The MAN KILLER

Blue Ribbon Fiction

By FREDERICK IRVING ANDERSON

Being the Tale of High Gun, the Demon Horse, and the Fourth Tragedy on Murderers' Row.

There were no primroses on the river's brim for Mr. Parr, deputy of police and inveterate man hunter by 20 years of habit. He could only see red, even when he was looking at green.

"Up there," said Mr. Parr, apropos des bottes, as the French say, indicating with a jerk of a thumb the sheep-nibbled eminence of Beacon Hill, "up there women manslaughter their husbands with the utmost impunity.

He turned to scowl ferociously at his companion, Oliver Armiston, whose whole attention was occupied in holding his mettlesome roadster down to three miles an hour on high, behind a fleet of stone-deaf moving vans.

"I call it 'Murderers' Row'," rasped the man hunter in Oliver's ear, showing his teeth in a mirthless smile. Armiston bleated feebly at the rumbling obstruction ahead. He had been bleating for his right-of-way for the last 10 minutes. Several times the rearmost car had swung out, and just as Oliver gave his eager engine the gas a car would come snorting through the gap from the opposite direction, and before Oliver could pull himself out of the ditch the insolent moving van would be perched on the crown of the road again.

Mr. Parr returned his fierce look to Murderers' Row. Coy rooftrees, ornate and glinting, returned his regard over the feathery tops of exotic shrubbery. Beacon Hill was gorgeous, especially on such a June day as this. Nature and landscape architects had conspired to eradicate the last taint of poverty from this part of the island, the 'Hampton Country. Oliver continued to bleat plaintively with his horn.

"The first one," mused Parr, glowering at a red tile expanse of roof showing amid aisles of lank locusts, "the first one used arsenic."

The aggrieved Oliver, one immovable eye on the van ahead, suddenly snarled at the inextinguishable deputy.

"The first what?" he demanded.

"The first lady," said Parr suavely. "She was quite frank about it. The second—that one with the holy cologne bottles on the ridgepole—used a pearl handled pea shooter. Lord! You wouldn't have thought it would kill a flea. But it did!" He snapped his chops over this reflection. "The third one,'—he ruminated further—"where you see the green shingles—preferred a sawed-off shotgun. There was hardly enough left for the coroner."

Parr removed his cap and scratched his head reflectively.

"The fourth one," he began, and paused, surveying his companion with renewed ferocity. "I don't seem to recollect what happened the fourth one. Maybe nothing."

The man hunter subsided momentarily, adjusting the wrapper of his cigar.

"Parr," said Oliver patiently, "you've been seeing blood ever since we left the city line. You've been pointing out the landmarks of oilcloth murders and trunk mysteries and garrotings all along the road. Forget it! You're on your vacation, man! Take a nip of the air. Look at the sky. The grass. The trees. The flowers. Can't you imagine some innocence somewhere?"

"Oh, if it doesn't interest you," said Parr glumly., It was true he was on a vacation, the first in 20 years. He had consented to come, but with misgivings.

"Turn to the left!" he commanded suddenly, waking up, and Oliver obediently turned into a little side road. "Give her her head! There's a parallel road a half mile out. We can run around that mob of piano movers if we can't run through them." Now the deputy was positively jocular. Somewhat cheered, Oliver stepped on the gas and the lithe car jumped into a sprint like a quarter horse. "I know this country like a book," roared Parr in Oliver's ear as he clutched his cap. "I used to live here—off and on—when Murderers' Row—was in—eruption."

A winding road lost itself among nicely barbered trees, to emerge at an upper level, where an ornamental garden looked over the edge of the escarpment. There sat the fourth house of Murderers' Row. It was an ornate affair. Carved in stone was its name—"White Bars."

At this instant Chance, that mischievous handmaiden of Fate, doubtless summoned by the pregnant auguries of the situation, took the center of the stage. Drama was in the air. The scene was set, the actors waiting. In the first place, there was Parr, inveterate man hunter, whose fame extended from Cape Cod to Waikiki. Beside him sat Oliver Armiston, extinct writer of tall tales, whose undue fame as a fiction criminologist had for some years back held his imagination in leash. For a back drop Murderers' Row looked down expectantly through the shrubbery as though thirsting for fresh notoriety.

It was just here that Chance put her shoulder to the wheel. A moving van, abandoned by its keeper on a saucer-like incline in the road, started to roll down hill. It came to halt with a gentle bump. The bump itself was harmless enough, but the effect was like the kiss of a trigger on fulminate. A thousand devils, suddenly liberated in the interior of that van, sprang to life, swinging gigantic flails.

"The man killer! The man killer!" bellowed the head piano mover through the hideous clamor; and, as the herd ran pellmell to the van, a pair of glistening hoofs, driven by a fury incarnate, crashed through the rear doors. The hoofs were gone and come again, this time carrying the two doors off their hinges with a shower of splinters.

Parr and Armiston lined up alongside just as a demon horse, backing and kicking itself free of hobbles, crashed to the roadway on its haunches. A knot in the torn halter rope caught fast in a broken hinge and held—for the moment at least. The mad beast now seemed bent on strangling itself. Parr, noting the agony of the animal and its obvious aristocracy, tried to dodge to its head, but he quickly desisted and backed off, helpless, rubbing an car that had been fanned by those lashing sharp shod hoofs.

Just then, with a clatter of hoofs from behind, three riders wheeled through the stone arch of the gate, two men and a woman. They cannonaded up, careless of the fact that Parr and Armiston stood in their path. The woman slipped out of her saddle in the middle of a full stride with the dexterity of a trained matador. With a sharp, eager cry of "High Gun! High Gun!" in a bound she was at the animal's head; she clamped a long-fingered, jeweled hand on its muzzle. The effect was sheer magic. Instantly at that touch the murderous horse became subdued, though it continued to tremble slightly as she rubbed her cheek agains the velvet nose and fondled an ear. High Gun arched his graceful neck to her shoulder.

"Oh, you darling baby!" she cried ecstatically, stroking the sleek neck. She loosened the demon's throatlatch and took off the torn halter. She lst the halter drop and stood examining the creature for a pensive moment; then she slowly walked around the horse, running a hand over the pasterns and hocks.

She was in boots, breeches and jacket, with a starched ruff, and beneath her little hard hat her mahogany hair was drawn so tightly as to accent the natural sharpness of her features. She was of a type idigenous to the 'Hampton country, as fit and sleek as her horse. Parr stared in frank admiration.

Another caress and she turntd her back on the man killer and strode across the road, where her own mount, a spare roan, was picking grass in the ditch. Her "darling baby" followed at her shoulder, nosing her playfully. She slipped the bridle from the roan and inserted the bit, clinking, between the villainous teeth of the demon; with quick, sure movements she made the ears snug, drew tight the headstall. In a twinkling she had transferred the saddle and blanket, and, putting her beautiful neck in jeopardy, she reached under High Gun's belly for the girth. With a knee braced against the animal's ribs she drew the girth tight and made it fast. Neither of her two companions offered to assist. She was so splendidly competent that comment or aid seemed superfluous.

One of the men had dismounted and with one arm hooked over his steed's roached neck, hung idly watching her. He was a startlingly tall man, large boned; he bore a curious resemblance in facial contour to the horse beside him. If he admired the graceful shining creature, or the woman's skill in subduing it, or if he were aware that strangers were looking on at the dramatic spectacle, his equine countenance gave no hint.

The second man sat idly looking down on them with a feebly amused expression. He had the tufted brows and the sharp beak of a hawk; his lean face was decorated with an absurdly slender mustache that seemed to have been "tweezed," as some ladies these days "tweeze" their eyebrows. It was he who spoke first.

"You'll break your fool neck," he ventured absently.

The woman said, not to the languid prophet, but to the other:

"That barrel, Cecil! What?" Her long eyes glittered with pride as she caressed the horse with a look. She took out a cigaret, and as she tapped it daintily on her gold case she asked with a look of approbation—not for herself, but for her precious High Gun. Cecil nodded stonily. These two were undoubtedly high priests of the paddock, versed in a cult hidden to ordinary mortals. She thrust out a varnished boot, and Cecil, with one seven-league stride, was beside her; he gave her a leg as though she were a feather weight in the hollow of his hand.

"He'll break your fool neck," croaked the male Cassandra from his high seat, wasting another mouthful of breath.

The shining, eager beast, at the touch of her knees, made the ditch in one bound; with a flirt of the ribbons she gave the horse its head, and it sailed over the stone wall through the brown of rail birds, who threw themselves desperately to right and left with wild yells. Cecil was but a jump behind her, and with resounding hoofs the second gentleman now bestirred himself; he slapped the roan over the rump with his crop and followed it clattering through the gate and up the drive.

Armiston and Parr were back in their car, and Oliver's low spirits bobbed up like a cork as he let in the clutch and started ahead; that demon horse had at least served to eliminate road hogs from the vacation scenery. Parr now lapsed into a brown study, chewing a match-end. Some distance down the road Oliver broke the silence. He said:

"I had the queer sensation back there of being invisible. You, too, Parr. Those three never saw us—no more than if we weren't there."

"That's aristocracy, my boy," said Parr. He was wearing his fiercest frown. "You've been in society today, son," he added. "That was Jimmie Penwarden."

"Eh? Which one?"

"The one that rather hoped Mrs. Jimmie would break her neck," said Parr. "She may," added the man hunter thoughtfully, "but I doubt it."

Jimmie Penwarden was famous primarily for Mrs. Jimmie; he took blows for her when she did something astonishing, which she was forever doing. Also Jimmie was notable in his own right for his clothes. Twelve months in the year he was stalked in his haunts by intrepid photographers for illustrating society journals published for the delectation of the hoi-polloi. It seemed an idle thing—man's attire—to hang ambition on; nevertheless Jimmie was the object of envy among his kind. He followed Mrs. Jimmie about assiduously, fetched and carried for her with the utmost willingness. If there was a shade of rather bored tolerance in her attitude, she accepted him as a necessary and even valuable adjunct; Jimmie rarely got in her way.

The road Armiston traveled accompanied a busy brook down a long winding hill, emerging in the bowl of a valley where basked a ramshackle hamlet inhabited by the few adventurous natives who had stayed behind after the conquest of these hills by the idle rich.

They were half way down the village street when Parr exploded in a "Hello!" Armiston, wondering, brought the car to a gentle stop at the curb. The deputy commissioner of police leaped out and the next instant was joyfully buffeting an inoffensive rustic asleep in a chair tilted against the sunny side of what appeared to be the temple of justice. On the sleeper's suspender, shining like a beacon, sat a polished star proclaiming him to be a sheriff. It was Jeremiah Zabriskie, poohbah of these parts.

As Sheriff Zabriskie came out of a sound sleep and recognized his old friend Parr, Armiston had a swift premonition that they would never see Shelter island on this trip. It speedily developed that the three grand occasions of the career of Mr. Zabriskie—the triple eruptions of Beacon Hill—were indissolubly associated with the famous Mr. Parr. Daily during the phenomenal run of the three widows pleading unwritten law in this same court the sheriff and Mr. Parr (the latter as consulting engineer) had been photographed together for the Sunday supplements.

The first ebullition over, the sheriff admitted that he had just dispatched a boy for a bushel of shrimp to chum with—for in these milk-and-water times he had taken refuge in fishing. Mr. Parr straightway invited himself and Oliver.

Afternoon lengthened into evening. There was a good supper. The sheriff's wife, after giving motherly attention to the batch of prisoners in cells in the basement, stood at Oliver's elbow during the meal with lively reminiscences of the days when the lightning of violence had struck and struck again and yet again, on Beacon Hill, with horrible iteration. As the people who live within the shadow of a volcano date all events from its eruptions, so the dwellers in this happy valley reverted with pride in all their talk to the three cataclysmic crimes that had focused the eyes of the world on them.

When she raked off the crumbs of the repast she presented Oliver, as a special favor, the entombed records of those grisly occasions, the proces verbal of crimes that had been read by the whole country with its morning coffee. The details stared at him in glaring headlines in the pall of cold type. Thumbing those pages,, and picking up a thread here and there, Oliver got the reek of it—the fluttering murmur of the veiled woman in the box; the buzz of flies; the drone of clerks; the barking challenge of contending lawyers; the rustle and uneasy shifting of the craning audience, and the indrawn breath at the inevitable verdict that justified cold slaughter by delicate women. This was the personnel of Murderers' Row, in which Parr took such a proprietary interest! They lived "kind of to themselves," the sheriff's wife said. Oh, yes, they still lived up there on the hill.

Oliver could picture the gradual and qualified withdrawal of the countryside as the glamor of the sensation waned and the moment's tragedy queen lapsed into the small-beer heroine. Every crime has its aura; the verdict of the court is not the last word. Even through his disgust, Oliver was conscious of the curious thread of paganism in these related histories.

He read himself tired, saturated himself with the realism of stark words. Finally he put himself to bed in the sepulchral silence of the village night.

He was trying to blind his eyes to the glare of the early sun, when he became aware that Deputy Parr, with shining morning face, was standing over him trying to impress some weird fact on his half-awakened senses.

"They moved in the fourth husband last night'," repeated Armiston automatically; then he sat bolt upright, staring.

"Hurry," commanded Parr, starting out. "We'll wait for you down below."

It was the fastidious Jimmie whose fool neck had been broken, not Mrs. Jimmie's, as he himself had so blithely prophesied on the occasion of High Gun's dress rehearsal, the day before. No doubt had it been turn about Jimmie would have felt constrained to appear (outwardly, at least) quite as bitterly resentful against her as she now felt against him. One doesn't get one's self brained by a pet horse without involving one's next of kin in a bad half hour with the police.

Nothing had been disturbed. There is a grewsome etiquette about such things, prompted doubtless by some common horrid understanding that the law, like a microscopist, demands its specimens frozen in an attitude, so that if necessary they may be sliced micrometer thin and examined by transmitted light. To the three experienced men who stood silently peering in over the half door of High Gun's box stall it seemed that a tyro could easily fit together the pieces of the swift catastrophe. Mrs. Jimmie and their guest, summoned by the departing shrieks of the victim, had arrived too late. The gaunt Cecil, however, had had the forethought, in that moment of finality, to thrust a 14-foot gate pole between the gratings to crowd High Gun into the far corner.

Poor Jimmie lay there on the clean straw, one hand extended as if reaching for the overturned measure of oats, High Gun's breakfast. The beautiful horse, silky as a kitten and quite as tame, turned its lustrous eyes on them as they spoke in lowered tones, whickering now and again with wistful friendliness. The perfect cast of a steel-shod hoof at the base of the skull told the whole tale with ghastly terseness.

"Go about it! Get it over with!" said Mrs. Jimmie, as she tapped her gold case with a cigaret she had been about to light for the last hour. She had told her story in curt sentences. The whole thing had been over in a moment. Jimmie had always been afraid of the horse. But sheer bravado had sent him out. There were no servants, it seemed, in the house, the kitchen, or the paddock. There had been a walkout, in town, a few days before, when it transpired below stairs that the household would summer again in the 'Hamptons instead of at the North Shore for a change. A fresh batch had been consigned the day before, but something had diverted the shipment. There was nothing more—the facts were before them.

She hung the cigaret in her dry lips and surveyed the sheriff, shaved and starched for the occasion, through those glittering long eyes that looked as if they had never known a tear.

"I'm not a sentimental woman," she said, without moving her lips. She added—"But it is bound to shake one."

She took to tapping the cigaret again, as if she found some relief from her acid reflections in this simple act. She was clothed as on the day before—in fact, this woman lived in breeches. One pigskin leg was balanced over the other as she sat hunched in an old arm chair in the disordered billiard room. Boxes and crates and bundles of burlap stood or lay about. At the end of the room the blinds of a French window had been withdrawn, letting in the morning sun through bleared panes; and beside this window stood the rawboned Cecil, not looking up when Zabriskie entered. Cecil concerned himself with a sliver imbedded in the fat of a thumb. There were the remains of a breakfast on the dusty cover of a billiard table—three glasses, a carafe and fragments of hardtack, indicating the conventional meagerness of early morning fare in sporting high life.

Zabriskie, who was not overkeen, had the vague and fugitive impression that this wife and friend of the dead man had occupied the same impassive attitudes for the last hour—since, in fact, the telephone messages (one to himself, the other to Struthers, her lawyer in town) had been sent off shortly after daybreak. It was as though the shock of the tragedy had cut the wires of communication between them. Zabriskie sensed an antipathy, a curious withdrawal each from each. They had nothing to say to each other; nevertheless for the time being they were tied hard and fast together by this act of inconceivable stupidity on the part of poor Jimmie.

"Well! Is there anything more?" demanded Mrs. Jimmie, as if the mere presence of this man of the law strained her endurance to the breaking point.

Zabriskie, rather ill at ease, ventured the suggestion that possibly the lady who had told all she knew of the case—bravely, too—might possibly want to rest; the gentleman—and the sheriff cast a look at Cecil, who remained stonily inert, could attend to other formalities. Zabriskie seemed to ask her indulgence for the callous judicial curiosity of the law even on an occasion such as this; he wished to spare her the cruelty of any further inquisition. A wintry smile flitted across her face, as eyes downcast, she permitted the loutish official to stumble through what he so evidently meant as an act of delicacy. If the gentleman would accompany him, said Zabriskie, eyeing the wooden image at the window—

Mrs. Jimmie brought him up with a sharp "No!" Cecil had been let in for quite enough as it was. Instantly softening her tone she went on:

"You must pardon the feelings of a wife, sir. But it is I—I alone—who must answer all questions—see this through to the end. No one can speak for me—" After a little pause—"about Jimmie."

At this moment the roar of a motor announced the arrival of the forehanded Struthers, to be instantly hushed, as he lifted his racing car up to the terrace, with the echoing cries of frightened birds. The sheriff, hurrying out to join him, found Struthers drawing off his gloves and peering through the door of the box stall.

"Well, Jimmie," the lawyer was saying under his breath, apostrophizing the figure on the straw, "at last you succeeded in doing something original. Eh, Jimmie?"

He turned and discovered Parr standing there in the darkness of the box.

"Parr!" he said, queerly. He questioned the deputy with uneasy eyes. "There's nothing here for you?"

"I was passing," said Parr.

"And you, Oliver?"

Armiston looked up with a curt nod from a keg where he sat nursing one knee. He knew Struthers as a shrewd fashionable lawyer who danced with the younger set and exercised their inheritances for them. Apparently Mrs. Jimmie, who was not a sentimental woman, had given him a coherent account by telephone in those first moments of her bereavement. Struthers cogitated for some seconds, eyeing Parr, who waited.

"It's bad business, Parr."

Parr sniffed. "He never knew what hit him," he said slowly.

"Oh, not that!" said the lawyer hastily, hardly giving Jimmie the grace of a look now. "It's Mallet."

"Mallet!" said Parr, curiously.

The lawyer nodded.

"The honorable Cecil," he explained, with a jerk of his head over a shoulder. "He's a—" He paused abruptly and stared at Zabriskie suspiciously.

"Sheriff Zabriskie," said Parr. "He's in authority."

"Cecil is official, you know, and incognito," muttered the worried lawyer. He lowered his voice. "British intelligence service—won't do at all! We must keep him severely out of it! There'll be a riot in the papers, of course. Jimmie and Mrs. Jimmie!"—he jerked his head at the big house rising out of the morning mists—" and this empty house—and the three of them, alone."

Parr added softly, for extra weight:

"And up here, too."

"Eh. What do you mean?"

"Murderers' Row," said the deputy with a grim smile.

"Good God! I'd clean forgotten! I say, this is rotten!" Struthers turned and stared hypnotized at the three prim roof trees presiding over finely landscaped gardens just beyond. Three legally-justified uxoricides would shortly be opening their morning shutters and looking out sympathetically—it was already 8 o'clock.

A long silence intervened. Parr seemed to enjoy it. Zabriskie chewed meditatively at a straw as his eyes wandered about the circumscribed stage of the tragedy. Oliver's fingers began to itch—had he only had his typewriter to play with, he might think.

"Oh, I say, Parr! You're not going to let the yellows drag that in!" cried the lawyer, aghast as he suddenly conceived the length of the shadow those three other women had cast over this hill. His eyes were drawn to the patient dead man. "Poor devil!" he muttered. "He never had a cent. She had it all. His cousins, the Van Duersins, staked him occasionally, so he wasn't exactly a pauper. How do you happen to be here, anyway, Parr? You're rather out of your jurisdiction, aren't you?"

"No, this is an old stamping ground for me up here," drawled Parr. "I'm getting to be a sort of guest conductor." He took Struthers by the arm, and they started in pace across the blue stone drive to the house. "The sheriff and I were cleaning fish this morning, when the message came. I'm on a vacation," he added, with a queer smile. "Curious thing," he volunteered as they walked along, "but Oliver and I were driving by when that horse staged a dress rehearsal on the public road yesterday."

While they paused to talk in the drive, Armiston was prowling about the stall. The properties were so preciously few that he moved round and round. That gate bar held his attention. It was a massive thing, painted a glistening white, decorated with brass ferrules. It must have taken a giant to handle it singly from the outside—a giant laboring under superhuman excitement. He stooped to examine it. Its smooth surface was nicked with many a glancing caulk of timber toppers, mementos of high days and holidays up here on this beautiful hill. It had been driven, wedged into place, and stood as rigid as a riveter beam. Armiston, as he examined the outside end, noted from the battered butts that it had been pounded home. Evidently Cecil had taken no chances that those villainous heels would reach Jimmie again. A wooden maul lay there where Cecil had dropped it.

"I'd like to see that hoof," said Oliver, look-dubiously at the friendly High Gun.

"So would I," agreed Zabriskie. They approached the bar, High Gun nosing them and whickering again for his delayed breakfast. Zabriskie had been a blacksmith's apprentice in the days when horses were in flower among the commonalty down here. He ran a practiced hand along the clean back, down the flank to the pastern; with the touch of a mechanic who knew his trade, he picked up the foot and settled it heavily between his two knees, High Gun accepting the familiar move with quiet confidence.

It was the left hoof; the steel plate still bore its grisly signature.

"See if you can find a pair of tongs," said the sheriff. "That plate has got to come off, anyway."

In the tool house close by Oliver found the tongs and fetched them. Zabriskie tapped the shoe with the tool, from the habit of a mechanic.

"It's loose, anyhow," he mumbled. "He'd a' cast this plate in a few more jumps."

With a twist of the wrist he drew off the shoe and let High Gun down on all fours again. They examined the hideous memento. Parr was calling Armiston, and Oliver, answering the summons, found them in the billiard room, the now pompous Struthers going through the form of introductions.

"The Honorable Cecil Mallet, gentlemen," repeated Struthers, unctuously.

The Honorable Cecil looked up momentarily to acknowledge the introduction. He was still giving surgical attention to his sliver.

"I am afraid your precious High Gun will have to pay the penalty this time, madam," said Parr.

"This time?" asked Mrs. Jimmie, narrowing her eyes.

"He has a record, I believe," replied the deputy, watching her quietly. Their looks met, like foils touching in the first salute.

"He brained a stable boy, a year or two back—over in Jersey?" continued Parr.

She hesitated for an instant, then nodded.

"And was condemned to be shot, after that. Wasn't he?"

Again the woman bent her head.

"You smuggled the horse out of the state, ma'am." Parr was alarmingly direct; the woman stiffened.

"High Gun," she said, to her cigaret, "is a lineal descendant of Adalbahram—the only one in this country. Because an idiot of a boy got in the way of his heels, must I destroy the blood?" She raised her eyes to challenge Parr squarely.

During this interchange Oliver had wandered on into the French window, intent on a sliver of his own; he too had handled that gate bar. He was operating with a small pair of tweezers.

"Did he fight?" he asked absently, picking at his finger.

The tall Englishman's mouth dropped open.

"High Gun, I mean—when you shoved in that pole?"

"Oh! No!" the Honorable Cecil heaved a sigh.

"There!" said Oliver triumphantly. "I've got mine. Let me get yours for you." He took Cecil's hand in his own without further ado, and with a single deft movement of his tweezers drew out the annoying sliver. "It's a young crow bar!" he said, holding it up. "You ought to get an antiseptic in that hole right away. I've got some in my car," offered the gracious Armiston, and he hurried off to fetch it.

Here in the billiard room the drama had practically reached an impasse. Parr was the obstacle. Cecil remained tongue-tied at his post. Mrs. Jimmie chafing at the restraint made no attempt to conceal her resentment at the deputy commissioner's intrusion. Struthers, entirely alive to the effect of Parr's presence, strove to pour oil on the troubled waters. Parr himself sat back ponderously, letting the lawyer do all the talking, while his keen eyes missed no detail.

Behind his urbane front, as he lent ear, the old man hunter was in the throes of an unprecedented mental conflict. Within the last few moments, with no tangible circumstance to hang it on, the conviction had gradually grown in Parr's mind that he sat in the presence of murder. So irresistible was the impression that it seemed to his startled sense as if someone had shouted it aloud. In the next moment he was dismissing the idea as an arraignment of cold logic—he, a police expert, judging before the facts! He looked about him, as if expecting to find some confirmation. Their attitudes and manner were unchanged. Mrs. Jimmie was petulantly tapping her eternal cigaret; Cecil had not moved a hair.

It was all too pat, the deputy told himself. An animal act—and it must be an animal act, if anything—never goes off exactly as it is scheduled, even on the stage. This one had run on oiled wheels. Glancing from one to the other, Parr assured himself again it must be an accident. It could be nothing not moved by a hair.

But the doubt persistently returned; it was like an obsession. Why? How? Struthers' monologue gradually penetrated his thoughts. Meeting with no opposition, the lawyer was arranging it all. They would run the Honorable Cecil down to the Shore, and a fast motor cruiser would take him to town in a jiffy.

Of course, the woman was the intelligence; that wordless ninny by the window would be merely the tool—Parr as again coming back to his fixed idea. But how, how—and why? This was a problem for the hectic faculties of Oliver Armiston, which Parr for lack of a better understanding was wont to ascribe to clairvoyance. Oliver, in collusion with the familiar that dwelt in the keys of his trusty typewriter, had developed an uncanny introspection. Set a stage with its characters, load the scene with atmosphere and the action flowed from his finger ends. That was the fiction writer's metier. Parr had made use of him a score of times, solving the "frozen" plots that had baffled his shrewdest operatives. Parr did not attempt to understand his methods, but Oliver's results had made criminal history. Oliver's explanation was cryptic—instinct can be reduced to a chart; impulse follows a groove. But where was Oliver? What was keeping him?

"Mr. Commissioner," broke in Struthers in oily tones, "we are exceedingly fortunate to have you with us. We need authority, and understanding—and appreciation of how international relations might be seriously embarrassed by a wrong step."

"Who was the other gentleman? I didn't catch his name," said Mrs. Jimmie to fill the pause.

"He is a celebrated criminologist," said Parr, yawning. He was certain he caught the flash of an eye between those two.

Just then the door opened, and Oliver came in. In one hand he carried a huge wooden maul, and in the other a horseshoe—the horseshoe—with four bent nails protruding. Without a word to anyone, without even a glance about, he set the maul down in the middle of the room. Gingerly he placed the horseshoe on the billiard table; still ignoring his startled audience, Armiston absently explored a vest pocket and produced a piece of tissue paper from which he extracted the sliver he had so kindly withdrawn from poor Cecil's suffering thumb; this he deposited beside the horseshoe. Then he selected a seat on one of the crated boxes, and languidly prepared a cigaret. (Balzac somewhere spoke of a painter who could introduce an ordinary broomstick into a scene in such a manner as to freeze the beholder with horror.) The wooden maul, teetering gently on its rounded edge out there in the middle of this disordered room, was the focus of glazed stares.

Struthers, who had sprung to his feet, halted in midsentence, mouth open. The woman now finally applied a match to her cigaret, and threw back her head to blow the first puff into the air. As she did so, her gleaming eyes under half closed lashes sought the gaunt Cecil at the French window. Parr, taking his cue from Oliver, held himself in easy attitude, ready for instant action.

The tension was broken by a stifled cry from the window. With one movement the giant Cecil, his horselike face livid, thrust open the glass leaves and plunged out in headlong flight. Armiston raised a quick hand to check Parr. All turned. There was a moment's silence, followed by a slow, heavy tread on the portico without. It was Cecil returning. He was half crouching, his hands above his head; he backed through the window into the room, his eyes staring with birdlike fascination down the shiny muzzle of a revolver held level by Zabriskie, who advanced deliberately step by step. With one hand Zabriskie, still holding the ashen Cecil with his hawk eye, produced clinking handcuffs from a pocket; still threatening with his weapon, he snapped first one, then the other, into place. The manacled man, covering his face with his hands and sobbing convulsively, fell in a heap on the floor. Zabriskie nodded to Oliver.

"There you be, gol durn you! I didn't believe you. I swear I took you for another nut." The sheriff, with a contemptuous sneer, prodded the groveling figure on the floor. "You ain't much of a horseshoer, be you?"

The woman studied the slender thread of smoke rising from her cigaret; her eyes traveled moodily from one to another, till, with shrinking disgust, they finally reached the blubbering giant by the window. Struthers was demanding incoherently "What—Who—Why—This is——"

(Turn to Page Six)

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