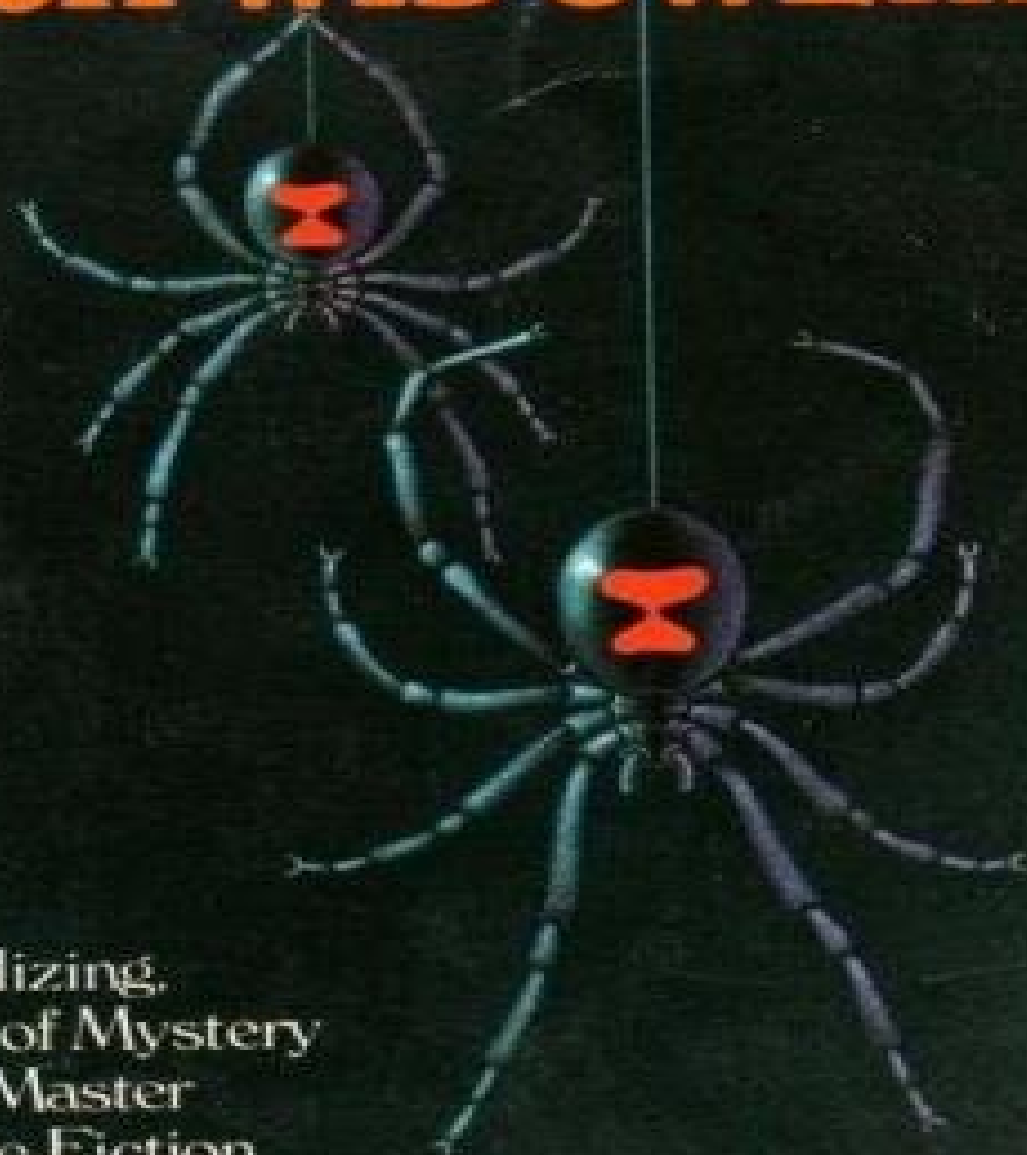


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ISAAC ASIMOV

MORE TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOWERS



Tantalizing,
New Tales of Mystery
By the Master
of Science Fiction

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Front Cover

The Black Widowers are at it again.

- A greeting card collector finds himself the target for a mysterious message....
- A Russian visitor to New York thinks he has uncovered a sinister murder plot....
- A mad scientist's locked-up secrets create a desperate race to unlock his safe—but first the combination must be deciphered....
- A man smokes a cigarette and loses a job—and his company loses a million dollars....
- But things aren't always what they seem. Here is your chance to test your detective skills against the very best—”The Black Widowers.”

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TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOWERS

MORE TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOWERS

MURDER AT THE ABA

Non-fiction:

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MORE STORIES FROM THE HUGO WINNERS,

Volume 3 WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

More Tales
Of The
Black Widowers
ISAAC ASIMOV
A FAWCETT CREST BOOK
Fawcett Books, Greenwich, Connecticut

MORE TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOWERS

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Selection of the Detective Book Club

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To:

Donald Bensen

Gilbert Cant

Lin Carter

John D. Clark

L. Sprague de Camp

Lester del Rey

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Introduction

I don't think there's much more to say about the Black Widowers than I've already said in Tales of the Black Widowers. That was the first book in this series and the one you're now holding is the second. In that first introduction, I explained that the Black Widowers was inspired by a real club, to which I belong, which is called the Trap Door Spiders. I won't tell you any more about that here because if you've read Tales of the Black Widowers you'd just be bored by the repetition, and if you haven't read it I'd rather leave you in the agony of curiosity so that you will then be driven to buy the first book and repair the omission.

Once the Tales was published, by the way, I handed a copy to each member of the Trap Door Spiders. One and all carefully masked their real feelings under the pretense of pleasure, and naturally, they accepted that pretense at face value.

That's all I have to say now, but lest you rejoice too quickly at being rid of me, I must warn you that I will appear again in a short afterword following each of the stories.

1 When No Man Pursueth

Thomas Trumbull scowled with only his usual ferocity and said, "How do you justify your existence Mr. Stellar?"

Mortimer Stellar lifted his eyebrows in surprise and looked about the table at the six Black Widowers whose guest he was for that evening.

"Would you repeat that?" he said.

But before Trumbull could, Henry, the club's redoubtable waiter, had moved in silently to offer Stellar his brandy and Stellar took it with an absently murmured "Thank you."

"It's a simple question," said Trumbull. "How do you justify your existence?"

"I didn't know I had to," said Stellar.

"Suppose you did have to," said Trumbull. "Suppose you were standing before God's great judgment seat."

"You sound like an editor," said Stellar, unimpressed.

And Emmanuel Rubin, host for the evening, and a fellow writer, laughed and said, "No, he doesn't sound like Mort. He's ugly but he's not ugly enough."

"You stay out of it, Manny," said Trumbull, pointing a forefinger.

"All right," said Stellar. "I'll give you an answer. I hope that, as a result of my stay on Earth, I will have left some people a little more informed about science than they would have been if I had never lived."

"How have you done that?"

"By the books and articles I write on science for the layman." Stellar's blue eyes glinted from behind his heavily black-rimmed glasses and he added with no perceptible trace of modesty, "Which are probably the best that have ever been written."

"They're pretty good," said James Drake, the chemist, stubbing out his fifth cigarette of the evening and coughing as though to celebrate the momentary pulmonary release. "I wouldn't put you ahead of Gamow, though."

"Tastes differ," said Stellar coldly. "I would."

Mario Gonzalo said, "You don't write only about science, do you? It seems to me I read an article by you in a television weekly magazine and that was just humor." He had propped up the caricature he had drawn of Stellar in the course of the meal. The black-rimmed glasses were prominent and so was the shoulder-length, fading brown hair, the broad grin, and the horizontal lines across the forehead.

"Good Lord," said Stellar. "Is that me?"

"It's the best Mario can do," said Rubin. "Don't shoot him."

"Let's have some order," said Trumbull testily. "Mr. Stellar, please answer the question Mario put to you. Do you write only about science?"

Geoffrey Avalon, who had been sipping gently at his brandy, said in his deep voice which could whenever he chose, utterly dominate the table, "Aren't we wasting time? We've all read Mr. Stellar's articles. It's impossible to avoid him. He's everywhere."

"If you don't mind, Jeff," said Trumbull, "it's what I'm trying to get at in a systematic way. I've seen his articles and Manny says he has written a hundred-and-something books on all sorts of subjects and the point is why and how?"

The monthly banquet of the Black Widowers was in its concluding phase—that of the grilling of the guest. It was a process that was supposed to be conducted along the simple, ordinary lines of a judicial cross-examination but never was. The fact that it so often dissolved into chaos was a matter of deep irritation to Trumbull, the club's code expert, whose dream it was to conduct the grilling after the

fashion of a drumhead court-martial.

"Let's get into that, then, Mr. Stellar," he said. "Why the hell do you write so many books on so many subjects?"

Stellar said, "Because it's good business. It pays to be unspecialized. Most writers are specialists; they've got to be. Manny Rubin is a specialist; he writes mysteries—when he bothers to write at all." Rubin's sparse beard lifted and his eyes widened with indignation behind his thick-lensed glasses. "I've happen to have published over forty books, and they're not all mysteries. I've published"—he began ticking off his fingers—"sport stories, confessions, fantasies—"

"Mostly mysteries," amended Stellar smoothly. "Me, I try not to specialize. I'll write on any subject that strikes my fancy. It makes life more interesting for me so that I never go through a writer's block. Besides, it makes me independent of the ups and downs of fashion. If one kind of article loses popularity, what's the difference? I write others."

Roger Halsted passed his hand over the smooth balding forepart of his head and said, "But how do you do it? Do you have set hours to write in?"

"No," said Stellar. "I just write when I feel like. But I feel like all the time."

"Actually," said Rubin, "you're a compulsive writer."

"I've never denied it," said Stellar.

Gonzalo said, "But steady composition doesn't seem to be consistent with artistic inspiration. Does it just pour out of you? Do you revise at all?"

Stellar's face lowered and for a moment he seemed to be staring at his brandy glass. He pushed it to one side and said, "Everyone seems to worry about inspiration. You're an artist, Mr. Gonzalo. If you waited for inspiration, you'd starve."

"Sometimes I starve even when I don't," said Gonzalo.

"I just write," said Stellar, a bit impatiently. "It's not so difficult to do that I have a simple, straightforward, unornamented style, so that I don't have to waste time on clever phrases. I present my ideas in a clear and orderly way because I have a clear and orderly mind. Most of all, I have security. I know I'm going to sell what I write, and so I don't agonize over every sentence, worrying about whether the editor will like it."

"You didn't always know you would sell what you wrote," said Rubin. "I assume there was a time when you were a beginner and got rejection slips like everyone else."

"That's right. And in those days writing took a lot longer and was a lot harder. But that was thirty years ago. I've been literarily secure for a long time."

Drake twitched his neat gray mustache and said, "Do you really sell everything you write now? Without exception?"

Stellar said, "Just about everything, but not always first crack out of the box. Sometimes I get a request for revision and, if it's a reasonable request, I revise, and if it's unreasonable, I don't. And once in a while—at least once a year, I think—I get an outright rejection." He shrugged. "It's part of the free-lance game. It can't be helped."

"What happens to something that's rejected, or that you won't revise?" asked Trumbull.

"I try it somewhere else. One editor might like what another editor doesn't. If I can't sell it anywhere, I put it aside; a new market might open up; I might get a request for something that the rejected article can fill."

"Don't you feel that's like selling damaged goods?" said Avalon.

"No, not at all," said Stellar. "A rejection doesn't necessarily mean an article is bad. It just means that one particular editor found it unsuitable. Another editor might find it suitable."

Avalon's lawyer-mind saw an opening. He said, "By that reasoning, it follows that if an editor likes it, buys, and publishes one of your articles, that is no necessary proof that the article is any good."

"None at all, in any one case," said Stellar, "but if it happens over and over again, the evidence in your favor mounts up."

Gonzalo said, "What happens if everyone rejects an article?"

Stellar said, "That hardly ever happens, but if I get tired of submitting a piece, chances are I'll cannibalize it. Sooner or later I'll write something on a subject that's close to it, and then I incorporate parts of the rejected article into a new piece. I don't waste anything"

"Then everything you write sees print, one way or another. Is that right?" And Gonzalo shook his head slightly, in obvious admiration.

"That's about right." But then Stellar frowned. "Except, of course," he said, "when you deal with an idiot editor who buys something and then doesn't publish it."

Rubin said, "Oh, have you run into one of those things? The magazine folded?"

"No, it's flourishing. Haven't I ever told you about this?"

"Not as far as I remember."

"I'm talking about Bercovich. Did you ever sell anything to him?"

"Joel Bercovich?"

"Are there likely to be two editors with that last name? Of course, Joel Bercovich."

"Well, sure. He used to edit Mystery Story magazine some years ago. I sold him a few items. I still have lunch with him occasionally. He's not in mysteries anymore."

"I know he isn't. He's editing Way of Life magazine. One of those fancy new slick jobs that appeal to the would-be affluent"

"Hold it. Hold ill" cried out Trumbull. "This thing's degenerating. Let's go back to the questioning."

"Now wait," said Stellar, waving his hand at Trumbull in clear annoyance. "I've been asked a question as to whether everything I write sees print and I want to answer that because it brings up something I'm pretty sore about and would like to get off my chest."

"I think he's within his rights there, Tom," said Avalon.

"Well, go head, then," said Trumbull discontentedly, "but don't take forever."

Stellar nodded with a sort of grieved impatience and said, "I met Bercovich at some formal party. I don't even remember the occasion for it, or very much who was involved. But I remember Bercovich because we did some business as a result. I was there with Gladys, my wife, and Bercovich was there with his wife and there were maybe eight other couples. It was an elaborate thing.

"In fact, it was very elaborate, and deadly. It was formal. It wasn't black tie; they stopped short of that but it was formal. The serving was slow; the food was bad; the conversation was constipated. I hated it—Listen, Manny, what do you think of Bercovich?"

Rubin shrugged. "He's an editor. That limits his good points, but I've known worse. He's not an idiot. He isn't? Well, I must admit that at the time he seemed all right I had vaguely heard of him, but he didn't know me, of course."

"Oh, of course," said Rubin, twirling his empty brandy glass.

"Well, he did," said Stellar indignantly. "It's the whole point of the story that he knew me, or he wouldn't have asked me for an article. He came up to me after dinner and told me that he read my story and that he admired it, and I nodded and smiled. Then he said, 'What do you think of the evening?'

"I said cautiously, 'Oh well, sort of slow,' because for all I knew he was the hostess' lover and I didn't want to be needlessly offensive.

"And he said, I think it's a bomb. It's too formal and that doesn't fit the American scene these days. Then he went on to say, 'Look, I'm editor of a new magazine, Way of Life, and I wonder if you couldn't write us an article on formality. If you could give us, say, twenty-five hundred to three thousand words, that would be fine. You could have a free hand and take any approach you want, but be lighthearted.'

“Well, it sounded interesting and I said so, and we discussed price a little, and I said I would try and he asked if I could have it in his office within three weeks, and I said maybe. He seemed very anxious.”

Rubin said, “When was all this?”

“Just about two years ago.”

“Uh-huh. That was about when the magazine started. I look at it occasionally. Very pretentious and not worth the money. I didn't see your article, though.”

Stellar snorted. “Naturally you haven't.”

“Don't tell me you didn't write it,” said Gonzalo.

“Of course I wrote it. I had it in Bercovich's office within a week. It was a very easy article to do and it was good. It was lightly satirical and included several examples of stupid formality at which I could fire my shots. In fact, I even described a dinner like the one we had.”

“And he rejected it?” asked Gonzalo.

Stellar glared at Gonzalo. “He didn't reject it. I had a check in my hands within another week.”

“Well then,” said Trumbull impatiently, “what's all this about?”

“He never printed it,” shouted Stellar. “That idiot has been sitting on it ever since, for nearly two years. He hasn't published it; he hasn't even scheduled it.”

“So what,” said Gonzalo, “as long as he's paid for it?”

Stellar glared again. “You don't suppose a one-time sale is all I'm after, do you? I can usually count on reprints here and there for additional money. And then I publish collections of my articles; and I can include that one until it's published.”

“Surely,” said Avalon, “the money involved is not very important.”

“No,” admitted Stellar, “but it's not utterly unimportant either. Besides, I don't understand why the delay. He was in a hurry for it. When I brought it in he slavered. He said, 'Good, good. I'll be able to get an artist on it right away and there'll be time to do some strong illustrations.' And then nothing happened. You would think he didn't like it; but if he didn't like it, why did he buy it?”

Halsted held up his coffee cup for a refill and Henry took care of it. Halsted said, “Maybe he only bought it to buy your good will, so to speak, and make sure you would write other articles for him even though the one you wrote wasn't quite good enough.”

Stellar said, “Oh no. . . . Oh no. . . . Manny, tell these innocents that editors don't do that. They never have the budget to buy bad articles in order to buy good will. Besides, if a writer turns out bad articles you don't want his good will. And what's more, you don't earn good will by buying an article and burying it”

Trumbull said, “All right, Mr. Stellar. We listened to your story and you'll note I didn't interrupt you. Now, why did you tell it to us?”

“Because I'm tired of brooding over it. Maybe one of you can figure it out. Why doesn't he publish it? —Manny, you said you used to sell him. Did he ever hold up anything of yours?”

“No,” said Manny, after a judicious pause. “I can't recall that he did. —Of course, he's had a bad time.”

“What kind of a bad time?”

“This dinner took place two years ago, you said, so that was his first wife you met him with. She was an older woman, wasn't she, Mort?”

Stellar said, “I don't remember her. That was the only time we ever met.”

“If it was his second wife, you'd remember. She's about thirty and very good-looking. His first wife died about a year and a half ago. She'd been ill a long time, it turned out, though she'd done her best to hide it and I never knew, for instance. She had a heart attack and it broke him up. He went through quite a period there.”

“Oh! Well, I didn't know about that. But even so, he's married again, right?”

“Sometime last year, yes.”

“And she's a good-looking person and he's consoled. Right?”

“The last time I saw him, about a month ago—just in passing—he looked all right.”

“Well then,” said Stellar, “why is he still holding out?”

Avalon said thoughtfully, “Have you explained to Mr. Bercovich the advantages of having your article published?”

Stellar said, “He knows the advantages. He's an editor.”

“Well then,” said Avalon, just as thoughtfully, “it may be that on second reading he found some serious flaw and feels it is not publishable as it stands. Perhaps he's embarrassed at having bought it and doesn't know how to approach you.”

Stellar laughed but without humor. “Editors don't get embarrassed and they're not afraid to approach you. If he found something wrong on second reading, he'd have called me and asked for a revision. I've been asked for revisions many times.”

“Do you revise when they ask for it?” said Gonzalo.

“I told you. . . . Sometimes, when it sounds reasonable,” said Stellar.

James Drake nodded as though that were the answer he would have expected and said, “And this editor never asked for any revision at all?”

“No,” said Stellar explosively, and then almost at once he added, “Well, once! One time when I called him to ask if it were scheduled—I was getting pretty edgy about it by then—he asked if it would be all right if he cut it a little, because it seemed diffuse in spots. I asked where the hell it was diffuse in spots, because I knew it wasn't, and he was vague and I was just peeved enough to say, no, I didn't want a word touched. He could print as it was or he could send it back to me.”

“And he didn't send it back to you, I suppose,” said Drake.

“No, he didn't. Damn it, I offered to buy it back. I said, 'Send it back, Joel, and I'll return the money.' And he said, 'Oh, come, Mort, that's not necessary. I'm glad to have it in my inventory even if I don't use it right away.' Damn fool. What good does it do either him or me to have it in his inventory?”

“Maybe he's lost it,” said Halsted, “and doesn't want to admit it”

“There's no reason not to admit it,” said Stellar. “I've got a carbon; two carbons, in fact. Even if I wanted to keep the carbons—and they come in handy when it's book time—it's no problem these days to get copies made.”

There was a silence around the table, and then Stellar's brow furrowed and he said, “You know, he did ask once if I had a carbon copy. I don't remember when. It was one of the more recent times I called on him. He said, 'By the way, Mort, do you have a carbon copy?'—just like that, 'By the way,' as if it were an afterthought. I remember thinking he was an idiot; does he expect a man of my experience not to have a carbon copy? I had the notion, then, that he was getting round to saying he had mislaid the manuscript, but he never said a word of the kind. I said that I had a carbon copy and he let the subject drop.”

“Seems to me,” said Trumbull, “that all this isn't worth the trouble you're taking.”

“Well, it isn't,” said Stellar, “but the thing bothers me. I keep careful files of my articles; I've got tabs on its edges are dark from handling. It's a sort of irritation. —Now why did he ask me if I had a carbon copy? If he'd lost the manuscript, why not say so? And if he hadn't lost it, why ask about the carbon?”

Henry, who had been standing at the sideboard, as was his custom after the dinner had been served and the dishes cleared away, said, “May I make a suggestion, gentlemen?”

Trumbull said, “Good Lord, Henry, don't tell me that this nonsense means something to you?”

Henry said, “No, Mr. Trumbull, I'm afraid I no more understand what it's all about than anyone else . . .”

the room. It merely strikes me as a possibility that Mr. Bercovich may have been prepared to tell Mr. Stellar that the manuscript was mislaid—but perhaps only if Mr. Stellar had said that he had no carbon. It might have been the fact that Mr. Stellar did have a carbon that made it useless to lose, or possibly, destroy the manuscript”

“Destroy it?” said Stellar in high-pitched indignation.

“Suppose we consider what would happen if he published the manuscript, sir,” said Henry.

“It would appear in print,” said Stellar, “and people would read it. That’s what I want to happen.”

“And if Mr. Bercovich had rejected it?”

“Then I would have sold it somewhere else, damn it, and it would still have appeared in print and people would have read it.”

“And if he returned it to you now, either because you refused revision or because you bought it back then again you would sell it somewhere else and it would appear in print and be read.”

“Damn right.”

“But suppose, Mr. Stellar, the editor bought the article as he did and does not publish it. Can you sell it elsewhere?”

“Of course not. It’s not mine to sell. Way of Life has bought first serial rights, which means they have the full and sole right to publish it before any other use is made of it. Until they publish it, or until they formally relinquish the right to do so, I can’t sell it anywhere.”

“In that case, Mr. Stellar, does it not seem to you that the only conceivable way in which Mr. Bercovich can keep the article from being generally read is to do exactly as he has done?”

“Are you trying to tell me, Henry,” said Stellar, with naked incredulity in his voice, “that he doesn’t want it read? Then why the hell did he ask me to write it?”

Henry said, “He asked you to write an article, sir. He did not know the exact article you would write till he saw it. Isn’t it possible that, once he read the article you did in actual fact write, he realized that he didn’t want it read and therefore took the only action possible to keep it unpublished, perhaps forever unpublished? He probably did not expect you to be the kind of writer who would hound an editor over such a matter.”

Stellar spread out his hands, palms upward, and looked about at the faces of the Black Widowers in a kind of semi-humorous exasperation. “I never heard of anything so ridiculous.”

Avalon said, “Mr. Stellar, you don’t know Henry as we do. If this is his opinion, I suggest you take it seriously.”

“But why should Joel want to destroy the thing or bury it? It’s a perfectly harmless article.”

Henry said, “I merely advance a possible explanation for what has gone on for two years.”

“But yours is not an explanation that explains, Henry. It doesn’t explain why he wants the article to be left unread.”

“You had said, sir, that he asked for permission to cut the article a little and you refused. If you had agreed, he would perhaps have changed it so as to render it really innocuous and then he would have published it.”

“But what did he want cut?”

“I’m afraid I can’t say, Mr. Stellar, but I gather that he wanted to do the cutting. That may have been in order not to call your attention to the precise passage he wanted altered.”

Stellar said, “But if he made the cuts himself, I’d still see what he had done once the article appeared.”

Henry said, “Would you be likely to read the article once published and compare it sentence by sentence with the original manuscript, sir?”

“No,” admitted Stellar reluctantly.

“And even if you did, sir, there might be a number of small changes and you would have no reason to suppose that one change was more significant than the others.”

Stellar said, "You know, this is a more peculiar mystery than the first, Henry. What could I have said to bother him?"

"I cannot say, Mr. Stellar," said Henry.

Avalon cleared his throat in his best lawyer-like fashion and said, "It is rather a pity, Mr. Stellar, that you didn't bring the carbon copy of your manuscript with you. You could have read it to us and perhaps we could then spot the critical passage. At the very least, I'm sure we would have been entertained."

Stellar said, "Who thought this sort of thing would come up?"

Gonzalo said eagerly, "If your wife is at home, Mr. Stellar, we might call her and have her read the article to Henry on the phone. The club could afford the charge."

Henry seemed to be lost in thought. Now he said slowly as though the thinking had surfaced but was still a private colloquy he was holding with himself, "Surely it couldn't be anything impersonal. If the tenets of good taste had been broken, if the policy of the magazine had been violated, he would have seen that at once and asked for specific changes. Even if he had bought it after a hasty reading and then discovered these impersonal errors afterward, there would have been no reason to hesitate to ask for specific changes, surely. Could it be that some superior officer in the publishing firm had vetoed the article and Mr. Bercovich is embarrassed to tell you that?"

"No," said Stellar. "An editor who isn't given a free hand by the front office is very likely to quit. And even if Bercovich didn't have the guts to do that he would be only too glad to use upstairs interference as an excuse to return the manuscript. He certainly wouldn't just hold onto it."

"Then," said Henry, "it must be something personal; something that has meaning to him, a humiliating meaning, a horrifying meaning."

"There's nothing of the kind in it," insisted Stellar.

"Perhaps there is no significance in the passage to you or to anyone else; but only to Mr. Bercovich."

"In that case," interrupted Drake, "why should Bercovich care?"

"Perhaps," said Henry, "because, if attention were called to it, it would come to have significance. That is why he dared not even tell Mr. Stellar what passage he wanted cut."

"You keep inventing perhapses," muttered Stellar. "I just don't believe it."

Gonzalo said abruptly, "I believe it. Henry has been right before and I don't hear anyone suggesting any other theory to account for the fact that the article isn't being published."

Stellar said, "But we're talking about nothing. What is the mysterious passage that is bothering Joel?"

Henry said, "Perhaps you can recall some personal reference, since that is what we suspect it would have to be. Did you not say that included in your article was an account of a dinner rather like the one that had inspired Mr. Bercovich to ask for the article in the first place?"

"Aha," said Gonzalo, "got it! You described the dinner too accurately, old boy, and the editor was afraid that the host would recognize it and be offended. Maybe the host is an old and valued friend of the publisher and would get the editor fired if the article appeared."

Stellar said, with no effort to hide his contempt, "In the first place, I'm an old hand at this. I don't write anything either actionable or embarrassing. I assure you I masked that dinner so that no one could reasonably speak of a resemblance. I changed every major characteristic of the dinner and I used no names. —Besides, if I had slipped and made the damned thing too real, why shouldn't he tell me that? That sort of thing I would change in a shot."

Henry said, "It might be something more personal still. He and his wife were at the dinner. What would it you said about them?"

"Nothing!" said Stellar. "Do you suppose I would make use of the editor to whom I was submitting the article? Give me that much credit. I didn't refer to him under any name or any guise; didn't refer to anything he said or did at all."

"Or anything about his wife either, sir?" asked Henry.

~~"Or about his wife— Well, wait, she may have inspired one small exchange in the article, but of course I didn't name her, describe her or anything of the sort. It was entirely insignificant"~~

Avalon said, "Nevertheless, that may be it. The memory was too poignant. She had died and he just couldn't publish an article that reminded him of—of—"

Stellar said, "If you're about to finish that sentence with the dear departed, I walk out. That's tripe, Mr. Avalon. With all respect—no, without too damn much respect— that's tripe. Why wouldn't he ask me to take out a sentence or two if it aroused too keen a memory? I would do it."

Avalon said, "Just because I phrase the matter in sentimental fashion, Mr. Stellar, doesn't mean it can't have significance all the same. His failure to mention it to you might be the result of a certain shame. In our culture, such things as sorrow over lost love are made fun of. You've just made fun of it. Yet it can be very real."

Stellar said, "Manny Rubin said she died about a year and a half ago. That means at least half a year after I wrote the article. Time enough to have it printed by then, considering his anxiety to have me meet an instant deadline. And it's been a year and a half since and he's married a beautiful woman. — Come on, how long does one sorrow over a lost love after one has found another?"

"It might help," said Henry, "if Mr. Stellar could tell us the passage in question."

"Yes," said Gonzalo, "call your wife and have her read it to Henry."

"I don't have to," said Stellar, who had only with difficulty withdrawn the wounded stare he had been directing at Avalon. "I've read the damn thing again a couple of weeks ago—about the fifth time—and I have it reasonably fresh in my mind. What it amounts to is this: we had been served the roast at a kind of snail's pace and I was waiting for others to be served before beginning. A few weren't quite that formal and were eating. Finally I broke down and salted it and was going to eat when I noticed that Mrs. Bercovich, who was on my right, had still not been served. I looked surprised and she said she had a special request and it was delayed in getting to her and I offered her my plate and she said 'No, thank you, it's been salted.' I told that passage, without names, just so I could get across my funny line, which I remember exactly. It went, 'She was the only one at the table who objected to the salt; the rest of us objected to the meat. In fact, several of us scraped off the salt, then ate it in a marked manner.'"

No one laughed at the funny line. Trumbull went to the trouble of simulating nausea.

Halsted said, "I certainly don't see any great sentimental value in that."

"I should say not," said Stellar, "and that's every last mention of her, without name or description, and none of Joel himself."

Henry said, "Yet Mr. Rubin said that the first Mrs. Bercovich died of a heart attack, which is rather a catch-all reference to circulatory disorders in general. She may well have had seriously high blood pressure and have been put on a low-salt diet."

"Which is why she refused Stellar's salted meat," said Gonzalo. "Right!"

"And why she was waiting for a special dish," said Henry. "And this is something to which Mrs. Bercovich desperately wants no attention drawn. Mr. Rubin said Mrs. Bercovich had done her best to hide her condition. Perhaps few people knew she was on a low-salt diet."

Stellar said, "Why should Joel care if they know?"

"I must introduce another perhaps, sir. Perhaps Mr. Bercovich, weary of waiting and, perhaps, already attracted by the woman who is now his second wife, took advantage of the situation. He may have salted her food surreptitiously, or, if she used salt substitute, he may have replaced it, at least in part, with ordinary salt—"

"And killed her, you mean?" interrupted Avalon.

Henry shook his head. "Who can tell? She might have died at the same moment anyway. He, however

may feel he contributed to the death and may now be in panic lest anyone find out. The mere mention of a woman refusing salt at that table may, in his eyes, be a shrieking out of his guilt—”

Stellar said, “But I didn't name her, Henry. There's no way of telling who she was. And even somehow one were to find out that it was she, how could anyone suspect anything out of the way?”

“You are perfectly right, Mr. Stellar,” said Henry. “The only reason we have come to suspect Mr. Bercovich now is because of his peculiar behavior with respect to the article and not to anything in the article itself. —But, you know, we have biblical authority to the effect that the wicked flee when no man pursueth.”

Stellar paused a moment in thought, then said, “All this may be, but it's not getting my article published.” He pulled out a black address book, turned to the Bs, then looked at his watch. “I've called him at his home before and it isn't ten yet”

Avalon raised his hand in an impressive stop sign. “One moment, Mr. Stellar. I trust you are not going to tell your editor about what we've said here. It is all strictly confidential in the first place, and would be slander in the second. You would not be able to support it and you may get yourself into serious trouble.”

Stellar said impatiently, “I wish all of you would take it for granted that an experienced writer is aware of what libel and slander are. —Is there a telephone handy, Henry?”

“Yes, sir,” said Henry. “I can bring one to the table. —May I also suggest caution?”

“Don't worry,” said Stellar as he dialed. He waited a moment, then, “Hello, Mrs. Bercovich? This is Mort Stellar, one of the writers for your husband's magazine. May I speak to Joel? —Oh, sure, I'll wait” He did not look up from the telephone as he waited. “Hello, Joel, sorry to call you at home, but I've been going over the piece on formality. You don't have it scheduled, do you? —Well, all right, I didn't feel like waiting on this because I didn't want to weaken. You can shorten it if you want. —Oh, sure, that's all right. —No, Joel, just a minute, no. I don't want you to do it. I've got some things I want cut out and maybe that will satisfy you. —For instance, that time I have about eating the salt instead of the meat isn't funny, now that I think of it. —Yes, that's right. Suppose I cut out that part about the woman refusing the salted meat. Will you publish it if I cut that out?”

There was a pause at this moment and now Stellar looked up at the others, grinning. Then he said, “All right, Joel. —Sure I can do it. How about 11 A.M.? —Okay, see you then.”

Stellar looked complacent. “It hit him right between the eyes. He repeated the line to me. You can tell me that he remembered that passage, in an article he bought two years ago, right off the top of his head, unless it had special meaning to him. I'll bet you're right after all, Henry. —Well, I'll cut it. The important thing is that I'll get my article into print.”

Avalon frowned and said with heavy dignity, “I should say that, from the standpoint of public morality, the really important thing is that a man may have tried to kill his wife and may even have actually done so and will get away with it.”

Trumbull said, “Don't get virtuously aggrieved, Jeff. If Henry is right, then there's no way of proving that he did anything, or that if he did tamper with the salt it actually contributed to her death, so what is there to do? In fact, what do we have to do? The really important thing is that Stellar has done it all. He's given the man two years of agony, first by writing the article and then by being constantly after him to publish it.”

Henry said, “The really important thing, sir, may be that Mr. Bercovich will, as a result of all this, be discouraged from attempting similar experiments in the future. After all, he has a second wife now and he may grow tired of her too.”

1 Afterword

I am sometimes asked whether any of the regular members of the Black Widowers is modeled on me

The answer is, No! Definitely not!

~~Some people have thought that talkative know-it-all Manny Rubin is the author in disguise. Not at all. He is actually reminiscent of someone else, someone who is a dearly loved (talkative, know-it-all) friend of mine.~~

In “When No Man Pursueth” (which appeared first in the March 1974 issue of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine) I took the liberty of introducing myself as the guest. Mortimer Stellar is as close as I could get to myself in appearance, profession, attitude, and so on.

I showed the story to my wife, Janet, after I had written it and asked her how well she thought I had caught the real me. She said, “But the character you drew is arrogant, vain, nasty, petty, and completely self-centered.”

I said, “See how close I got?”

She said, “But you're not like Mortimer Stellar at all. You're—” And she went on to list a string of nice adjectives I won't bore you with.

“Who'd believe that?” I said, and let the story stand as written.

Incidentally, since I introduced myself into the story, I had better make sure no unwarranted conclusions are drawn. I have lived through some rotten banquets and, at an editor's suggestion, I have written an article entitled “My Worst Meal,” but that editor is a pussycat who published the article promptly and who in no way resembles Bercovich in either word, thought, or deed.

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2 Quicker Than the Eye

Thomas Trumbull, who worked for the government as a cryptologist, was clearly uneasy. His tanned and wrinkled face was set in a carved attitude of worry. He said, "He's a man from the department; more superior, in fact. It's damned important, but I don't want Henry to feel the pressure."

He was whispering and he couldn't resist the quick look over his shoulder at Henry, the waiter at the Black Widower monthly banquets. Henry, who was several years older than Trumbull, had a face that was unwrinkled, and, as he quickly set the table, he seemed tranquil and utterly unaware of the fact that five of the Black Widowers were huddled quietly at the opposite end of the room. Or, if not unaware, then certainly undisturbed.

Geoffrey Avalon, the tall patent lawyer, had, under the best of conditions, difficulty in keeping his voice low. Still, stirring his drink with a middle finger on the ice cube, he managed to impart sufficient hoarseness. "How can we prevent it, Tom? Henry is no fool."

"I'm not sure anyone from the federal administration qualifies as a guest, Tom," said Emmanuel Rubin in a swerving non sequitur. His sparse beard bristled truculently and his eyes flashed through the thick lenses of his glasses. "And I say that even though you're in the category. Eighty per cent of the tax money I pay to Washington is expended in ways of which I strongly disapprove."

"You've got the vote, haven't you?" said Trumbull testily.

"And a fat lot of good that does, when the manipulation—" began Rubin, quite forgetting to keep his voice low.

Oddly enough, it was Roger Halsted, the mathematics teacher, whose quiet voice had sufficient difficulty in controlling a junior high school class, who managed to stop Rubin in mid-roar. He did so by placing his hand firmly over the smaller man's mouth. He said, "You don't sound very happy about your boss coming here, Tom."

"I'm not," said Trumbull. "It's a difficult thing. The point is that I've gotten considerable credit on two different occasions over matters that were really Henry's insights. I've had to take the credit, damn it, since what we say here in this room is confidential. Now something has come up and they're turning on me, and I'm as stuck as the rest of them. I've had to invite Bob here without really explaining why."

James Drake, the organic chemist, coughed over his cigarette and fingered his walrus-head bolo-tie. "Have you been talking too much about our dinners, Tom?"

"I suppose it could be viewed in that way. What bothers me is Henry, though. He enjoys the game, I know, when it is a game, but if there's real pressure and he won't—or can't—under that pressure—"

"Then you'll look bad, eh, Tom?" said Rubin with just a touch, perhaps, of malice.

Avalon said frigidly, "I have said before and I will say it again that what began as a friendly social get-together is becoming a strain on us all. Can't we have one session with just conversation?"

"I'm afraid not this one," said Trumbull. "All right, here's my boss. —Now let's carry all the load we can and put as little as possible on Henry."

But it was only Mario Gonzalo walking noisily up the stairs, uncharacteristically late, and resplendent in his long hair, a crimson jacket, and subtly matching striped shirt, to say nothing of a flowing scarf meticulously arranged to display the effect of casualness.

"Sorry I'm late, Henry—" But the proper drink was in his hand before he could say more. "Thank you, Henry. Sorry, fellows, trouble with getting a taxi. That put me in a grim mood and when the driver began to lecture me on the crimes and misdemeanors of the mayor I argued with him."

"Lord help us," said Drake.

"I always argue every tenth time I hear that kind of crap. Then he managed to get lost, and I didn't notice and it took us a long time to pull out. —I mean, he was giving me this business about welfare recipients being a bunch of lazy, free-loading troublemakers and how no decent person should expect

a handout but instead they should work for what they get and earn every cent. So I said what about sick people and old people and mothers with young children and he started telling me what a hard life he had led and he had never gone to anyone for a handout.

“Anyway, I got out and the fare came to \$4.80, and it was a good half dollar more than it should have been because of getting lost, so I counted out four singles and then spent some time getting the exact eighty cents change and I handed it to him. He counted it over, looked surprised, and I said, just as sweetly as I could, ‘That’s what you earned, driver. You looking for a handout too?’”

Gonzalo burst out laughing, but no one joined him. Drake said, “That’s a dirty trick on the poor guy just because you egged him into arguing.”

Avalon stared down austere from his lean height and said, “You might have gotten beaten up, Marius, and I wouldn’t blame him.”

“That’s a hell of an attitude you fellows are taking,” said Gonzalo, aggrieved—and at that point Trumbull’s boss did arrive.

Trumbull introduced the newcomer all round, looking uncommonly subdued as he did so. The guest’s name was Robert Alford Bunsen and he was both heavy and large. His face was pink and his white hair was sleeked back from an old-fashioned part down the middle.

“What will you have, Mr. Bunsen?” said Avalon, with a small and courtly bend at the middle. He was the only one present who was taller than the newcomer.

Bunsen cleared his throat. “Glad to meet you all. No—no—I’ve had my alcoholic calories for today. Some diet drink.” He snapped his fingers at Henry. “A diet cola, waiter. If you don’t have that, a diet anything.”

Gonzalo’s eyes widened and Drake, whispering philosophically through the curling smoke of the cigarette stub he held between his tobacco-stained fingers, said, “Oh well, he’s government.”

“Still,” muttered Gonzalo, “there’s such a thing as courtesy. You don’t snap your fingers. Henry isn’t a peon.”

“You’re rude to taxi drivers,” said Drake. “This guy’s rude to waiters.”

“That’s a different thing,” said Gonzalo vehemently, his voice rising. “That was a matter of principle. Henry, who had shown no signs of resentment at being finger-snapped, had returned with a bottle of soft drink on a tray and had presented it solemnly for inspection.

“Sure, sure,” said Bunsen, and Henry opened it and poured half its contents into an ice-filled glass and let the foam settle. Bunsen took it and Henry left the bottle.

The dinner was less comfortable than many in the past had been. The only one who seemed unsubdued over the fact that the guest was a high, if a not very well known, official of the government was Rubin. In fact, he seized the occasion to attack the government in the person of its surrogate by proclaiming loudly that diet drinks were one of the great causes of overweight in America.

“Because you drink a lot of them and the one calorie per bottle mounts up?” asked Halsted, with as much derision as he could pack into his colorless voice.

“They’ve got more than one calorie per bottle now that cyclamates have been eliminated on the basis of fallacious animal experiments,” said Rubin hotly, “but that’s not the point. Diet anything is based psychologically. Anyone overweight who takes a diet drink is overcome with virtue. He has saved two hundred calories, so he celebrates by taking another pat of butter and consuming three hundred calories. The only way to lose weight is to stay hungry. The hunger is telling you that you’re getting less calories than you’re expending—”

Halsted, who knew very well that there was a certain softness in his abdominal region, muttered, “Come on, well.”

“But he’s right, though,” said Bunsen, attacking the veal Marengo with gusto. “The diet drinks don’t do me any good, but I like the taste. And I approve of looking at matters from the psychological angle.”

Gonzalo, frowning, showed no signs of listening. When Henry bent over him to fill his coffee cup, he said, "What do you think, Henry? I mean about the taxi driver. Wasn't I right?"

Henry said, "A gratuity is not quite a handout, Mr. Gonzalo. Personal service is customarily rewarded in a small way and to equate that with welfare is perhaps not quite just."

"You're just saying that because you—" began Gonzalo, and then he stopped abruptly.

Henry said, "Yes, I benefit in the same way as the taxi driver does, but despite that I believe my statement to be correct."

Gonzalo threw himself back in his chair and chafed visibly.

"Gentlemen," said Trumbull, tapping his empty water glass with a fork, as Henry poured the liqueur.

"This is an interesting occasion. Mr. Bunsen, who is my superior at the department, has a small puzzle to present to us. Let's see what we can make of it." Again, he cast a quick glance at Henry, who had replaced the bottle on the sideboard and now stood placidly in the background.

Bunsen, wiping his mouth with his napkin and wheezing slightly, also cast an anxious glance at Henry and Trumbull leaned over to say, "Henry is one of us, Bob."

Trumbull went on, "Bob Bunsen is going to present merely the bare bones, to keep from distorting your view of the matter with unnecessary knowledge to begin with. I will remain out of it myself since I know too much about the matter."

Halsted leaned over to whisper to Drake, "I think it won't look good for Tom in the department if this doesn't work."

Drake shrugged, and mouthed rather than said, "He brought it on himself."

Bunsen, having adjusted the position of the breadbasket unnecessarily (he had earlier prevented Henry from removing it), began. "I will give you those bare bones of a story. There's a man. Call him Smith. We want him, but not just him. He's of little account. Clever at what he does, but of little account. If we get him, we learn nothing of importance and we warn off men of greater importance. If, however, we can use him to lead us to the men of greater importance—"

"We all understand," interrupted Avalon.

Bunsen cleared his throat and made a new start. "Of course, we weren't sure about Smith to begin with. It seemed very likely, but we weren't sure. If he was indeed a link in the apparatus we were trying to break up, then we reasoned that he transferred the information at a restaurant he regularly frequented. Part of the reasoning was based on psychology, something I imagine Mr. Rubin would approve. Smith had the appearance and patina of a well-bred man about town who always did the correct social thing. On that basis, we—"

He paused to think, then he said, "No, I'm getting off the subject and it's more than you need. We laid a trap for him." For a moment he reddened as though in bashfulness and then he went on firmly, "We laid the trap and it was damned complicated. We managed to beat down his caution, never mind how, and we ended with Smith having in his hand something he had to transfer. It was a legitimate item and would be useful to them, but not too useful. It would be well worth the loss to us if we had gained what we hoped to gain."

Bunsen looked about him, clearing his throat, but no one made a sound. Henry, standing by the sideboard, seemed a quiet statue. Even the napkin he held did not move.

Bunsen said, "Smith walked into the restaurant with the object on his person. After he left the restaurant he did not have the object on his person. We know therefore that he transferred the object. What we don't know is the exact moment at which he transferred it, how, and to whom. We have never been able to locate the object anywhere. Now ask your questions, gentlemen."

Trumbull said, "Let's try this one at a time. Mario?"

Gonzalo thought a moment and then shrugged. Twiddling his brandy glass between thumb and forefinger, he said, "What did this object—as you call it—look like?"

“About an inch across and flat,” said Bunsen. “It had a metallic shine so it was easy to see. It was too large to swallow easily; heavy enough to make a noise if it were dropped; too thick to place in a crack; too heavy to stick easily to anything; not iron so there could be no tricks with magnets. The object, I still call it, was carefully designed to make the task of transferring, or hiding, difficult.”

“But what did he do in the restaurant? He ate a meal, I suppose?” said Gonzalo.

“He ate a meal as he always did.”

“Was it a fancy restaurant?”

“A fairly elaborate one. He ate there regularly.”

“I mean, there's nothing phony about the restaurant?”

“Not as far as we know, although in general that is not enough to allow us to display a blind trust in him, and, believe me, we don't.”

“Who was with him at the meal?”

“No one.” Bunsen shook his head gravely. “He ate alone. That was his custom. He signed the check when he was through, as he always did. He had an account in the restaurant, you see. Then he left, took a taxi, and after a while he was stopped and taken into custody. The object was no longer in his possession.”

“Wait, now,” said Gonzalo, his eyes narrowing. “You say he signed the check. What was it he wrote? Would you know?”

“We know quite well. We have the check. He added a tip—quite the normal amount and we could find nothing wrong with that—and signed his name. That's all. Nothing more. He used the waiter's pencil and returned that pencil. Nor did he pass along anything else, and the waiter did not escape scrutiny, I assure you.”

Gonzalo said, “I pass.”

Drake, stubbing out his cigarette, lifted a gray eyebrow as Trumbull's finger gestured at him. “I suppose Smith was kept under close surveillance while he was in the restaurant.”

“As close as though he were a coat and we were the lining. We had two men in that restaurant, each at a table near him. They were trained men and capable ones and their entire task was to note every movement he made. He could not scratch himself without being noticed. He couldn't fumble at a button, crook a finger, shift a leg, or raise a buttock without being noted.”

“Did he go to the men's room at any time?”

“No, he did not. If he had, we would have managed to follow.”

“Were you there yourself, Mr. Bunsen?”

“I? No, I'm no good for that kind of surveillance. I'm too noticeable. What's needed to keep a man out of view is a shadow with a good, gray face and an overwhelming lack of distinction in form and feature. I'm too big, too broad; I stand out.”

Drake nodded. “Do you suppose Smith knew he was being watched?”

“He may have. People in his line of work don't last long if they don't assume at every moment that they might be watched. In fact, to be truthful, at one point I got a clear impression He felt he was being watched. I was across the street at a window, with a pair of binoculars. I could see him come out from the corner entrance of the restaurant.

“The doorman held the taxi door open for him and Smith paused for just a minute. He looked about him as though trying to identify those who might be watching. And he smiled, a tight smile, not amusement, it seemed to me, as much as bravado. At that moment, I was sure we had lost him. And, as it turned out, we had.”

“And you really are sure,” said Drake, “that he had it on him when he walked into the restaurant and that he didn't have it on him when he left.”

“We really are sure. When he walked in, there was what amounted to a pickpocketing, an inspection

and a replacement. He had it; you can take that as given. When he left and took a taxi, that taxi driver was ~~one of our men who came, when the doorman hailed him, in a completely natural manner.~~ Smith got in with no hint of suspicion. We are positive about that. The driver, one of our best men, then— But never mind that. The point is that Smith found himself in a kind of minor trouble that had apparently, nothing to do with us. He was arrested, taken to the police station, and searched. Later when it became obvious that we couldn't find the object anywhere, he was searched more thoroughly. Eventually we used X rays.”

Drake said, “He might have left the object in the taxi.”

“I doubt he could have done that with our man driving, and in any case, the taxi was searched. So here,” said Bunsen heavily, “there's no point in thinking we are incompetent in our business. When I say we watched, I mean that we watched with professional attention. When I say we searched, I mean we searched with professional thoroughness. You won't catch us on details.”

“All right,” said Drake, nodding, “but you missed, didn't you? The object was there and then it wasn't there, so either we call upon the supernatural or we must admit that somewhere you failed. Somewhere you blinked when you were watching or skipped when you were searching. Right?”

Bunsen looked rather as though he had bitten into a lemon. “There's no way of avoiding that conclusion, I suppose.” Then, belligerently, “But show me where.”

Drake shook his head, but Halsted intervened rapidly, his high forehead pink with excitement. “No wait, the hand is quicker than the eye. The thing you're looking for was shiny and heavy, but did it have to stay that way? Smith might have pushed it into a lump of clay. Then he had something dull and shapeless which he could push against the bottom of the table or drop on the floor. It might still be there.”

Bunsen said, “The hand is quicker than the eye when you have an audience that doesn't know what to watch for. We know all the tricks and we know what to expect. Smith couldn't have put the object into the clay without our men knowing he was doing something. He couldn't have placed it under the table or on the floor without our men knowing he was doing something.”

“Yes,” said Halsted, “but in these quicker-than-the-eye things, a diversion is usually created. Your men were looking somewhere else.”

“There was no diversion, and in any case the restaurant was searched quite thoroughly as soon as he left.”

“You couldn't have searched it thoroughly,” protested Halsted. “There were still people eating there. Did you make them all leave?”

“We searched his table, his area, and eventually all the restaurant. We are quite certain that he did not leave the object behind anywhere. He did not leave anything behind anywhere.”

Avalon had been sitting stiffly in his chair, his arms folded, his forehead creased in a portentous frown. His voice boomed out now. “Mr. Bunsen,” he said, “I am not at all comfortable with the account of yours. I recognize the fact that you have told us very little and that neither places, names, occasions, nor identifications have been given.

“Nevertheless, you are telling me more than I want to know. Have you permission from your superior to tell us this? Are you quite certain in your mind that each one of us is to be trusted? You might get into trouble as a result and that would be regrettable, but I must admit that that is not the point I am most concerned with at the moment. What is important is that I do not wish to become the object of questioning and investigation because you have seen fit to honor me with confidences I have not asked for.”

Trumbull had vainly tried to break in and managed to say finally, “Come on, Jeff. Don't act like the rear end of a horse.”

Bunsen raised a massive and pudgy hand. “That's all right, Tom. I see Mr. Avalon's point and, in

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