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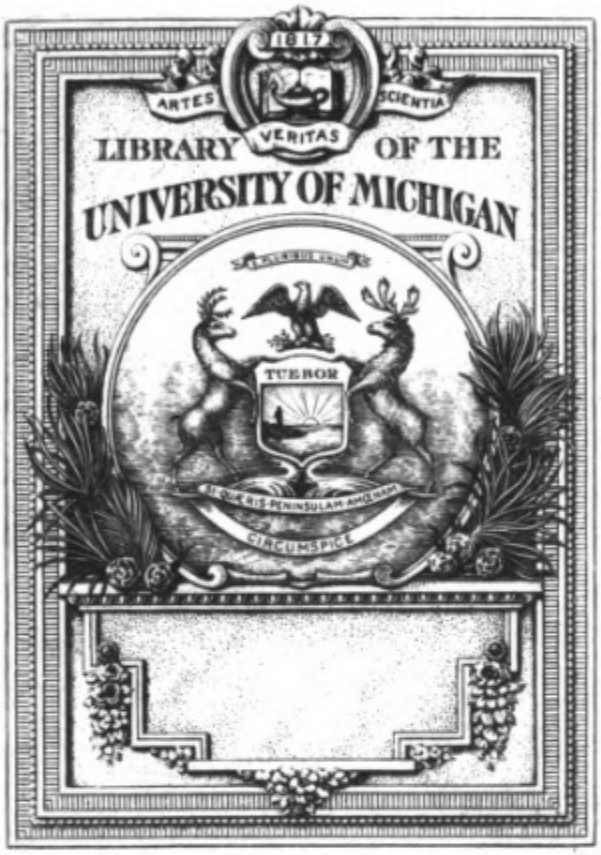

BEQUEST OF
ORMA FITCH BUTLER, PH.D., '07
PROFESSOR OF LATIN

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE MURDER OF CECILY THANE

THE MURDER OF STEVEN KESTER

THE MURDER OF SIGURD SHARON

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A MOST IMMORAL MURDER

BY H. arnette ASHBROOK

COWARD-McCANN
PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK

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H. ASHBROOK

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TO

WELLMER

WHO COLLECTS STAMPS

AND TO

DIZ

WHO DOESN'T

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O. F. BUTLER
BOX 15
KINGMAN, ARIZ.

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NOTE

In all fairness to the reader it should be pointed out that the events narrated in this story are supposed to take place in the year 1933. The reader should also bear in mind the fact that, although all of the stamps mentioned herein really exist and are famous throughout the philatelic world, the ownership attributed to them in this story is pure invention on the part of the author.

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CHAPTER I

"AIN'T IT DULL?"

" 'IT MAY be life, but ain't it dull?' "

The lazy young man, a-sprawl in the porch chair, flung down his book and gazed across the blue waters of the bay.

"I beg pardon, sir?" The voice was soft and discreet in the best traditions of English butlerdom.

"Just quoting. Guy named Herbert. He knows what he's talking about."

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir."

"You lie! It's lousy."

The discreet voice made no comment, but a tall tinkling glass was deftly inserted into the curve of the young man's hand as it lay outflung in boredom across the wicker table beside the chair. His fingers closed around its icy smoothness. He raised it and took a long swallow. Then he made a face.

"God! Even the liquor's lousy!"

"Beg pardon, sir, but that's the special brand you ordered the other day. Durfey & Benson."

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"Well, it's lousy just the same. They made a mistake on the label. They ought to call it 'cambric tea.' If you ever get wind of some good old pre-repeal, aged-in-the-bathtub gin, buy out the house."

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir."

The young man took another swallow of the "cambric tea" and scowled at the landscape.

"The trouble is," he said, "I'm getting old."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm twenty-nine and I'm bored as hell."

"Beg pardon, sir, but might I suggest that ——"

"No!"

Inertia changed to sudden irritation. The young man's feet came down off the chair opposite with a bang, and he twisted in his seat to confront the soft discreet voice at his elbow.

"Sit down!"

The soft, discreet voice sat.

"Pour yourself a drink!"

Soda sizzed in a second tall, tinkling glass.

"Now be yourself!"

"Very goo ——"

"Yourself, I said." There was a threatening edge to the tone.

"O. K., Chief."

"That's better, but make it 'Spike.' "

The young man relaxed once more into his comfortable sprawl and let his eyes rest this time on the figure before him.

A surprising figure it was. Surprising at least to

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anyone who up to this time had heard only the voice that issued therefrom. "Yes, sir. . . . Very good, sir. . . . Beg pardon, sir." A butler. An English butler, tall and austere, the snobbish sort who gets racing tips from dukes, and can make even the most self-satisfied Americans feel a bit wormish and inferior.

As a matter of fact Pug Beasley was none of these. He was short, just a bit over five feet, and he had never in all his forty years so much as seen a duke. His scarred, battered features taken separately —the broken nose, the missing teeth, the bent left ear—were not prepossessing, but the ensemble, though ugly, was comic and strangely intriguing.

Of late, however, his general air of geniality had been somewhat marred by the assumption of a dignity which his stature made slightly ridiculous.

"Just what," said Spike, "is the idea?"

Pug relaxed gratefully from the strain of British butlerdom and took a long swig from his glass before he answered.

"Well, you see, it's like this. I been readin' a book."

"Bad business, Pug. The higher learning has ruined more than one prize-fighter."

"Yeah, but I don't read so good, and I ain't a fighter no more, so I guess it ain't gonna do me no harm. Anyway this book here, I'm tellin' you about, has got a butler in it. A real classy one. And I figure to myself that this here job with you is pretty soft, and if I'm gonna hold it I'd ought to be perfectin'

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myself in my art. If I'm gonna be a butler, I'm gonna be a good butler, like when I was a fighter, I was a good fighter, see?"

"I see, but I don't think it's so hot."

"Well, that's maybe because I ain't so good yet. I ain't had the book but about two weeks, and I'm only at page eighty-three. Gimme time."

"Give you time and you'll work yourself right out of your soft job."

"Whaddaya mean?" Pug looked suddenly apprehensive.

"I mean that I didn't hire you to be a butler. If I'd wanted a butler, I would have gotten a butler, not a has-been, bantam-weight pug. I loathe butlers. They're too damn snooty. They don't realize that this is a democratic world. A butler, for instance, would never sit down and put his feet up on the table and drink with the mahster."

"No? Well, that just shows what a sap he is."

"See that you don't get to be that kind of a sap."

"Well, I'll tell you, Spike. With you—no. But in front of company, it's class. See?"

"All right, in front of company, but at your own risk. There's no telling when I may haul off and bust you one."

Pug grinned. "Couldn't be done. My foot work's too good for you. It ain't all just in the hittin', you know. You gotta find the guy first before you can lam him one. Now you take ——"

"No, you take it right back home. When I want a

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lesson in boxing, I'll call up Dempsey. He's more my size."

The two men sat for a few moments in silence, sipping their drinks and smoking. Presently Spike spoke, taking up once more the thread of his boredom.

"What do you do, Pug, when you don't know what in God's name *to* do?"

Pug considered the question judicially. "Well, if I got the price, I get drunk."

Spike shook his head. "No good. I tried that all last week. The relief's just temporary."

"Well, if you're hell bent on goin' to hell, and likker won't do it, most everybody else tries women."

Again Spike shook his head. "Vastly over-rated. Anyway modern morals have destroyed sin. It's called 'living life to the full' now."

Plainly Pug was stumped. Liquor and women exhausted his own personal repertoire of iniquity. His was a simple soul, untuned to the finer nuances of wickedness. In desperation he cast about into those realms of vicarious experience in which he had lately been immersed.

"Well, in this book I'm readin', the one with the class butler in it, it starts off with a guy that's kinda like you. I mean he's got tons of jack, and he ain't bad lookin' but he ain't got nothin' to do except spend his jack and make janes, and he's already kinda tired of doin' that, so he begins lookin' up ads in the newspapers. You know like—well ——"

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He reached for the newspaper that lay on the wicker table and opened it to the column of personal notices.

"You know, like these here. They was one that said, 'Wanted, young man of fearless courage to undertake secret mission, one willin' to risk life and fortune if need be,' and it was just signed 'Sonya,' so this guy in the book answers it and Sonya gives him a ring and tells him to come on over, and it seems she's the daughter of a spy in the Czar's army and she's tryin' . . ."

The exploits of the stalwart hero of fearless courage were lost on the lazy young man in the porch chair as he let his eyes wander down the personal column of the *Tribune*.

The regular annual meeting of the shareholders of the Teachers' Building and Loan Society will be held at the office of the society, 349 Broadway, at 4 p. m., August 12.

Party driving to California in car will take three passengers for share of expenses.

Marty: Come home. Mamma sick. We'll forget it.—Cora.

Write Joe Marajos for details of Mexican divorce law. Divorces obtained in six weeks without leaving New York.

Spike put down the paper and shook his head sadly. "I'm not a member of the Teachers' Building and Loan Society, I have no intention of driving

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to California, I haven't an idea who Marty and Mamma and Cora are, and I'm not married so I don't need a Mexican divorce. No, Pug, I'm afraid that won't do."

"Well, those ain't so good. I been sort of readin' them myself since I started this story I'm tellin' you about, and the best ones is in that paper that's all about books."

"*The Saturday Review*. Ah yes; poor, dear Richard gave me a subscription to it. He thought it might improve my literary taste."

Spike took from the pile of newspapers and magazines which cluttered the screened verandah ledge, the *Review* and opened it to that enticing column of human vapidity in a world of literary austerities.

> Lives there a man with soul so dead he could not suffer inspiration from a young woman?—Gay but Wistful.

"Sorry," Spike said, "but my soul is absolutely moribund." His eyes wandered down the column.

> Struggling harpist wishes someone would endow her future musical education. Sick and in prison. Adele.

"Now this," Spike remarked as he scanned the third item, "sounds promising."

> I want to put on an act to make the cats in my office sit up and take notice. For this not especially high-minded purpose I require an attentive date. I'd like him to be forty or older and willing to come into the office with the expressed purpose of taking me to lunch or dinner. It will be Dutch treat, but the cats will never know. Proud Polly.

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Pug was not impressed. Female office intrigue is pap to one whose regular fare is international espionage. But he merely pointed out: "You're too young. It says forty or over."

Spike read on.

> **Artist or writer can have home in exchange for part time work around country residence. Must be well recommended.**

"Recommended for what?" he inquired. "His prose style or his skill in putting up the summer screens?"

He tossed the *Review* from him and scooped up from the floor the *Saugus Weekly Index*. A much less pretentious sheet than either the *Review* or the *Tribune*, yet boasting a personal column enlivened with photographs. There were two in today—a young man and a cow.

Beneath the young man the caption read: "Will anyone knowing whereabouts of fourteen-year-old boy resembling this photograph communicate with Box 71, Saugus Index."

And beneath the cow: "Will anyone knowing whereabouts of Holstein cow marked like above communicate with C. F. Springer, Old Lane Road, Saugus."

There was also an advertisement of the midsummer strawberry festival of the First Presbyterian Church of Saugus, an announcement of a meeting of the Farmers' Co-operative, and three notices of strayed calves.

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Spike flung the pile from him. "No, Pug, I'm afraid they won't do."

Pug agreed with him. Lost cows and strawberry festivals bore even less promise of adventure than starving harpists and spinsters without dates.

They sighed in unison and for a long time they sat gazing gloomily out across the gay ripples of the bay, musing on the barrenness of life. Presently Spike yawned prodigiously, stretched, and gathered together his sprawling members.

"I guess there's nothing for it, Pug, but to give myself up to good works."

Pug looked apprehensive. "You mean prayin' and takin' jelly to the sick?"

"Hardly. I'm not exactly the type for that. What I had in mind was a trip over to the mainland to my brother's."

Pug rose and started gathering up the glasses. "I don't suppose," he said, as he busied himself with an overflowing ash tray, "that there's much accountin' for tastes."

"Meaning, of course, that you think my brother is one of the most God-awful blisters on the landscape."

Pug nodded and Spike grinned reminiscently. "That was the beginning of our beautiful friendship, wasn't it? The minute he told me you were a 'disreputable character,' I felt drawn to you. I felt something in you akin to myself. Richard has so often called me a 'disreputable character.'"

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Pug paused in his cleaning and eyed Spike, his forehead wrinkling with speculation. "Tell me somethin'—are you sure your ma didn't put nothin' over on your old man?"

Spike laughed, then sobered quickly. "Unfortunately," he said dolefully, "I'm afraid she didn't. Blood brothers we are, though, thank God, it isn't visible to the naked eye."

"Then what do you want to see him for?"

"I was thinking of Teddy. I feel sorry for the brat. He wrings my heart. He's been sick and I promised him I'd come and see him and bring some stamps. Tell Mrs. Parsons I'll be back late for dinner, maybe not before eight."

"The paper says storm tonight. You'd beter look out crossin' the bay."

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CHAPTER II

A Good Deed Gone Wrong

MR. PUG BEASLEY was not alone in his speculations as to the parentage of the Tracy brothers. There were many who shared his doubts. It seemed hardly possible that two such diverse human beings could spring from the same parents.

Spike, or to give him his baptismal, passport and police blotter name, Philip Tracy, was a blithe, debonair young man of infinite good humor and a feeling that life is more bearable if laughed at. He was twenty-nine, personable in a tall, blond way, with plenty of inherited money, and an inclination to enjoy what he had rather than make more. He had an apartment in New York and a summer cottage on an island two miles off the south shore of Long Island.

His brother, Richard, shared none of his insouciant qualities. Between the ages of one and three Richard had been subjected to the portrait of an ancestor in a frock coat with the left hand stuck in the chest about to make a speech. It had hung over the

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mantle in the drawing room and he had viewed it every day of his life and it had left an indelible imprint. Life as he saw it was serious and should be treated with proper respect. Man was created for some useful purpose like being district attorney of New York County—which Richard was. Man should strive onward and upward, ever aspiring toward something higher like being senator or governor—which was Richard's secret ambition.

Man should not waste his youth in idle bachelorhood but should found a family. And as Richard was some fifteen years older than Philip, the family which he had dutifully if not passionately founded was not twelve years old and just recovering from the mumps.

It was the hapless plight of Teddy which had aroused the benevolent impulses of his Uncle Spike. Not that the mumps, and an extremely light case at that, was particularly distressing. It was at worst a temporary ordeal. But parentage such as had been wished on Teddy was a permanent blight on a young life which otherwise might have been full of hope. If Spike considered his brother a blister, he regarded his sister-in-law as a boil.

How the two of them together had ever managed to produce a child as appealing as Teddy was one of the major mysteries of life which he had refused to tackle. He did, however, feel a certain responsibility toward the child in ameliorating the hardness of his lot. And in consequence he found himself some

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fifteen minutes after his parting with Pug heading his motor launch toward the mainland of Long Island and the Saugus wharf.

The town of Saugus by some strange miracle had escaped the depredations of summer vacationists and antique hunters, and had preserved much of the quiet, sleepy flavor that is one of the chief charms of very old and very small shore villages. There was still the white church that had been built in 1794, and the same shops that had lined its streets since the Civil War.

It was into one of these that Spike strolled after he had moored his launch down at the rotting, green-lichened pier at the foot of Main Street.

Milo Taylor, the proprietor, a rosy, graying, rotund fellow, sat behind a tall roll top desk in the rear.

"So it's stamps you're after again," he said when Spike had stated his business. "Well, I guess I still got some left—somewhere." He started pawing about aimlessly in the roll top desk. "I recollect I bought quite a sight of 'em about two, three years ago from a salesman that come through. Nobody much has bought 'em, though, except you and the boy up to your brother's place."

"I'm getting them for him," Spike explained. "He has been sick. Mumps."

Milo tch-tched sympathetically and heaved himself from his chair. He wandered about the shop, peering under a length of cloth here, opening up an

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empty tin there. And like all disorderly people over whom some benign Providence watches, he finally found what he was looking for in a large and ornate vase made from clam shells embedded in pink cement.

"Here they are," and he shook them out onto the desk. "Always had a hankerin' after stamps myself ever since I read an article about them in one of the New York papers, the time they had the big exhibition, back a spell."

The stamps were a miscellaneous lot, done up in little soiled, dusty cellophane envelopes. Spike selected several packets.

"How much?"

Milo pursed his lips uncertainly. Cost accounting had no place in his schemes of merchandising. "Oh—well—say about fifty, seventy-five cents."

He laughed as he pocketed the coins flipped across the counter. "You know this article I was tellin' you about says they's some stamps that are worth thousands of dollars. Thousands!"

"Don't tell Teddy about them. It would sort of take the edge off my seventy-five cents worth."

"Well, you never can tell. Now maybe unbeknownst to anybody there might be one of them real valuable ones in one of them there packets you got."

Milo seemed to regard the prospect of a fortune slipping through his fingers with his usual equanimity.

"I recollect this article was tellin' about a fellow

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that come across a bank that was movin' from a place they'd been fifty, sixty years, and they was going to throw out a lot of old letters and stuff. And he give a hundred dollars for the lot, and what do you know if he didn't find some of these valuable stamps, and sold 'em for seven, eight thousand dollars.

"And they was tellin' about one stamp—just *one*, mind you—that was worth twenty-five thousand—no, no, it was thirty-two thousand ——"

Reluctantly Spike tore himself away from Milo's tall tales of stamp fortunes. He would have preferred to stay and listen to the store-keeper's genial ramblings, but having pledged himself to good works, he felt that the sooner he got them over the better.

The country place of R. Montgomery Tracy was imposing in an ugly, solid sort of way. As Spike drove his Cadillac roadster up the gravelled driveway—he had picked up his car at the garage in Saugus—he searched the second-floor windows for a glimpse of Teddy's face. He hoped he might slip in and see his nephew without encountering his sister-in-law. His brother he knew was in town. Hilda, he hoped, was in hell.

But it just happened that Hilda was sitting on the side verandah. Hilda was a largish person—a bit taller, as a matter of fact, than her somewhat smallish husband—and she ran to resolute corseting, close-cropped gray hair, and large bone glasses. Much of her life was devoted to committees, and she had at

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one time or another been chairman of everything from a church mystery play to a county dog show. Her specialty, however, was child training, and Teddy was her guinea pig. It was a tribute to the inherent soundness of his constitution that he had survived successively Behaviorism, the Montessori Method, a progressive play school and Gestalt psychology.

It was only the mumps that had saved him from newer and more scientific horrors. The interlude was temporary though. Already his mother was planning fresh experiments. Even as Spike mounted the steps she was engaged in reading a book, an astonishing new theory that conclusively proved that the time to get a child, to really mold his character and clinch his behavior pattern is in his twelfth year. He must be isolated, a creature apart during that crucial time. He must be kept from all peril both physical and moral. Bad company is as dangerous as germs. Association with people of light . . .

Spike felt that his sister-in-law's greeting was unusually cool. He was aware, of course, that her feelings toward him were never unduly tender, yet this afternoon he felt a new frigidity in the air.

"Teddy," she told him curtly, in reply to his inquiry, "is ill."

"I know. That's why I came over. I brought him some stamps."

"Stamps!"

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The inference of her tone was that someone was about to present her son with a bunch of adders.

"For his collection," Spike explained.

"He has no collection."

"Oh yes, he has. He was showing it to me just the other day."

"He has no collection. I ordered Perkins to burn it—this morning."

"Why you di ——," Spike caught himself just in time.

"To burn it—this morning. I was reading a book only last week on various phases of the Oriental plague, and they have on record three cases over a period of twenty years which are directly traceable to stamps. The plague bacillus adheres to the glue of the stamp, forming ——"

Spike rose abruptly. "Where's Teddy? I want to see him."

"Teddy can see no one."

"He's not as sick as all that. The doctor said yesterday that he ——"

"For a period of six weeks Teddy will not be at home to anyone—anyone. I'm reading a book now, a marvelous book on an entirely new phase of child psychology which ——"

Spike jerked open the door of his car, turned the key and jammed in the clutch. The engine roared with quite unnecessary anger. It was just beyond the shrubbery that shut off the house from the road that

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a figure jumped from the bushes and gesticulated wildly. Spike put on squealing brakes.

"Perkins, what the hell?"

"It's Master Teddy, Mr. Philip. He asked if I would give you this when I saw you instead of—of burning it. But you won't, of course, say anything to Mrs. Tracy about it, will you?"

Perkins was old and white-haired and his gentle, kindly eyes were appealing as he held out a clumsily done up package. Spike slipped the wrapping off. It was a grubby stamp album and inside was a letter in round little-boy writing.

"Spike: Take care of this for me. They're going to burn it on me. And if you find any good new Russian air mails save them.

Teddy.

P. S. Do you know a book that says that stamps are good for you? If you do will you please buy it and send it anonmusly to Mother and I will pay you back twenty cents a week from my alouance."

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CHAPTER III

The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship

"SING TO me. Sing me that song you sang the night when first we met."

Pug looked disgusted. "If I didn't know you, I'd say you was a pansy."

"Sing to me," Spike persisted as he stretched himself on the davenport.

The heat of the afternoon had given way before lowering clouds, and with darkness had come a storm that whipped the calm waters of the bay into tumbling waves. The wind was rising now, driving the rain against the window panes.

Spike lit an after-dinner cigarette and raised his voice above the rattling of the shutters as he addressed Pug.

"Sing 'The Baggage Coach Ahead.'"

"I can't. I ain't drunk, and anyway, I gotta clear the table." Pug went virtuously about his duties. "Mrs. Parsons wants to get home early."

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But Spike would not be put off. "Sing 'Why Did They Dig Ma's Grave So Deep?' "

"I ain't got my music along."

"Sing 'Somebody's Grandpa' and 'The Fatal Wedding.' "

The swinging door to the kitchen banged on Pug's back as he retreated with a pile of dishes. Presently he returned with an empty tray. Spike eyed him sternly.

"Chuck it," he said, indicating the tray. Pug hesitated, then put the tray on the table.

"Come here and sit down." He indicated a chair in front of the davenport. Pug sat.

"Now tell me something. What the hell do you think I hired you for?"

"I couldn't rightly say," said Pug complacently. "Neither could you. The both of us was too cockeyed that night to remember anything correct."

The stern lines of Spike's face relaxed at the recollection of a certain night three months before when he had first made the acquaintance of Mr. Pug Beasley. The details were misted in an alcoholic haze, but the general outlines were there.

It had been in the Garden. Nothing exciting, just the usual Thursday night card of second raters who might some day be champions, and second raters who had once been champions. There had been two light weights . . . stalling . . . stalling . . . round after round of heavy, dull evasion. The crowd had started to boo . . . "Wake me up when they start to fight"

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. . . "Don't hit him, Clarence, you might hurt him." . . . One of the fighters had gotten mad at the crowd. Words had been flung back and forth over the ropes. "All right, if you can do any better come on up here and do it, you little dried up prune."

A small, belligerent figure had crawled and swayed into the ring. Dead, roarin' drunk. He had fought with his bare fists and both of the fighters at once. A gallant fight! A challenge! . . . Always stick up for the game fighter. . . . Another figure had crawled and swayed into the ring . . . larger, clad in evening clothes . . . dead, roarin' drunk, too. It was a grand four-cornered melee.

Afterward on the way to the precinct station house in the patrol wagon, they had introduced themselves with the extreme formality of which only the very drunk are capable. "Mr. Pug Beasley, one of the bes' bantam-weight fighters in the world 'til I got too fat, one of the bes'." . . . "Mr. Spike Tracy, one of the bes'—no, no, one of the wors' ——"

They had spent the night together in the same cell and Mr. Beasley had revealed himself as a virtuoso of rare talent. "The Curse of An Aching Heart" . . . "Just Break the News to Mother" . . . unprintable verses of "Mademoiselle from Armentiers" and "Frankie and Johnnie" . . . "Throw Him Down, McClosky." . . . The night had been alternately gay and lachrymose with song.

In the morning the desk sergeant had been somewhat embarrassed to discover that one of his guests

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was the younger brother of the district attorney. He was all for letting him go quietly, but Spike refused unless he be allowed to take along a friend. The elastic procedure of the police department—where friends are concerned—could not be stretched quite that far, and Spike's wallet had been lost in the fight the night before.

In the end R. Montgomery Tracy had been forced to come down in person and put up the money for fines. He had not missed the opportunity to lecture his younger brother on the "thoroughly disreputable" nature of his conduct and his associate. It was, as Spike frequently pointed out, the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

It's only discordant feature was Pug's insistence on doing a little work. He received a salary far in excess of his actual services, and occasionally his conscience smote him.

"I hired you," said Spike, drifting back to the present, "to do what I tell you to do."

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir."

"I thought we settled all that this afternoon."

"We did, sir, but occasionally, sir, I like to get your goat, sir."

Spike grinned. "God, what a bloody fool you are, Pug. That's why I like you. Light up." He tossed him cigarettes and a lighter.

"How's the kid, Teddy?" Pug asked when he was settled comfortably, smoking.

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"Lousy." Spike related the afternoon's misadventures.

"Ain't I glad my old lady was a tart," Pug commented complacently, "and left me on a doorstep? It's fierce what kids with mothers has got to endure. I'll bet ——"

The rest of his sentence was drowned in the roar of thunder and wind.

"Tough night out," Spike said.

"Yeah."

"Milo Taylor says people pay thousands of dollars for just one stamp."

"He's a liar or there's more damn fools in the world than I thought."

"Yes, but aren't they lucky?"

"Who?"

"The damn fools. At least they have—something." Spike's voice became weighted with pity and tragedy. "They have their stamps, their porcelains from the tenth Ming dynasty, their match box covers. But what have I? Nothing, nothing! My life is empty. My empty arms are ——"

"Shut up!" Pug sat up listening.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought I heard ——"

Spike listened. "So did I. Go to the door."

Pug crossed the room, shot back the heavy bolt, opened the door a crack. Wind and rain billowed into the room. He peered out into the darkness. The

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door was pushed wider. Then it crashed open with the weight against it.

A woman, drenched, wild, haggard, fell across the threshold and lay there, moaning softly.

"Get a load o' *this* in your empty arms," Pug said quietly.

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CHAPTER IV

Murder at Last!

THE BREAKING waves dashed high on the low, sandy shore of Sark Island, and collapsed into frantic, boiling surf, cutting the tiny bit of land off from the mainland, enveloping it in storm and hurricane.

At the eastern end of the island, the fantastic scroll work that surrounded the lookout porch at the top of the Huddleston's old Victorian farm house was torn away and hurled crashing against the barn. Mrs. Parsons' tiny, three-roomed cottage, low and compact, located midway along the north shore, escaped the storm's fury, but her garden in all the lushness of mid-summer was trampled and ruined.

At the Tracy place on the extreme western end, shutters were torn off, and at the tiny pier at the foot of the lawn the motor launch snapped its moorings, was picked up by the frenzied sea and hurled back against rocks, dashed into splinters.

The pier itself with its landing platform used by the ferry that came across twice a day from Saugus

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to bring provisions and mail, stood firm. It was alone, however, in its pigmy defiance, for no ferry would risk the boiling, mountainous sea that separated Sark Island from the mainland.

At the Tracy house the roaring outside only threw into greater relief the strange quiet of the upstairs room where the woman lay. A lamp burned fitfully on the dresser—there was no electricity on Sark Island—and the room was hung with shadows through which the white face on the pillow could be dimly seen.

Spike and Pug stood at the foot of the bed, and Mrs. Parsons sat on a chair beside it, her large capable hands smoothing the tangled black hair, wiping rain and mud from the face, turning up the cuffs of the pajama coat that was much, much too long and large for the frail body within it.

The woman tossed, muttered, babbled strange incoherencies. She seemed to strain, now in some agony of effort, now in some terror of recoil. A violent fit of shivering shook her.

"Get a hot water bottle and fill it," Mrs. Parsons said quietly to Pug.

"We ain't got any. What do you think ——" But the words were suddenly stilled. Even Pug seemed to realize that it was not the time for his usual mode of retort.

"Then go down cellar and get three of those bricks

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that are piled up against the fruit room and heat them in the oven and wrap them in towels and bring them up here."

When Pug left the room, she turned to Spike.

"She's very ill, Mr. Tracy. She's cold and yet I'm sure she has a fever."

Spike said nothing but went to the window and peered out into the frenzied night. She divined his purpose.

"No use thinking about that," she said.

"She ought to have a doctor, though."

"I know, but how could you get one?"

"I could take the launch," he said, ignorant of the fact that even as he spoke it tossed in a million splinters on the boiling sea.

She shook her head. "You couldn't get beyond the breakers. You'd be smashed to pieces. When you've lived on Sark Island for twenty years like I have, Mr. Tracy, you'll know better than even to think of it. We're marooned. We are, every once in a while."

"Then there's nothing to be done?"

"Nothing, except to keep her warm and quiet if we can."

"You'll stay tonight?"

She nodded, and turned back to the woman moaning softly in delirium.

Monday night . . . all day Tuesday . . . Tuesday night. The storm raged. Inside the quiet room the

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woman lay for long hours sunk in coma. Then she would rouse, try vainly to get up, cry out, sink back sobbing, babbling. Mrs. Parsons was with her constantly during the day, and slept in an adjoining room at night. Pug and Spike took turns sitting beside the bed during the night, three hours each, alternating like sailors on watch.

It was in the early hours of Wednesday morning just as a murky grayness was beginning to creep into the room that the gale broke. Gradually Spike, sitting beside the bed, became aware that there was no roaring and pounding of wind and surf. He went to the window and peered out into the graying dawn. The storm was over.

He came back and sat down again and looked at the face against the pillow. White, oh so white and frail, with great dark circles of tragedy under the eyes. There were tiny crow's feet at the corner of the eyes and the muscles of cheek and throat had begun to droop. Here was no first flush of youth, but a woman in the indeterminate thirties. Over all the face there lay an expression of pain and weariness and beaten, broken effort. And yet with it all she was strangely, inexplicably beautiful.

At nine o'clock that Wednesday morning Mrs. Parsons stood on the verendah with Pug and surveyed the ravages of the storm. It was very still now and her ear was cocked for any slightest sound

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from the room upstairs. At the pier at the foot of the lawn she could see Spike waiting for the ferry that was laboring toward the landing place on its first trip since Monday evening.

"Quite a lot of passengers, seems like," she commented as the ferry drew nearer and she could see a small knot of figures on the foredeck. "Maybe the Huddlestons are expecting company."

The ferry nudged against the pier, and the ferryman sprang out with his packet of mail. Mrs. Parsons could see him handing some of it to Spike. Then the little knot of figures on the foredeck swarmed over the landing platform. An excited movement in their arms and legs could be discerned even at a distance. Mrs. Parsons shaded her eyes with her hand and squinted the better to see.

"Looks like maybe they're friends of Mr. Tracy. He seems to know 'em."

She could see them now, standing in a ring around Spike. He was shaking hands with several of them and they seemed to be telling him something. They stood in confab for perhaps ten minutes. Then the group broke up. Three of the men went one way along the north shore and three others along the south shore. The ferryman climbed into his gently rocking boat and started back across the bay.

Spike came toward the house, walking slowly, his forehead wrinkling as he scanned the newspaper he held in his hands. He mounted the steps of the ver-

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andah and for a moment stood looking strangely at Mrs. Parsons and Pug.

"Why, Mr. Tracy, whatever is the mat ——"

He motioned her to silence. "Come on inside," he said and led the way into the house. He closed the door carefully behind them, then faced the two puzzled creatures and spoke slowly, thoughtfully.

"The ferryman says that he brought a passenger over here on his last trip Monday night about seven —a woman."

Mrs. Parsons' anxious face lighted. "It must have been—her. Does he know who she is, where her folks are?"

Spike shook his head. "He never saw her before. He says she seemed nervous and distraught. 'All wild-like and terrible upset' was the way he put it, and she gave him five dollars to bring her over."

"Did she say who she was coming to see? The Huddlestons, maybe?"

"She didn't say anything. And now ——" He paused and again he eyed Mrs. Parsons and Pug as if he were weighing certain possibilities.

"Those men you saw down there, the ones that came over on the ferry, are detectives from the New York police department. I know some of them. I—I lied like hell to them, and I expect ——" He paused again and this time the gaze he held them with was a command. "—— and I expect you two to do the

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same," he said quietly, and spread the front page of the *New York Post* before them.

FAMOUS STAMP COLLECTOR
VICTIM OF STRANGE MURDER

Prentice Crossley, Owner of Fortune in Stamps, Found in Fifth Avenue Home, Stabbed in the Back

---

Linda Crossley, Granddaughter, Missing. Believed in Long Island Hide-out.

And beside the screaming, ghastly headlines was a photograph. It was a woman of dark and tragic beauty, the woman who lay in the room upstairs.

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CHAPTER V

Enter—the Super-Sleuth

THE WRITERS of murder fiction, the metropolitan press and the detective story magazines have been a powerful educational force. Thanks to them there is hardly a member of the general public today who doesn't know exactly what to do before the police arrive.

The average citizen confronted with a dead body isn't even embarrassed. He knows that he must disturb nothing and call the police. He regrets his inability to suspend himself in midair and thus avoid the destruction of footprints and automobile tracks. He observes. The time? Are the windows open or closed? Was the door locked from the inside or the out? He sniffs avidly for the scent of some strange Oriental perfume, searches for a frail wisp of handkerchief, a cigarette stub ringed with rouge. Sex-appeal is as important in death as in life. A woman in the case may mean all the difference between the front page and interment next to the ads.

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He knows that as soon as the police arrive the servants will be questioned, and the body photographed. A horde of men will descend upon the murder chamber and dust its smooth surfaces with white powder and then foolishly blow it away with a tiny bellows. Fingerprints! There will be scientific looking chaps who will scrape up bits of dried blood stain, and confiscate the three strands of red hair found clutched in the dead hand.

And presently there will appear a figure, rotund and jolly, whistling a sentimental hit from a Broadway show who will gaze down upon the corpse and toss off a bright quip about violent death. The medical examiner.

And above them all will tower the super-sleuth. Oh so super!

From the bit of cigar ash on the mantlepiece he will determine the last words of the deceased. A turned down corner of the desk blotter may be just a turned down corner of the desk blotter to the police, but to him it reveals the exact height of the murderer and the number of gold inlays in his teeth. With strange psychological insight he knows that the first parlor maid is lying when she says that the door to the library was *open* when she pased it at nine: forty-seven the previous night on her way downstairs to fill a hot-water bottle for cook who was having a twinge of her neuralgia, poor soul.

Afterward, of course, there are the reports that are brought moist from typewriter, laboratory and

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morgue and laid on the desk of the district attorney.

It was these reports that were still engaging District Attorney Tracy and Inspector Herschman as they sat in the district attorney's office four days after the murder of Prentice Crossley.

Inspector Herschman, head of the homicide squad, was built along the approved lines. The average citizen would spot him in a minute for what he was—a Headquarters dick, earnest but heavy-handed. In a detective story he would have made an ideal foil for the super-sleuth. Having worked himself up from a patrol beat on the sidewalks of New York, he knew intimately Willie the Wop, and Mike the Mick, but his acquaintance with the higher strata of society was limited. Stamp collectors, for instance, were *terra incognita* to him.

"They don't even call 'em that," he complained to the district attorney as the two of them sat hunched over the reports, studying them for the tenth time. "They call 'em philatelists."

"That's beside the point," the district attorney said irritably. "What I want to know is what progress have you made?"

"Well—we got the report from the men I sent out to Sark Island."

"Yes?"

"They combed every inch of it and they didn't find hide nor hair of the woman. And none of the people on the island did either. We questioned them

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all—a farmer family named Huddleston, and a Mrs. Parsons and—and your brother."

There was a short silence. The eyes of the two men met, then dropped swiftly, as if each was somewhat embarrassed by the mutual divination. The district attorney drummed on the table with nervous fingers and the inspector chewed at his unlit cigar. Presently he broke the silence.

"Speaking of your brother," he said with forced casualness, "it strikes me he's—well, he's a pretty bright fellow."

"At times; not always."

"Yeah, but ——" The sentence trailed off into nothing. The inspector was thinking back to a certain famous case in which the police department had covered itself with glory for the astuteness of its solution.* Being at heart an essentially honest fellow his spirit if not his flesh blushed when he thought of the flattering things that had been said about the chief of the homicide squad, and all the time it was that young Spike . . .

Again his eyes met those of the district attorney's. "I was thinking," he said, "that it might be a good idea if we were to . . ."

"I have already," the district attorney snapped as if unwilling to admit it. "He ought to be here now. I told him two o'clock, but of course, he's never on time."

* "The Murder of Cecily Thane."

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At three: thirty Spike arrived at the office of the district attorney. He rushed in with breathless cheerfulness, greeted Herschman genially and then turned to his brother.

"Make it snappy, old dear. I'm on my way to a squash match up at the Racquet Club. What am I on the carpet for now—drinking, women or embezzlement?"

The district attorney looked uncomfortable, pushed a box of large, fat cigars toward his brother, tried to smile and said, "Sit down, Philip."

"Can't. I'm dashing." But he took out his case, lit a cigarette and took a temporary seat on the corner of the desk. The district attorney cast a significant glance at the inspector.

"We were—uh—just wondering, Mr. Tracy ——"

"Inspector! And after all we've been through together! Anyway, it's mixing, with Richard here in the same room."

The inspector looked a bit embarrassed, substituted "Spike" for "Mr. Tracy," and went on. "We were wondering if maybe you couldn't—uh—well, in this Crossley murder case . . ."

"Oh yes, I talked to your men yesterday. In fact I spent half the day helping them. We couldn't find a trace of her. How come you tracked her to Sark Island?"

"Her picture was published in the Tuesday morning papers, and the guy that runs the ferry recog-

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nized it and tipped us off. Said he took her over Monday night about seven."

"Well," said Spike lightly, "she isn't there now. She probably got hold of a boat somewhere Monday night and went back to the mainland before the storm broke and is now ——" Suddenly he broke off, struck by an idea. "I wonder," he said, "I just wonder." For a moment he was thoughtful. Then he turned toward the district attorney.

"My boat!" he said. "That motor launch I had. You know it, Richard. It was gone yesterday morning and I just assumed that it had broken away in the storm and drifted away. I had to row over to the mainland in the Huddleston's row boat. That's why I was so late. I bet she took the launch. Come to think of it, it seems to me I recall hearing a sound like a motor starting about eight o'clock Monday night. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time, but now I remember."

"Listen," and he turned excitedly to Herschman, "send out a description of her—Elso, twenty-four foot cruiser, engine number 47926, painted white with . . ."

Herschman reached for the telephone, put through quick commands to his office, set in motion the vast network of a police broadcast, through radio and mail and telegraph. As he turned from the telephone, Spike gathered up his gloves and stick and tamped out his cigarette.

"Well, I'll be getting along. Glad I was able to

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help you a bit. If you find the boat let me know. I had to buy a new one this afternoon."

"But—but Philip!" The district attorney half rose from his chair. "We thought you might—perhaps—ah ——"

Spike looked innocently blank, and R. Montgomery Tracy floundered. It was Inspector Herschman who finally came to the point in the blunt, flatfooted manner in which years before he had pounded the sidewalks of New York.

"Listen, Mr. Tra—Spike, here's the idea. You were a big help on that last case we had. You know, Cecily Thane, and I understand you did pretty good with that Long Island case* and that one up in Vermont.** So now we want you in on this. See?"

"Sorry, Inspector, and thanks for the kind words, but I couldn't possibly. I'm much too busy."

The district attorney snorted in disdain. "Doing what, may I ask?"

"I'm supposed to be at the Racquet Club this minute. I'm going out to dinner and the theater tonight, and afterward I'm going to a party from which I shall not probably recover for several days. It's that kind."

"Now listen here, Spike." The inspector was roused, and he bore down upon him in his third degree manner. As a matter of fact the ordeal to which Mr. Philip Tracy was subjected in the fifteen

* "The Murder of Steven Kester."
** "The Murder of Sigurd Sharon."

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minutes that followed was not entirely unlike some of the more violent bludgeonings of the police department. At any rate he emerged at the end of half an hour only because, with a sigh of exhaustion, he gave way—slightly.

"All right, all right," he said irritably. "Give me your damn reports and I'll take 'em home tonight and read 'em over while I'm dressing, and if I'm in any condition tomorrow I'll drop in. But I won't guarantee anything. It's going to be a tough party." He reached for the typed copies of the reports that lay on the district attorney's desk, stuffed them into his pocket and escaped from the inquisition.

He hailed a taxi in front of Police Headquarters, but the address he gave the driver was not that of the Racquet Club. It was his own town apartment on East 102nd Street. He leaned back against the leather cushions, reached a hand into the breast pocket in which he carried the police department reports, and grinned with satisfaction. Then he glanced apprehensively at his watch. Pug was to call him at six.

But the cab made good time and he had almost ten minutes to spare before the telephone rang. "Long distance, calling Mr. Tracy." And presently Pug's voice came over the wire.

"Everything's O. K. I mean it's just the same."

"She conscious yet?"

"No. She don't toss around and moan so much, but she ain't conscious."

"Where are you calling from?"

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"Hollis. If I'd called from Saugus all them hicks would be listenin' in."

"Good boy, Pug! Now get this. Go out tonight and pick up any wreckage of the launch that you find on the beach and bury it. And then if anybody asks you what happened to the launch, look dumb and say somebody must have stolen it—that it disappeared Monday night, *before* the storm. See?"

"I don't see, but it's O.K. Anything else?"

"If I'm not out tomorrow, call me at the same time, same place."

"O.K."

Spike ate his dinner at a tiny basement restaurant near his apartment. Then he came home and studied the reports, read them, re-read them, paced the floor, smoked countless cigarettes. It was one o'clock before he finally turned out the light, and sank into a restless sleep.

At his home in the Bronx, Inspector Herschman slept soundly for the first time in three nights.

At the summer residence of the district attorney in Saugus, the district attorney remarked irritably to his wife, "Philip is not always a fool, but at least he's always irritating."

And in the dim, lamplit upper room on Sark Island, Linda Crossley tossed in troubled stupor.

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CHAPTER VI

Dull But Necessary

EVERY ROSE has its thorn.

Into each life some rain must fall.

Comes a time in the course of even the best of murders when things get awfully slow. Facts . . . the minutiæ of checks and counter-checks . . . the distance from the door to the window and back to the fireplace . . . and who heard the clock strike ten?

The reader must resign himself to a bit of tough going. It's dull but necessary.

Although Spike spent three hours of troubled concentration on the reports which he had taken from the district attorney's office that afternoon, the gist of them can be put down here in a few pages.

At eight o'clock on Monday morning, June 5, Kathryn Dennis, for four years second maid in the home of Prentice Crossley, entered the library for the daily straightening, and discovered her employer lying hunched over the library table. The dressing gown he wore was maroon, and the dark stain down

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