any reasonable amounts, of course, but--"

Carl Harlow stirred impatiently. "Be a good fellow, Tom, and let me have the money."

Tom Pryor looked at him keenly. "We might," he ad-mitted, "but that isn't all I wanted to say. Second place, ten thousand dollars is a lot of money for *you,* Carl. Your account here--checking and savings together--is ten thou-sand four hundred, which means you're practically closing it out. And I know you well enough to know that's every-thing you've got in the world, except an equity in your house, two automobiles, and ten or fifteen thousand life insurance."

Carl nodded. "But listen, Tom, I'm not drawing it out to go on a bat or anything. I suppose I might as well tell you. You've heard the Keefe-Owen Agency isn't doing so well, I suppose. Well, it's worse than that. It's on the rocks!

"And if it goes under, well--I don't know what I'll do. I want to try to buy out Roger Keefe. Owen's good, but Keefe is the bottleneck there. If Bill Owen and I could run it together, without that damned-- Well, you know what I mean. Incidentally, this is confidential. Not even Bill--nor Keefe, either, as yet--knows what I have" in mind."

Tom whistled softly. "Taking a big risk, Carl!"

"Maybe it is, but I'm sure Bill Owen and I can make a go of that agency, with Keefe out. // I can talk Keefe into letting me buy his share."

"But, Carl, why the cash? People do business other-wise. And you'll have to carry the money, besides maybe keeping it overnight. Why take that risk?"

Carl Harlow nodded. "There's that, of course. But I have a small safe at home. And nobody's going to know I got the money except you and the teller outside. I don't think either of you would try burglary--although after one or two of the bluffs you tried to run in that poker game last night--"

Pryor chuckled. "It's an idea. Ten thousand is a lot of money. A year's salary for me, Carl; I'm not a high-priced advertising executive like you and Bill. But granting there's little risk of losing it, I still don't see why you want cash."

"You bankers!" said Carl Harlow. "Got to know every-thing, don't you? All right--and this is off the record. Keefe is being hounded by creditors. They'll grab off whatever he gets, if it shows. He might be able to give me a better price if half of it goes under the table.

"I mean, we might make out the papers for four thou-sand, and the other four on the side--where a referee in bankruptcy wouldn't find it. I have a hunch he'd take eight thousand that way, rather than a check for ten thousand. Now, I hope you're satisfied!"

"Um-m-m," said Pryor. "Satisfied to the extent I wish I hadn't asked you. That's hardly legal. Well--" he shrugged his shoulders-- "it's none of my business. Have you an ap-pointment with Keefe?"

Carl Harlow shook his head. "I'll just run up there to-morrow."

"He's out of town a lot, weekends. Why not ring him up from here and make a date? If he can't see you this week-end, then you won't have to carry that cash out."

"It's an idea," Harlow agreed. He called up Keefe's home, and a minute later put the phone back on Pryor's desk in disgust. "You were right," he said. "His brother says Roger's in New York till Monday."

"Carl, that gives you the weekend to think this over. Monday, if you still want to go through with it, I'll waive the bank rules and let you have the money."

"Okay, Tom." Carl Harlow stood up and started for the door, then turned around. "Oh, the check. You'd better--"

Pryor picked up the check lying on a corner of his desk and held it out. "Here, tear it up and don't carry it around endorsed. Write a new one Monday, if you still want to."

Harlow tore the check twice across and dropped it into the wastebasket. He said, "At that, maybe six thousand will be enough to take in cash. We can use a check for the aboveboard part of the deal."

"Damn it," said Pryor, "quit telling me about that! I told you I wished I hadn't asked you! Don't make me an ac-cessory; forget you told me. Have you talked this over with the other half of your family?"

"Nope. I'll tell Elsie if it goes through; otherwise, she needn't know and then be disappointed. Well, so long, and thanks."

He drove home slowly, wondering if maybe he *should* talk this over with Bill Owen. Well, he could see Bill after the golf this afternoon and think it over meanwhile.

And then there was the empty house. With Elsie gone, it didn't seem home at all, except for his own room. He wasn't hungry, but he made himself a sandwich in the kitchen and then went up to change clothes for golf.

It was too soon to leave, and he had a quick one out of the decanter of rye on his bureau to wash down the sand-wich. He even had time to sit down at the typewriter in his room and bat out a copy idea for the Krebbs Hardware account. Not a brilliant one, but worth putting on paper before he forgot it.

Then it was time to drive out to the golf club.

Nemesis was still after him, but it was Swender, the golf pro, who met him in the doorway of the locker room. He said, "Doc Millard phoned, Mr. Harlow. He tried to get you at your office, but you'd left. He doesn't think he'll be able to get here."

"Why not?" said Carl. "Did he say?"

"A baby case. Mrs. Nordhoff."

"Nordhoff? Oh, Tom's cousin. These inconsiderate women, breaking up a perfectly good golf date just be-cause-- Say, how's about you playing around with me? You can give me a lift on those chip shots."

"Sorry, Mr. Harlow." The regret in the pro's voice was genuine. "Sprained an ankle yesterday and I'm on the shelf. I'm a clubhouse fixture for about three days."

Carl Harlow stared down the inviting fairway gloomily. This course, like a lot of other small, private courses, was never crowded Saturday afternoons, because Saturday afternoon was proverbially busy and no one came around unless they'd made reservation. Like he and Doc had done for two o'clock.

If he waited an hour, there'd be Owen and Pryor-- but that was a full foursome already and he could not butt in. Well, now that he was here and dressed for it, he might as well play around alone. The exercise would do him good.

Playing alone wasn't much fun; there's little satisfac-tion in a beautiful approach, with just enough back spin to hold the green four feet from the pin, when there's no one watching you make it. And, paradoxically, it's even more disgusting to flub a would-be explosion shot out of a sand trap when there's nobody around to tell you how lousy you are.

He'd just flubbed that explosion shot--with a sweet new No. 9 iron which, for its effectiveness at that moment, might as well have been an umbrella handle--when the bullet came.

The first sensation was like somebody drawing a sharp-edged piece of ice across his side. He jerked involuntarily and said, "What the--" And looked down and saw the horizontal rip in his sweater, along the course of the rip, begin to turn red instead of white.

Then, and only then, did he realize that he'd heard the sound of the shot.

He looked up in the direction from which the shot had seemed to come--up on the hillside that flanked the fair-way ahead, past the green he'd been approaching out of the trap. Up there near the top, in among the scrub pine maybe two or three hundred yards away, he thought he caught a gleam of sun on metal that might have been a rifle barrel.

Somebody up there was being damned careless with a rifle, shooting out over the golf course! Some fool hunter, and that wasn't hunting land, anyway. Carl Harlow yelled, "Hey! You with the gun--" wondering if his voice would carry that far.

And then that second bullet whined somewhere be-tween his shoulder and ear, and he knew that he was being shot at. Deliberately! Probably by someone with a gun with telescopic sights, if they were shooting at that distance.

The first bullet, the one that had raked his side, could have been an accident. But that second shot was some-thing else again.

Carl Harlow had never been shot at before, but it didn't take him long to figure out the best thing to do. He dropped flat into the sand. There wasn't a bunker to duck behind, but the sand trap itself was a slight depression, maybe eight inches in the center below the fairway.

He dropped down flat, trying to accomplish two things. First, to fall naturally, as though that second bullet had been a fatal hit, and second, to fall so that most of him would be in the deepest part of the trap and would pre-sent as poor a target as possible to the distant marksman.

There were two more shots, but he didn't know where the bullets went except that they didn't hit him. Then, for a space of time that was probably twenty minutes but seemed like hours, nothing happened and there weren't any more shots.

Carl Harlow lay there, not daring to move, scarcely daring to breathe. His side hurt him, but not badly. The bullet had taken off a streak of hide and ruined a good sweater, but that was all.

Then there was a yell, "Carl!" and there was Doc Millard running toward him. Doc's golf bag lay a couple hundred yards back along the fairway, where he'd dropped it when he'd seen the prone figure in the sand trap.

Then Doc saw the crimson streak on the sweater, and he said, "What the hell?"

Carl Harlow got up slowly. His first glance was at the hillside, but there was no gleam of sun on metal, and there was no further shot.

Millard said, "Stand still," and pulled up the sweater and the shirt underneath it, and looked at the wound and said, "I'll be a monkey's uncle!" Then he commandeered Harlow's handkerchief and his own to improvise a band-age. The story and the bandage got finished about the same time.

"Superficial," said Doc. "Have to clean it and put on a decent bandage when we get back to the clubhouse, but-- You say you heard four shots? Listen, Carl, it must have been some kid up there with a twenty-two, whanging at a target on a tree or something. You stroll on in to the club-house; I'll go over there and take a look around."

"No," said Carl Harlow, who was getting his nerve back, "I'll go with you. This scratch doesn't amount to any-thing, and it certainly doesn't stop me from walking. Be-sides, the guy's gone."

Then he looked at Millard strangely. "Doc, I don't know anything about guns, but would a twenty-two carry that far?"

"A twenty-two long rifle'll carry a mile, would kill at about two hundred and fifty yards. That's what it must have been. And you could have imagined hearing that second bullet whiz so close. Maybe it was a bee or a hornet or something you heard. And the third and fourth shots might have been fired in the opposite direction."

"Can't you tell from the wound what size bullet--?"

Doc shook his head. "If it'd gone in, sure. But not from just a scrape." He stopped suddenly, looking at Carl Har-low. "Say, is there any reason why somebody would be taking pot shots at you?"

Harlow shook his head. It did seem absurd when you put it that way, particularly now that he was almost at the fence that bounded the course and within a hundred yards of where he thought the rifleman had been. Hell's bells, why *would* anybody be taking pot shots at him?

He said, "Well--no. But, damn it, I *did* hear that second bullet whiz by! It wasn't a bee!"

They were climbing the fence. Doc Millard said, "Well, if you're that sure-- But people don't go around shooting at other people without *some* reason."

They were going up the hill now. Carl said, "Of course, the guy could have taken two shots at a sitting bird and both of them missed the bird but come pretty close to-gether."

They found nothing of interest or importance on the hillside. Reaching the top, they saw that a side road wound by just beyond, but there were no cars, parked or moving, in sight on it.

Carl said hesitantly, "Do you think we ought to report it, just in case--?"

Doc Millard snorted. "Report it? You're darned well right we'll report it! I'd lose my license if I treated a gun-shot wound of any kind without reporting it. Golf's off, of course, so we'll go back to the clubhouse. Don't take any exercise for a few days. Walking's all right, but I mean nothing that uses your arms."

Carl Harlow grinned. "No two-fisted drinking, huh? Well, it's my left side, and I guess I can make out with one hand. Gosh, I could use a drink right now! My nerves are playing ring-around-the-rosy!"

After the clubhouse and the inevitable explanations and not too many drinks, because they'd have to go to the police station, Carl found himself talking about it to Captain Wunderly.

By that time, Carl was sure it had been a kid with a twenty-two and it sounded silly to admit that he'd been scared enough to lie there doggo for nearly half an hour. But Captain Wunderly, just the same, sent a couple of men out to look around.

And then Carl and Doc stopped in at a bar and had a few, and Carl wanted to keep on going. But Doc Millard insisted that Carl was drunk already--although it was only dusk--and that he should go home and sleep it off. Es-pecially because he was wounded, and that made him a patient.

Carl Harlow had argued, and then capitulated.

He really was feeling quite a bit woozy by the time he got home. He'd forgotten that Elsie wouldn't be there, but the decanter of rye on his bureau was still there. After a while, there wasn't much in it.

But that didn't matter. It was quite dark outside and he was getting sleepy. He remembered

about the clock and the cat, and decided he'd better take care of them, just in case he dropped off and stayed asleep.

He couldn't find the cat. He stuck his head out of the back door and called, "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty--" and was pleased as Punch that he could still articulate those rather difficult syllables. But no cat.

Lots of shadows on the lawn, though. Dark shadows.

Those shadows might have worried him, perhaps, had he noticed the hole in his golf bag. An inconspicuous hole near the bottom, but definitely the size of a thirty-thirty rather than a twenty-two. And kids don't hunt squirrels or birds with thirty-thirty rifles. Old Lady Nemesis, may-be-

Yes, still on the job, this gal Nemesis. For twenty awful minutes during the afternoon, Carl Harlow had felt her presence. Carl Harlow, though, had forgotten. Nemesis hadn't.

It was Carl Harlow who shut the back door, but it might have been Nemesis who left it unlocked. Not because murder pauses long before a locked door, but its being unlocked would make things easier.

Carl went up the stairs, and the staircase was pitching under him like the deck of a wallowing ship. The drinks were getting at him now. This was the unpleasant stage; it had been pleasant up to now, and pretty soon he'd feel better again. This was the in-between period--when things went around and stood not upon the order of their going.

He got to his room with something of the feeling of a storm-tossed ship reaching a safe harbor, a harbor in which the angry waves still lapped, but less high, less deadly. Where the rocking of the ship becomes almost a friendly thing, like the rocking of a cradle.

Being home. It's a lot different from being out in the open of a field, with no cover and bullets whizzing around you. He sank into the Morris chair and for a while seemed to live over again those terrible minutes of dread out there under the dead-blue sky. The horrible open sky. There on the flat *trap* of the ground, held by gravity as a fly is held upon flypaper.

And after a while he shook his head and remembered that it had been a kid with a twenty-two.

Getting to feel better now. He got up, holding on to the arm of the chair until he was sure he could walk without lurching, and crossed over to the bureau. He had another drink; it was really wonderful rye, smooth and mellow and golden.

That left enough for only one more drink, and he'd want it the minute he waked up, if he dropped off. He poured it carefully into the glass and put the glass on the little table near the chair.

He looked around the room, feeling there was something else he'd ought to do. He stared at the typewriter a while. He almost had an impulse to sit down at it and write out how it felt to be shot at. Maybe sell it somewhere, to a magazine. Oh, to hell with it!

Sleepy, and the Morris chair was too comfortable. His head went back and his eyelids weighed a stone apiece, and there was a gentle glow in the room and in the whole house. He could see it through his closed eyelids. He could--or thought he could--hear the cat walking in the back yard--so plainly that he almost got up and went down to call it again at the back door.

Then, of course, it came to him that he was dreaming.

One damn thing after another. The cat was on the roof. It came down the chimney and mewed in the grate, and pointed a rifle at him and said, in Doc Millard's voice, "Now this isn't going to hurt much," and pulled the trigger and the gun seemed to shoot backward and shot the cat back up the chimney.

And Bill Owen was there, and saying, "Carl, Tommy Pryor tells me the bank is out of money and can't give you your five million dollars, and so Roger Keefe and I have decided to give you the agency free. All yours, Carl, and I'll work for you if you want me to, and there are new orders coming in like wildfire and you'll be able to sell out for a billion in a year."

And then Bill Owen's friendly smile seemed gradually to freeze into a gargoyle grimace, and he pulled a rifle out of his pocket, a toy rifle, and said, "Twenty-three, skiddoo," and it was Keefe who had the rifle, grinning like a fiend, and he told Carl he was going to use it for a mashie to make a hole in one, and wanted Carl to guess in one what. And then he wasn't there any more.

It was all very strange and confusing. Elsie was there, too, and she said, "Why do you drink so

much, Carl?" and he looked at her owlishly and wanted to say that he was sorry, but that she just didn't understand, and that he loved her and was sorry. And she told him that she loved him, anyway, and she danced around the room.

And sat down at his typewriter and wrote something on it, with the keys going *clickety-click* like a twenty-two but faster. Just like when she'd been a stenographer at the agency so long ago, and he couldn't move out of the chair and take her in his arms and tell her what an awful fool he was. And she said, "Good-by, Carl, and don't forget your eye-opener when you wake up."

And then there was Doc Millard again, pointing to the fireplace and explaining that "eternal" was an overworked word and that the Eternity Burial Vault Company was now making their vaults disguised as fireplaces, so the worms wouldn't know--and would he change the copy to explain that, but to be very careful not to let it out to the worms.

"It's just a scratch," he added. . . . But then it was different. It seemed later, a long time later, because there was a two-o'clock feeling in the air, and the door was opening, and a man was walking into the room, and this was real.

The man was standing there, and Carl Harlow opened his eyes and looked at him without having to look through his eyelids this time, and it was Tom Pryor. His friend. Really there, with a pistol in his hand.

Carl said thickly, "T-Tom! What--?"

Yes, the man with the revolver was *really* there, really Tom Pryor. Tom said, "Damn!" And then, "Why didn't you stay asleep? God, I hate to--"

Carl said, "The golf course? You?" and Tom nodded. He said, "I ... I had to. I mean *have* to. I was six thousand short, and when you tore up the wrong check and didn't notice--"

"When I--what?"

Tom's face was whiter than paper, his voice strange. "Carl, it wasn't planned. I picked up the wrong check, one of my own. You took it and tore it up and didn't look, and you walked out and left me your own check for ten thousand dollars. And with the examiners nearly due--I put it through.

"With you dead, Carl, nobody'll ever know you didn't take the money today. I'm sorry, Carl, but . . . it's me or you."

"My friend," said Carl Harlow, surprised that he was grinning just a little. Because he was still more than a little drunk, and all of this was still less than completely real.

The gun muzzle lifted. It shook. Tom was saying, al-most plaintively, "You want to ... to pray or anything, Carl? I... there isn't any hurry--"

It was like a scene in a play. Any minute the audience would start applauding. It wasn't really happening, Carl knew. Murder happens to John Smith, and you read about it in the paper. Nemesis is a gal who follows somebody else--

But he stared owlishly at Tom Pryor. Tom was waiting there to see if he was going to say something. Had to say something.

He grinned a little again. He said, "Give Elsie my love, Tom. Tell her I'm sorry I--"

Tom said, "Your wife? She wants you out of the way---dead--as much as I do! We're going away together with the balance of this money! I thought you knew! Oh, hell, why am I telling you now? Here goes. Good luck!"

What a damn silly thing to say!--that last part. But the first part of what Tom had said was sinking in slowly and Harlow was going rigid with anger, only he couldn't move.

Now he wanted to kill Tom Pryor, and the gun muzzle yawned in his face, but out of reach. Tom's hand held the gun, and his pudgy fingers were white at the knuckles.

The trigger hadn't pulled yet, and there was sweat beaded on Tom's forehead. Tom said, "Hell, I--" and his free hand reached out for the glass of whiskey on the little table near the Morris chair. Dutch courage.

He tossed it down neat.

Or started to. The whiskey spilled, and Tom made a horrible strangling sound and the gun went off wild--with a roar in the confined space of the room that sounded like the end of the world.

A cannonlike roar that brought Carl Harlow to his feet out of the Morris chair. Watching Tom on the carpet. Standing there looking down at Tom, and wishing in that awful moment that Tom had killed him.

For Carl Harlow was cold sober now. And going cold, cold, all over--as the hideous pieces fell into place. As he bent over dead Tom Pryor and caught the strong scent of bitter almonds. And then, like a man hypnotized, turned and saw the white sheet of paper in the typewriter, and knew before he read it what it was.

The typewriter that had gone *clickety-click* while he had slept and had typed out a farewell note from Carl Harlow to the world. The typewriter that had gone *clickety-click* while he had slept, and while Elsie had really been here and had typed that note and put the prussic acid in the waiting pick-me-up shot of whiskey!

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[The following actually precedes all the foregoing in the DT on various pages. I've placed it here because it simply looks better, interferes less with the flow of the book and renders the reading experience closer to that of the DT in my opinion. Some changes of font sizes as they came from the scanner have been made for similar reasons with individual story titles changed to bold to compensate for changing the font size to the size as the text. I believe this scan meets the requirements of a Version 2.0 ebook by the standards found at http://ebook.23ae.com/documents/versioning.html. 2006/03/07. BEH]

THE SHAGGY DOG AND OTHER MURDERS

[Other books]
BY FREDRIC BROWN

THE DEAD RINGER

COMPLIMENTS OF A FIEND

HERE COMES A CANDLE

MURDER CAN BE FUN

THE BLOODY MOONLIGHT

THE FABULOUS CLIPJOINT

THE SCREAMING MIMI

NIGHT OF THE JABBERWOCK

DEATH HAS MANY DOORS

THE FAR CRY

WE ALL KILLED GRANDMA

THE DEEP END

MOSTLY MURDER

HIS NAME WAS DEATH

WHAT MAD UNIVERSE
THE LIGHTS IN THE SKY ARE STARS

ANGELS AND SPACESHIPS

THE WENCH IS DEAD

MARTIANS, GO HOME

THE LENIENT BEAST

ROGUE IN SPACE

THE OFFICE

ONE FOR THE ROAD

THE LATE LAMENTED

KNOCK THREE-ONE-TWO

THE MURDERERS

THE FIVE-DAY NIGHTMARE

THE SHAGGY DOG AND OTHER MURDERS