

The Murder

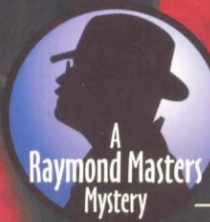
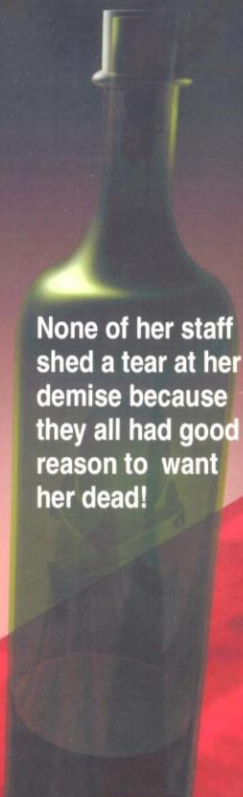


**No One
Committed**

**Garrison
Flint**

Another Family Friendly Book
from the Family of Man Press

None of her staff
shed a tear at her
demise because
they all had good
reason to want
her dead!



The Murder No One Committed

**A Raymond Masters Mystery Novel
BOOK FIVE**

by
Garrison Flint

The Family of Man Press

Revised and © 2013

**[READER: This story takes place in 1993, during the era
when computers were in their infancy and cell phones did
not yet exist.]**

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Day One: The players

The bright sky and gentle warmth from the mid-afternoon sun in no way foretold the dreadful saga soon to be played out at Forest Way - well, some, at least would say dreadful, but in all honesty, most would probably use a far less emotional term when thinking back on it. In exactly twenty-four hours and thirty-six minutes, a precisely planned and expertly executed murder would be perpetrated there at Forest Way - the massive Victorian home and office of Estelle Forester - self-proclaimed Grand Dame of historical novelists.

A quick, arm's length, check of his large, round, well-worn pocket watch, told Raymond Masters it was exactly four o'clock as he arrived at the front door of Mrs. Forester's mansion. Given that it was such an extraordinarily beautiful day, he had truly enjoyed walking the six blocks from the homey little hotel where he had spent the previous night. Arriving in town well ahead of time in order to become familiar with the surroundings and people was a long-practiced part of Masters' approach to a new assignment.

Detective Masters' quiet, unassuming presence, belied the genius within. His six three frame, 48-inch waist, white hair and over-sized mustache, presented an immediately imposing figure. During four decades, he had been the most respected and successful police detective on the East Coast. Retired a dozen years, he consulted, at his pleasure, with law enforcement agencies throughout the World. It was said he commanded the fee of a Hollywood star.

Masters was shown inside by the maid and, then,

abandoned, temporarily, in the sprawling living room, where he reluctantly confronted its garish Victorian decor. Mrs. Forester had engaged him to consult on certain, still somewhat obscure, aspects of her current book-in-progress - a series of vignettes, featuring the never solved murders of unusually fascinating ancient historical figures. They were fascinating to Estelle Forester, at least, and with Estelle, that was totally sufficient.

Intrigued by the unique demands of such an assignment, Masters consented to make himself available for several days in order to explore what contribution he might be able to offer the project. He sat patiently, though more than a little uncomfortably, on a hundred-year-old settee, which, he determined, even as it was being crafted had certainly never been intended to be more than a work of art to be appreciated from afar. As had become his trademark, Masters unconsciously brushed his ever-wayward mustache, using all four fingertips of his right hand, as if confident that would settle each obstreperous whisker into its proper pew. It never did and he knew that, but Raymond Masters admired the proper mustache as a work of art, and remained determined to sport one himself - even if unsuccessfully!

Masters assumed that the appearance of the room and its furnishings had not varied so much as a vase or ottoman since the 1920s. It was spotless and tidy and, most assuredly, seldom used, save, perhaps to receive an occasional guest such as himself. The ancient, deeply embossed, dark red, felt paper on the walls, cast a rusty glow that mingled most unfavorably with the natural shades of the white metal ceiling and the brown stones of the massive, never used - though carefully laid - fireplace.

'Such a thoroughly uninviting, purposefully intimidating place in which to greet one's guests,' Masters thought - a fact that measured well against what he had already learned about Mrs. Forester!

Presently, Mildred, the jaunty little day-maid who, earlier, had let him in, returned. She was an ever smiling, seemingly goodhearted, middle aged woman, properly aproned and capped for her menial station in life, and possessed of a rotund figure not unlike Masters' own. There

was a haphazard flamboyance about her that made Masters at once amused and yet cautious for his own wellbeing while in her presence.

"Mrs. Forester would have you please join her and her staff for tea," Mildred announced in a hushed and overly confidential tone. Later, Masters would come to understand that was just a part of her pixie-like demeanor.

"They always break for tea at exactly four o'clock, Sir," she explained, even though no explanation was required. Her tendency, and willingness, to relate far more than was necessary, would become a most helpful attribute that Masters would exploit to full advantage in the days just ahead.

"It's said," she continued, flicking her shoulders in impish delight, "that Mrs. Forester has been known to stop dictation in mid-sentence when the clock strikes tea hour."

Mildred shook her head and giggled girlishly from behind her hand as she turned and rustled on ahead, leading the way. Fascinated by her capricious manner, he followed at what he judged to be a safe, though friendly, distance. Tea was not on Masters list of top-ten favorite beverages, but he assumed he could survive it on this one occasion.

They left the living room and crossed a wide, overly appointed hall, then proceeded through a cluttered work area occupying a magnificent great room, with a white beamed, vaulted ceiling, and hand carved columns, standing, as if on guard, along all four walls. It was a most unexpected sight in an otherwise properly Victorian edifice. It possessed a maze of computer and word processing stations, files cabinets, desks, bookcases and tables.

Through the far door, they came upon the staff, gathered at one end of an altogether bright and pleasant glassed-in porch, which extended the length of the house. Estelle Forester sat alone, stoically stationed at the head of a long, glass-topped summer table, while the other three had scattered themselves in an unordered fashion here and there nearby.

There was no conversation to interrupt as the maid announced, "Mr. Masters, Ma'am."

Once said, Mildred turned on her heel and, giving Masters a private wink, - the purpose of which was not at all

obvious - scurried on her way.

"Mrs. Forester," Masters acknowledged, as he bowed ever so slightly, maintaining eye contact throughout.

"Welcome to our merry little band," she said, with a grand, inclusive sweep of her arm. She had emphasized the word 'merry', suggesting intentionally unveiled sarcasm. What a pleasant beginning, Masters thought.

The only other man present - at most, only half Masters' age - rose to his feet, extended his hand, and introduced himself as Ed Planter.

"Everybody calls me Eddy," he added, with a broad, appealing smile.

"Not everyone, Edward," Estelle was quick to point out and illustrate. Her legendary derisive manner would be made abundantly apparent from the outset.

Ignoring Estelle's remark as if from habit, Eddy then introduced Mary Dwyer - young, attractive, and shy to an extreme, at least upon first meeting.

"And this is Katy O'Day," he said, gesturing to a middle aged and very tired looking lady, who, even so, managed a faint smile. She was more to Masters' immediate liking than the younger Ms. Dwyer.

"How do you do," Masters said, greeting each in turn with his eyes. "It is my pleasure to meet you."

Masters took a seat near Mrs. Forester just as tea arrived under the watchful care of Florence, the dinner cook and evening maid - an emotionless, statuesque woman with sharp features, a small mouth and closely cropped dark hair. She promptly discerned Masters' hesitation about the tea.

"Would you prefer coffee, Sir?" she asked, aside.

"Well, yes, thank you, if it's not a bother."

"No bother, Sir. I'll just be a minute."

And that she was. A minute later she reappeared with a small carafe and cup.

"Thank you so much," Masters said.

She acknowledged his appreciation with a slight nod and what was as close to a smile as Masters would eventually come to expect.

"Cream and sugar," she said, not so much asking as assuming - perhaps due to Masters' portly dimensions.

"Yes, please!"

Both Masters and Florence had observed, though chose to ignore, the look of disapproval emanating from Estelle. The eyes of Eddy and Mary, while averted downward, danced with amusement. The whole exchange appeared to escape Katy. Obviously, at Forest Way, tea time was expressly set aside for tea drinking and only tea drinking! Masters, of course, had not known that though even if he had, it is doubtful that would have changed his behavior in any way. The first of several meetings of wills between Forester and Masters had passed. In one stroke, Masters had endeared himself to the staff!

Small talk set in and for the next thirty minutes. Masters listened, more than participated. Unbeknownst to him at the moment, everyone he had met thus far - save for the victim - would, by that time the following day, be suspects in one of Master's most intriguing and baffling murder cases.

As was his bent, Masters sat back and began surveying the company of players who were sitting and sipping and chatting there before him. As was also his bent, he had done his homework well - feeling that an accurate and intimate knowledge of one's soon-to-be-associates always enhanced the eventual working relationship.

He sat nodding and smiling as they talked, but mentally he was reviewing and up-dating his information.

Estelle Forester was an imposing figure of womanhood. She strode through life erect and strong, dressed older and more conservatively than her sixty years would prescribe. Her remarkably pleasant features were made less so by her hair, tightly swept up her neck and temples into a stately bun, firmly affixed atop her somewhat oversized, angular head. The bun appeared ever so much like a self-bestowed crown which she wore in stately splendor as if to remind others of her own importance and there insignificance. Not having had Estelle's permission, her dark brown hair had, of course, not dared thin or begin fading to gray.

Estelle spoke with authority on most topics, partly because she only tolerated conversations that were of interest to her, and partly because she was, indeed, an intelligent, well-read, educated lady with wide interests.

She had spent her adult life systematically building an irrefutable reputation as the Country's outstanding historical novelist. With her bevy of talented assistants - never call them associates in Estelle's presence - she churned out a new, precisely researched, carefully designed and beautifully written volume every other year - nineteen to date, soon to be twenty!

Those close to Estelle would readily confirm two facts: She was, first of all, an immensely talented writer - no argument, ever, about that. Second, she was a thoroughly despicable, self-serving human being - no argument about that, either.

She had lived her entire life in that huge family mansion on the north edge of Oak Hills. It was a small, middle class town, proud of its two only really significant features - a picturesque little liberal arts college, and Forester Publications, the town's major employer, which had been started by Estelle's grandfather and long since leased to a major publishing syndicate.

Money was, and always had been, abundant in Estelle's life. There was her own family money, the large sums her books commanded, the lease payments for Forester Publications, and a sizable inheritance from her late husband - Malcolm Blackmore - deceased, going on seven years. (Understand that well before it was fashionable, Estelle Forester would have never considered changing her name merely because she married.)

Malcolm Blackmore's son, Jack, had accompanied his father to Forest Way at the time of the marriage, sixteen years before. Jack's mother had died some years earlier, and, although he and his father had nothing in common and seldom spoke together in anything less than a tirade, where else was an impudent, spoiled, twelve-year-old lad to go?

So, Jack remained at Forest Way in his third floor, three-room hide away, speaking only occasionally to the woman of the house, as he prefers to call Estelle, delighting in the displeasure that brought her.

Malcolm Blackmore had been hired by the leasing syndicate, to run Forester Publications. For several years, he managed that company and several others from his Chicago

office. It was during his frequent business trips to Oak Hills that his relationship with Estelle developed. One couldn't say the relationship blossomed or grew - it just developed.

Soon after his wife died, he was demoted by his company for some undisclosed reason and was sent to be the local manager of the Oak Hills plant. It was at that time that Estelle and Malcolm - never Malcolm and Estelle - were married. No one understood the marriage. Perhaps it was just one of the few things in life Estelle had not yet experienced, so, she selected Malcolm - a weak little non-demanding stump of a man - to receive the honor. He soon came to occupy his own room and learned to just keep out of her way.

Ever so briefly it appeared to Estelle that she might enjoy the role of mother but gave it up as an inconvenient and trying experience long before the first year had passed. Estelle and Jack passed their lives as acquaintances - not as friends - not as enemies - not even as two people remotely interested in one another. If they reacted at all as they encountered each other in the house, it was as if merely to be reminded again of the other's existence.

Jack was well provided for from a substantial trust fund left to him by his natural mother - another person with whom he had not gotten on well. The trust was more than Jack would ever use, given his preference for a simple life style and modest needs. At twenty-eight Jack remained a well-built specimen - muscular, slender and more than a little good looking, that latter fact not escaping his own attention for so much as a moment! His looks and six-foot frame must have settled into his genes from the mother's side of the family - Malcolm having been rather short, dumpy and unattractive.

Jack's soft, boyish features were capped by perpetually poorly tended blond hair - wavy when allowed to grow long, as was usually the case. His skin sported a modest tan all over - he regularly sunbathed in the nude at the cottage, which was secluded on the hill above Forest Way. From time to time he lifted weights but only when it pleased him. That was how Jack lived his life - doing only that which pleased him! With a bandana across his forehead and a dangling earring, he appeared ever so much like an escapee from a 1960's hippie

commune.

His only truly serious endeavors to that point in his life seemed to have been his total recovery from drug addiction several years earlier and his newly found interest in sports reporting. In fact, he pursued the later with a dedication and determination that must have even occasionally baffled and surprised Jack, himself!

His only lasting relationship - it was not certain whether it could also be characterized as meaningful - had been with Mary Dwyer. They had been high school sweethearts - on and off, according to Jack's convenience - and since then remained something more intimate than just friends.

Mary Dwyer, a journalism graduate and very promising writer, had won several awards for her short stories prior to beginning work as Estelle's finish writer. Her responsibility was to organize the books and clean up the final manuscripts - dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's, so to speak, while keeping voice and tense and such things all in perfect order. Much of Estelle's recent success had undoubtedly been due to Mary's outstanding, though unheralded, talent.

Mary loved Jack totally and completely, despite his erratic and noncommittal ways. She was the only one who had stood by him during his struggle with drugs three years before. Although he seemed to recognize that without Mary's devotion and compassion he would not have recovered, it is doubtful that he ever confided that to her.

All things considered, Mary was, in Masters' eyes, the most pitiful of the lot - bright, attractive, talented, yet possessed of no self-esteem whatsoever. For most of her twenty-eight years, she had rushed to do everyone's bidding, pre-purchasing love and attention by over-doing her typically uncalled for kindnesses to others. One can imagine that she was always there for Jack whenever he desired her company or required her support or counsel. He seemed to be her only friend in the World.

Mary lived alone in a small apartment above a store down town. Most nights she busied herself writing short stories - romances and murder mysteries. Although even Mary must have known they were superior stories she never submitted them for publication. Her pile of manuscripts had

grown high!

While at work for Estelle, Mary was efficiency personified. She took Estelle's incessant criticism with a stoic half-smile and offered re-write upon re-write until one would finally meet with Estelle's acceptance - never approval, understand! In her quiet way, Mary got on well with her two co-workers, Ed Planter and Katy O'Day.

Katy - Katherine Margaret O'Day, her family Bible read - was fifty-two years old, though in spirit and appearance seemed considerably older. A quiet, sullen, sad appearing lady, she somehow managed to be a most effective private secretary to Estelle.

Prior to being engaged by Estelle - thirteen years before - Katy had been happily teaching in the business department out at the college. It was rumored that at the time she changed positions she had just been offered the department chairmanship. It remained a mystery why she chose the dreary, futureless job with Estelle, instead.

Despite her overriding depressive mood, Katy managed to do considerable volunteer work at The Oak Hills Children's Home - the name recently changed from the County Orphanage, largely due to Katy's efforts. She was also an easy touch for the extra civic responsibilities frequently thrust upon her by Chief of Police Keppy. After Chief Keppy's wife died, no one would have been surprised if the two of them had become romantically involved. It was apparently not to be, however.

'I guess even close knit little communities like Oak Hills sometimes read such signs wrong,' Masters mused to himself.

An intriguing enigma, Katy - an ever active, ever helpful, yet ever depressed personality. She resided alone in the modest, well-kept family home on Pine Street.

If Oak Hills could boast one real-life success story, it was that of Edward Planter. As an infant, Edward was literally left in a basket on the Orphanage doorstep. He was raised, surprisingly well, by its ever changing, septuagenarian staff. Grown into a likeable, bright, thirty-year old, with a Master's degree in history, Edward worked as Estelle's research assistant. He was, understandably, a devoted family man and loving husband. He and his wife had two sons, ages three

and five.

The single blemish on Edward's record was that, on one totally uncharacteristic occasion, he apparently lost control of himself and, in an unexplained rage, severely beat his oldest son, then four. Gossip had it that he had a nervous breakdown, clearly due in the minds of the townsfolk to his working for Estelle, who they less than fondly referred to as the Wicked Witch of the North. Further gossip implied that as a result of that incident, he had been undergoing counseling with a psychiatrist in Bloomington, a larger City twenty miles to the West. Masters soon learned that in Oak Hills, gossip is often just that.

Masters' thoughts had roamed too far ahead, and he needed to back-track a bit.

As a boy at the orphanage, Edward had been befriended by Estelle's late husband, Malcolm. While unable to relate to his own son, Jack, Malcolm seemed to get on famously with Eddy. From the time Eddy was fourteen until Malcolm's death, they spent three evenings a week together, usually up at the cabin, out of Estelle's way and away from Jack's jealous eyes.

Malcolm supported Eddy, financially, throughout high school and then put him through his college and University studies. In dramatic contrast to its opinion of Estelle, the town remembered Malcolm as something of a hero for all of that. In reality it was, perhaps, the one decent thing Malcolm Blackmore may have ever done. Masters had to wonder why?

Edward was twenty-four when Malcolm died. He was married the following year to a truly lovely girl he had known since high school. They had a house across town from Forest Way and seemed to once again be a very happy family. Why Edward didn't move on to the bigger and better things of which he was surely capable, remained obscure.

Masters was brought back from his reverie when he realized the others were beginning to move about and return to work.

"I'll have Florence show you to your room and you can get settled in," Estelle announced to Masters.

"Nap if you like. Dinner is at seven - coat and tie. We'll talk novel after that."

As he excused himself and followed Florence, Masters smiled inside, not feeling it was appropriate at that moment to openly exhibit his amusement at Estelle's various pronouncements.

'One thing is certain,' he thought, 'Estelle leaves no doubt about whom she believes is in charge at Forest Way!'

Since Masters was neither inclined to play nor practiced at acting the lackey, interesting times surely lay ahead! He stroked his mustache again, but that time as an attempt to conceal his blossoming grin.

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Day Two: The Murder

Morning found Masters working at the massive, roll top pine desk in one corner of his oddly furnished room. Mildred had explained that it had been Malcolm's room and was essentially as it had been at the time of his death. She further confided that to her way of thinking Mr. Blackmore had no sense of decorating taste, whatsoever. Masters agreed, but decided that what Malcolm had lacked in taste he certainly made up in his penchant for oversized-furniture.

The huge four-poster bed could have been taken directly from the bordello scene in a western movie. The two bedside tables would not have been out of place at the Ponderosa. The three large chests of drawers were each made from wood every bit as mysterious as the style or period they may have represented. The green overstuffed chair beside the heavily draped window was right out of a 1940's living room. Once engulfed by it, on the previous evening, Masters experienced great difficulty extricating himself from its grasp.

So, that morning he chose to work at the desk from a straight backed, frequently repainted, wooden dining room chair, which appeared to be yearning to escape the room and search for the five matching companions from which it had long been separated.

Unexpectedly, it all came together as a most comfortable corner in which to work. Masters was formulating meticulous notes related to the discussion he and Estelle had had the previous evening. It was, indeed, to be an intriguing, even exciting, undertaking - solving murders that had been

committed centuries before.

Estelle had been aware of Masters' reputation for relying, not so much on clues gleaned from direct suspect interrogation, as on the suspect's personal histories and tendencies, and from the accrual and ordering of associated bits and pieces of seemingly unrelated information. That patented, unorthodox approach to solving murders had gained him a reputation sufficient to stand alongside the greatest detective minds of the century. Considering that, nothing would do but that she engage him in her project. Estelle never traveled second class.

Masters was just finishing a list of topics he wanted Eddy to begin researching, when he was interrupted by Mildred's light, rapid-fire rapping at the door.

"Breakfast in ten minutes, Mr. Masters."

It had been a message delivered with the gusto and excitement usually reserved for a juicy tidbit of neighborhood gossip.

Masters thanked her through the door and shook his head at her familiar tittering as on down the hall she hurried. On second thought, Masters opened the door and stepped into the hall. Mildred, as if with eyes in the back of her head, stopped and turned around.

"Yes Sir," she asked, inching back in his direction, looking eager to perform whatever task he might be about to assign.

"I was wondering, will Jack be joining us for breakfast? I haven't met him yet, you know."

"Oh, no, Sir. I'm sorry but not this morning."

She moved uncomfortably close and assumed her typical confidential pose.

"Jack went off to Bloomington yesterday and won't be back until 4:18 this afternoon."

Masters just couldn't resist that one.

"Four-eighteen?" he asked, smiling.

"How do you know it will be four-eighteen?"

"Well, Master Jack took the bus to Bloomington yesterday morning - the 8:13. I put him on it myself. He'll be returning this afternoon on the 4:18 and I will go down and pick him up. That's how I know exactly 4:18, Sir."

A reasonable explanation, Masters thought, but ...

"Jack takes the bus frequently, does he?"

"No, Sir. I can't say that he does that, not to my immediate and personal knowledge, that is. You see with Master Jack, one just never knows what he's going to do."

Masters observed a brief inflection of pity in her voice.

"Sounds like you're the chauffeur around her, too, Mildred."

"Oh, yes Sir. I've got to go pick up Miss O'Day in a few minutes. She don't drive anymore, you know."

"Anymore?" Masters said.

"Yes. Ever since she come to work here, she just stopped driving."

"She used to drive, then?" Masters asked.

"Oh, yes Sir, she did. Everybody always knew it was her coming in her old black Chevy."

"How's that?"

"She bought it from a kid years before and it had a squirrel tail on the aerial and a yellow stripe down both sides. She just left it that way. I guess she must have had more spirit back then."

Having had just received far more information than he had desired, Masters didn't respond immediately.

"Will there be anything else, Sir?" she said, looking up at him with cocked head, reminding him ever of so much of a Pekinese, awaiting its master's approval.

"No. Thank you." Masters replied.

And then, as if compelled to verbally pat her on the head, he added, "I do appreciate all of your good assistance, Mildred."

She nodded, blushed a bit, and batted her eyes. Then, executing a circus-like curtsey, she put about and hurried on her way. Masters smiled and shook his head. Mildred was a most unique specimen - like something you'd expect to encounter frisking through the pages of a Lewis Carroll story. He made a mental note to do something especially nice for her before his stay at Forest Way ended.

Breakfast that morning was served on the glassed-in sun porch - to Masters' way of thinking the most pleasant and comfortable area of the house. It was just Estelle and

Masters. Mildred fluttered about from time to time, filling coffee, brushing away toast crumbs and removing plates and such. The morning sun bathed the entire length of the porch. Just outside was a stately birdbath, set against lovely, well maintained grounds. Masters could see the gardener already working at seven o'clock.

Small talk, which had seemed difficult for Estelle the day before, when others were present, seemed to flow surprisingly well that morning. The weather, the townsfolk, the past winter - all seemed acceptable topics. She even related a marginally humorous story about Eddy's youngest son. Perhaps, Masters thought, that skin was not as thick as it appeared.

Whereas most people might have asked Masters what he thought of her assistants, Estelle, undoubtedly in sincere support of her own good judgment said, "I'm sure you have sensed the excellent staff I have here."

"They do, indeed, appear to be top notch," Masters said, surprised at her acknowledging their talent, yet still doubting that she had ever indicated that same thing to any of them.

"I find good assistants bring out the best in me," Estelle continued, "And since I'm just hitting my prime, there is a lot yet to be brought out."

She smiled in a way that, coming from anyone else, might have been interpreted as playful, but from Estelle it seemed pointedly serious.

With the dishes cleared away, the conversation turned to another consultant Estelle had engaged. He would be along that afternoon. John Bayer was the relatively new local pharmacist. He had purchased the drug store four years before as a semi-retirement undertaking. Previously, he had taught pharmacology and its history at a university in another state. What he had done prior to that was a bit foggy. He came to Estelle's attention because of his expertise on exotic medicines and the naturally occurring chemicals and organic compounds used by primitive people. His skill in that area was apparently not generally known locally.

"Nor would the local peasantry understand had they known," Estelle added, her old self gradually returning as the

opening gong of the work day at Forest Way drew near.

"How did you come onto his specialty, then?" Masters added with the interest of a fisherman.

"A few year ago, Jack - that's Malcolm's son, he still lives here up on the third floor - had some problems with drugs," she began, assuming Masters knew nothing of it. "Since his recovery, he has retained an extraordinary interest in reading about drugs and such. Not long ago he left a folder of articles on the hall table and as I thumbed through it - attempting to ascertain why the folder was there - I found that two of the articles had been written by Oak Hills' own John Bayer. It was all quite a coincidence, actually. Jack and I talk so seldom that I probably would have never found out if I weren't so nosey by nature."

"So, this Bayer is now a member of the community," Masters said, hoping to extract a bit more information about the man he was soon to meet.

"Yes. He seems to enjoy the drugstore business. I understand he has reopened the old soda shop section. The local kids just flock to it. Katherine says it's busy from the time school is out until he closes at ten o'clock."

"Does he have a family?"

"No, I believe he's a single gentleman," she said as if never really having thought about it before and wondering why it was of any consequence to Masters.

"He will be here at three and I want you two to spend some time picking one another's brains - along the lines we discussed last evening."

"Sounds like a fine plan," Masters agreed.

As Estelle removed herself to the great room, Mildred arrived, as if on cue, to refill Masters' coffee cup. She made no attempt to hide the fact she had been eavesdropping.

"If you ask me it's strange that Jack just left that folder on the hall table," she offered, as if expected to be the resident expert on such matters.

Masters just waited, knowing full well that she would explain without prompting.

"Jack never uses that hall. Never! He comes and goes through the back, he does."

It seemed much of a fuss over an insignificant matter,

to Masters. Obviously, it wasn't to Mildred.

'Mildred really has some sort of soft spot for Jack,' Masters thought. 'When it comes to Estelle against Jack, she's going to defend the boy every time.'

Before he could think further on that matter, the doorbell rang, and Mildred hurried off in that direction.

Presently Eddy arrived on the porch and slid into a chair beside Masters.

"What do you need?" he asked in his usual, friendly way. "Estelle said you had a project for me."

"I made some notes about topics on which I need more information," Masters explained. "Here, look this over and see if you have questions. I may not have been specific enough in certain cases."

"Looks good to me. Want to see how Herbert works?" he added as he rose to his feet.

"Herbert?" Masters asked.

"Herbert. That's what we call our research computer terminal. Named after some trivial pursuit fanatic Katy used to date, or something. I really forget how the name came to be."

"Yes. I'm sure that would be fascinating," Masters said.

Eddy jotted down a few handwritten notes and then moved to the keyboard. He deftly typed in a series of words.

"These are the key, topical words I selected from your notes," he explained. "Now I'll just punch up, 'List', and there you are."

The screen produced a list of related topics. Together they selected a half dozen and then Eddy punched another button.

"We'll get a bibliography now, annotated with topics included in each article or book. I'll make a hard copy and you can review it. Just circle the articles you think might be helpful and I can have copies of them to you in no time at all."

While waiting, Masters looked beyond the technological wonders there in the foreground, to the far walls lined with shelf upon shelf of books and journals of every size and shape.

"Do you ever refer to real books, anymore," Masters asked with a gleam in his eye?

"Oh, sure. But typically, only after Herbert points the

way. He saves us the work of a dozen research assistants."

"Where does Herbert find all this information?" Masters asked.

"He has direct access to libraries all over the World. When he can't find something to his liking at one place, he just switches to somewhere else."

"I admire his talents," Masters said.

He then retired to a corner table with the pile of bibliographies and began working. He had no idea it could all happen so rapidly. As he would finish marking one page, Eddy would begin bringing in the articles.

"Eddy," Masters asked at one point, "Can you ask Herbert for a complete bib on everything John Bayer, the pharmacist, has published?"

"It's already been done. I'll get you a copy."

He returned in a few minutes, bibliography in tow. Masters scanned it with interest and set it aside as he returned to the pursuits at hand.

After a considerable period of work, Masters' eyes tired, and he sat back to let them rest. Eddy joined him.

"How's it going?" Eddy asked as he slid into a chair across the table.

"Fine. Really fine. You have quite the set-up here." Masters said.

"Yes, one thing you have to say about Estelle Forester, she does things up first class."

Masters couldn't help but feel Eddy was more than a little nervous.

"I do hope my being here isn't upsetting things too much," Masters said, fishing for whatever he might reel in. The comment caught Eddy's teeth working over a fingernail.

"Oh, this?" He said, taken by surprise at Masters' remark.

"No. It's not you, Sir. Just got things on my mind today. Personal stuff. That's all. ... Anything else I can do for you right now?"

"No. Looks like you and Herbert have already managed to put me three days behind."

Eddy smiled and left. Masters wondered about him.

Continuing to just sit for another moment, Masters

watched the others at work. Each one was going their own way, seeming to be deeply absorbed in their tasks. Katy was typing at a rate Masters was sure he had never before witnessed - 'And undoubtedly perfect copy, too,' he thought to himself with a smile. But not so on that day. At that moment, in fact, she tore the paper from the machine in disgust and started again.

"Another player having an edgy day," he thought.

Of course, that may have been the norm. He hadn't seen them in action before. It just wasn't in accord with his expectations, and Masters' expectations were never - well, seldom - wrong.

Turning his gaze elsewhere, he watched an encounter between Estelle and Mary. Although he couldn't make out the words, the voices were up a decibel or two from the average. Estelle brandished a set of papers in Mary's face, tossed them on her desk, and marched off. Mary's usually stoic face broke into tears and she quickly left the room. Eddy had witnessed the same event and his eyes caught Masters'. He shrugged his shoulders and made a face, as if to make light of the incident.

'What is going on here?' Masters began wondering more seriously.

Lunchtime came and went. The oral exchanges that occurred could not by any stretch of the imagination be classed as conversation. A few isolated words and phrases, such as "Good," "Not really," and "So?" managed to achieve utterance, but all in all, a quiet, almost somber event. No one looked at Estelle, but then neither did Estelle look at any of them. Again, Masters wondered to himself: 'If this is the norm around here, how do they manage to tolerate it? Even more intriguing was why they chose to tolerate it?'

John Bayer arrived two hours early, much to the irritation of Estelle. He and Masters retreated to the sun porch, still a bright and beautiful spot, but no longer offering the direct rays of the sun.

Bayer had heard of Masters apparently long before Estelle had mentioned that he would be joining them.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he said to Masters, adjusting his own chair ever so slightly further away.

"And I, you," Masters returned. "I had started reading some of your publications earlier but got sidetracked, I'm afraid."

"When I was teaching at the university, publishing was expected, required really, you know," was Bayer's response, as if attempting to make light of it all.

"Did you enjoy it?" Masters inquired further.

"Oh, yes! Doing the research took me across three continents and that was interesting," he said.

"Three continents!" Masters was again fishing.

"Yes. I spent time in Brazil and Turkey and Australia, picking the local medicine men's brains, so to speak."

He broke a weak smile.

"People aren't really very cooperative in situations like that, though. Nobody wants to give up their precious secrets. I ended up having to pay back-alley informants for most of the information. So then, of course, I'd have to do all of the verification studies myself. I probably would have redone them all anyway. I'm not what you'd call a trusting person when it comes to such things."

"Mrs. Forester is certainly impressed with your work," Masters said.

"Forester!" Bayer said with obvious contempt.

"She's talented, but sure is the bitch, isn't she?" he went on.

Assuming that was a rhetorical question, Masters ignored it and said:

"It seems that Mrs. Forester is most interested in your knowledge of the fifteenth and sixteenth century poisons available and utilized in Europe and England."

"Well, I have volumes on that topic," Bayer said with a sigh, verging on a yawn, giving the unmistakable impression that that era hardly presented any challenge for a man of his expertise.

"I was thinking this morning that at that same period there must have been poisons in use in other parts of the World that were totally unknown to most of the Europeans and English," Masters suggested.

"Oh, most certainly; the Congo, the Malaysian Peninsula, China. Many places were actually well ahead of

the West in their knowledge of those ghastly substances," Bayer answered, a bit more enthusiastic than before.

"Perhaps we need to postulate how some of those little-known substances might have secretly made their way into the West and into the hands of some unscrupulous dealers in, say, Italy, France and England," Masters suggested, restructuring the story line.

Masters could all but see the wheels begin to turn and the adrenaline start surging through Bayer's being. He was up to a good challenge, after all, Masters discovered.

From there, the conversation blossomed and both men made copious notes. That next two hours told Masters several noteworthy things about Bayer. He was a very private, in fact, secretive person, never intentionally revealing anything of a personal nature. His history of interpersonal relations appeared to have fallen somewhere between poor and disastrous. His blunt manner and insincere attempts at flattery suggested reason for that failure. The bottom line appeared to be that he really didn't care very much about other people.

The one trait, which was most interesting (and frightening) to Masters, was the tremendous undertow of raw, undirected anger that he sensed when Bayer would let his guard down. When he had used the term 'bitch' to describe Estelle, Masters sensed not just a derogating term, but his emotional tone really seemed to be saying, "All such bitches should be burned at the stake!"

On the positive side, Bayer was undoubtedly brilliant, careful, precise and cunning - that latter trait Masters initially categorized as positive, due to its probable usefulness in their present undertaking.

Visually, Bayer made a fine first impression, looking wise and dapper from his wavy gray hair right down to his expensive, shiny, alligator shoes. The silk suit, carefully tailored to flaunt the slender, five foot eight-inch frame in between was like nothing Masters had ever seen on the racks where he shopped. 'The soda shop business must be pretty good,' Masters thought to himself, though not believing it for a minute. The man had obviously made some money somewhere!

Perched above Bayer's small, steely-gray, sunken eyes, he sprouted overly large, wiry, eyebrows that were still dark - nary a gray hair in the lot. His nose, quite Roman in form, and though not at all unattractive, looked as though it may have been broken in his youth. A small scar graced his left cheek.

The other personal note that Masters had gleaned from their time together was that Bayer had been irked no end that Estelle had made public his expertise in exotic drugs and poisons. Apparently, that had caused the two of them, just the week before, "to go at it tooth and nail," as Mildred later recalled. Why would that be such a sensitive issue to Bayer? Perhaps he merely wanted to retire as a plain guy, slipping into the background for a change. Perhaps not. Masters tucked the question away for later consideration.

At that point Estelle unceremoniously dragged Bayer into the work- room and introduced him to Eddy - pardon, Edward!

After a while, Masters took his collection of articles and bibliographies back to his room where he could work on them undistracted by his preoccupation with the other members of the team.

When next he looked at his watch, it was almost three o'clock. Time for a stretch and some of Florence's good coffee. Masters made his way to the kitchen, entering through the hall door so as to not distract the others. He still had some work of his own to finish, before tea time.

"Mr. Masters, Sir," Florence said. "May I guess you're in need of some coffee?"

"You may indeed," Masters replied. Florence and Masters had liked one another from the first moment of that forbidden-coffee-at-tea-time incident.

"A new pot will be finished in no time. Why not have a seat?"

She pulled out a chair from the table and assisted him as he took his seat. This was a far more informal Florence than most of the folks at Forest Way ever got to see.

"Thank you, Florence. You are a kind person."

His eye was taken by the china tea service as it sat there on the table, waiting to perform its daily, four o'clock

ritual. The silver spoons all lined up on the silver tray. The china cups sitting upside down in a semi-circle in front of the large china teapot. Florence noticed his interest.

"It was a gift to Mrs. Forester from her late husband, I'm told. A wedding gift, I believe."

Masters picked up several of the pieces and examined them as one would if considering their possible purchase. They were hand-painted, with dark red roses twining about on green stems.

"English ware of some kind, I assume?" Masters said as if asking.

"That what I've been told. I don't remember the name."

The coffee was ready and properly poured. Masters helped himself from the cream and sugar containers on the tray. Mildred busied herself folding tea towels and such.

"May I ask how long you've been here at Forest Way?"

"Going on seven years, Sir."

Her answer was short and to the point. Though becoming more and more friendly, Florence still tended to be as closed mouth about things as Mildred was gossipy. With some amusement, Masters had to wonder as to the nature of the conversations that must have passed between the two of them. He imagined that Mildred just rambled on and on, bustling about, as Florence would quietly nod and tend to some task of her own. Florence was innately graceful and made every movement worth the effort it required. It was pleasant, even relaxing to watch her there at work. By contrast, Mildred scrambled through life like a windmill loose from its tower. Each seemed effective in its own way.

Masters wondered what each might have been hiding there behind the public person. Something for sure, but what? Since it was of no professional concern to him, he dismissed the question as frivolous. Florence excused herself and left to attend to another matter.

Presently, Masters realized it was twenty past three. He pushed himself back from the table, and in doing so, jostled and spilled his coffee. He procured a dishcloth from the neat stack by the sink and quickly cleaned things up. Depositing the soiled towel in the hamper by the rear door, he returned to his room and finished organizing his notes for the

staff meeting, which Estelle had called for five o'clock. He returned to the sun porch at three fifty-five, making certain he would not be late for tea. Bayer was just arriving from the kitchen door, a cup of Florence's coffee in hand.

"I see you take yours black," Masters said, making small talk.

"Not usually," Bayer replied, "but Mildred drowned me in coffee earlier and I don't think I could take another sweet drop of anything today."

"I'm coffeed out myself!" Masters laughed. "I think I'm going to pass entirely this time around."

As the beautiful old Grandfather clock struck four, the others gathered. Estelle took her usual place at the head of the table. Masters and Bayer sat next, across the table from one another. The rest scattered themselves at even further distances than the day before.

'Not a merry band again today,' Masters thought to himself. 'How does Estelle manage to keep such a group of unhappy malcontents all working so efficiently?' More to the point, he wondered how Estelle managed to keep them at all.

As was the ritual, Florence poured Estelle's tea first and waited patiently while she creamed and sugared according to her usual plan. Masters and Bayer passed, as did Katy. Mary took hers as usual but without sugar that day. Eddy piled in sugar by the spoonful, then filled his cup to the rim with cream.

If it hadn't been for the tinkling of silver spoons stirring in the china cups, there would have been no sound at all. Presently, Eddy stood and began pacing by the window ledge, cup in hand. Katy stared outside, up into the sky. Mary sat stiff as a post, as if expecting Estelle to scream at her at any moment. No sir! Not a merry band at all!

Estelle did scream, but not at Mary. While gasping and grabbing at her throat, Estelle's eyes rolled back and she collapsed into her chair. Masters and Bayer moved to assist her. Masters searched her mouth and throat for some possible obstruction while Bayer desperately tried to find a pulse. Neither an obstruction nor a pulse was to be found. Just that quickly The Great Dame of Historical Novelists was dead.

Out of years of habit, Masters took charge.

"Eddy call 911, now! Move it!"

He addressed the others in a somewhat calmer, more deliberate tone:

"As you may well understand, no one is to leave the house until the local police give their permission. Katy, will you please call them right now!"

He turned to Florence.

"Nothing in here or in the kitchen is to be touched or washed or moved. Do you understand that, Florence?"

She nodded, maintaining her composure only with some difficulty. Masters helped her into a chair.

Presently, Eddy returned and he, too, fell into a chair.

"They're on their way," he managed to report, barely audibly.

Katy returned, weeping, and reoccupying her same seat. Mary also cried openly.

"We've all had quite a shock here," Masters said, "but let's just remain as calm as possible. Keep your wits about you. Perhaps you would feel better if we waited in the living room."

No one moved. Each had slipped into his or her own, private state of shock. Although each of them, in their own way, had sufficient justification for disliking - even, perhaps, despising - Estelle, to a person they appeared genuinely shocked and horrified at her death. Masters had witnessed death many times before but that time he was struck by the magnitude of the onlookers' responses. The reactions, especially of Eddy, Mary and Katy, were well beyond the usual. They sat limp, drained, staring in total disbelief at what had just happened. Not one of them paid the least bit of attention to the others' grief. They were each totally self-absorbed and withdrawn into themselves.

Masters wondered why. Perhaps because, in life, Estelle had seemed so indestructible, that her sudden death presented more than the usual reaction. Perhaps because they had each privately wished for such a moment for so long, they were feeling pangs of guilt. Perhaps, since their lives had been so inextricably intertwined with Estelle's, they were each, in fact, feeling a part of them dying, too. For whatever their reasons, utter horror and total disbelief had set in.

Masters ran a quick mental review of what he knew about these five people. He had to shift gears from what had seemed important when they were his project colleagues to what was necessary at that moment for the investigation of a possible - probable - murder. Although Estelle, herself, had probably been capable of murder - even cold blooded, calculated murder - it seemed untenable from what he knew of the other staff members that they could do the same. Bayer, on the other hand, was probably capable of such a deed but hardly seemed to have a motive of sufficient magnitude. Masters would not be inclined to think of Florence as a murderess, unless her secrets were dark indeed!

During the next few moments the usually well-ordered life at Forest Way was turned upside down. The ambulance arrived just as Police Chief Keppy entered the house. Jack and Mildred had simultaneously entered from the rear of the house just in time for all of them to meet in the great room.

Masters met them there and introduced himself to Chief Keppy, who, in Masters perception, was a dead ringer for Lou Costello, of motion picture fame. That aside, Masters showed them onto the porch. The medical team verified that Estelle was dead. Keppy ordered an autopsy and called his photographer and forensics crew. They moved everyone into the living room.

Jack was not getting answers fast enough, so, as was his style, he threw a fit. At a nod from Masters, Mildred took him in tow and eventually calmed him down. Keppy took Masters aside.

"I would be pleased for any assistance you can give us here, Mr. Masters," he said.

"Consider me at your service, then."

"My officers will take statements," Keppy began. They'll have the pictures out of the way within the half hour. Any suggestions for forensics?"

"Well, the tea service will need to be examined for prints, of course. How long do you estimate it will take to get Estelle's tea analyzed?"

"I'll have an officer drive it to the State Police lab in Bloomington right away. They're good about situations like this. Probably by mid-morning, tomorrow," Keppy said.

"There may be other things for them to look at," Masters said, looking around.

"I'd have them check the sugar bowl, the creamer and everyone's cup." He paused.

"There really isn't much to check, is there? With your permission, Chief, I would like for us to check the kitchen together."

Masters stood in the doorway just glancing around the room. He walked over and opened the silverware drawer using his pen through the open design drawer pull. Something caught his eye. Two spoons had been just tossed into the drawer. That was not at all like the orderly kitchen Florence kept. He carefully bagged the spoons, each separately.

"I suppose we should have the boys in Bloomington look at the cream in the refrigerator and the sugar here in the canister, as well," he said. Keppy motioned to an officer and they were bagged.

Masters noticed that the pile of dishtowels, which had been by the sink, was missing. He turned and carefully opened the hamper. It had been empty earlier when he deposited his coffee soaked towel. Poking around with his pen, he discovered three additional towels there, each rumpled as if used, yet each appeared to be clean. A quick check with Mildred and Florence verified that they had not used any of them. Masters suggested that they be taken along as well, again, each one carefully bagged separately.

"Of course, it is possible, Mrs. Forester died of a heart attack or something," Keppy suggested.

"That's possible but from the immediate discoloration of her eyes and the gray tone on her lips, my guess is some kind of poison," Masters countered quietly and kindly, as he continued his slow, systematic survey.

"Let's see if Bayer has any ideas based on her appearance," Masters suggested, at last.

Bayer confirmed Masters' general hypothesis but could only speculate on which specific poison it might have been.

"It was nothing common, like cyanide or strychnine or arsenic. It is something far more unusual. You'll know soon enough once the autopsy is complete," Bayer explained.

He looked at Estelle's body for a long moment and shook his head.

"I hardly knew the woman, you know, and what I did know I must admit I didn't like, but this, this is just terrible!"

By six fifteen, all the initial statements had been taken and the people were released to leave. Masters stationed himself in the front hall, observing each one as he or she departed. Jack, now calm, and surprisingly assuming the role of host for the occasion, joined Masters and introduced himself.

"I'm Jack Blackmore. Sorry I blew off before. It's just that no one would say what was going on. I tend to overreact sometimes."

"Totally understandable, Jack. I'm Raymond Masters. I want you to know how sorry I am about your step-mother."

"Well, as terrible as this may sound right now, I won't shed any tears over her death. She wouldn't have shed any over mine either. We had a really strange relationship, you know?"

Masters assumed it wasn't a question.

"You've been in Bloomington today, I understand."

"Yes, since yesterday, actually." Jack left it at that.

"I suppose all this will fall on your shoulders now," Masters said looking around.

"All what? The house and funeral and such, you mean? No, her attorney will tend to all that. I suppose someone has called him?"

"Not to my knowledge," Masters said.

Keppy confirmed that with a shake of the head.

"What's the attorney's name?" Keppy asked.

"Bill Jameson. They were lifelong friends, well, lifelong something-or-others at least," he added with a shrug.

Presently it was just Masters, Keppy and Jack by the door. Bayer came out of the living room.

"I guess I'll be on my way, unless there is something more I can do," he said.

"No. We may be in contact later in the week," Chief Keppy replied.

Jack took Bayer's hat from the coat tree and handed it him. In the process, something fell from the hat onto the floor.

Keppy reached down and picked it up. It was a small white envelope, no more than one inch square. There was a white powder on it. Bayer looked surprised. He looked at his hat. Everyone looked at his hat. There were two more similarly sized white envelopes just visible from underneath his hatband, as if hidden there. Bayer pulled them out and looked at them like he had no idea what they were.

He sniffed each one in turn and pronounced judgment:

"These have each contained drugs of some kind. I can't place them exactly but you can bet I'm correct."

No one doubted him. The obvious possibility had already occurred to everyone else before it seemed to occur to Bayer - envelopes containing drugs, hidden in the hat band of a poison expert who had recently had a fight with the deceased.

"What the!" came his response as the situation finally dawned on him.

"Someone put these here. They aren't mine. Why would I? ... You don't think that I ..."

"It's probably best that you say no more until you have an attorney present," Chief Keppy said, interrupting at the first opportunity.

"Until we have an exact cause of death, I have no reason to hold you, though I will keep the envelopes and the hat and have them analyzed. If the powder in any one of these envelopes would happen to correspond with the poison used to kill Mrs. Forester, you understand that you appear to be in big trouble. You can go on home now but don't leave town. Stay available."

Bayer obviously wanted to continue his protest, but thinking better of it, just left.

With that, Keppy and his last officer also left, leaving Masters and Jack there with Mildred and Florence.

Masters and Jack walked back to the living room.

"Mildred," Masters said in his kindly deep voice as he found her still sitting there.

"You may as well leave now, too. No need to stay around any longer under the circumstances."

"Thought I'd stay and help Florence with dinner, Sir, if that's all right?"

"Well, I guess Jack's the boss around her now. Ask him," Masters replied, deferring to Jack with an arm gesture.

"Not me. I make an awful boss," Jack protested.

"You ladies just keep running things till Jameson decides what to do about this whole mess."

As Mildred left to assist Florence, it was obvious that there was little bounce in her step or cheerfulness in her spirit.

"I've never seen Mildred just sit, before," Masters said to Jack.

"It is a rare sight." he agreed.

"She seems very fond of you, Jack," Masters suggested.

"Me? Really! I guess I don't notice things like that. I'm pretty much of a loner - always have been. I sort of just raised myself you could say. Oh, there were always adults around but that's all they ever were - just around. I guess in some ways Mildred is sort of like the Grandma I never had."

Something resembling a smile broke across his face.

Dinner passed uneventfully. Jack tried his best to get Mildred and Florence to join them at the dining room table but they declined.

"That would have blown Estelle's mind, wouldn't it?" Jack said. "Can you imagine her allowing the hired help sit at her table?"

He chuckled to himself. Then chuckled again, as if it got funnier the more he thought about it.

Jack was right, Masters thought. He'll certainly not shed a tear on Estelle's behalf.

It was after nine when they finished dinner. Masters stepped into the kitchen and thanked the ladies for the meal. Jack accompanied him but without so much as even seconding Masters' comments.

"Perhaps you and I can talk in the morning, Jack," Masters said as they headed toward the stairs.

"Sure. I'm an early riser. Any time," Jack replied most amicably.

"Maybe we could get away from here and go up to the cabin for a while," he added.

"Sounds like a fine idea," Masters agreed.

They parted ways at the top of the first flight of stairs,

Masters heading down the hall to his room and Jack continuing on up the second flight to his third-floor apartment

It had been a long and unexpectedly eventful day. Though saddened at the turn things had taken, Masters had to admit that he felt a renewed vibrancy as the call of the hunt welled up inside him once again. Sleep came easier than he had imagined. Solving the case, however, would not.

Day three: The Twist

Masters had awakened early, eager, like the hound awaiting the hunt. He sat at the desk making a list of things he hoped to accomplish before that day ended.

Talk with Jack at the cabin
Look over the cabin
Direct Mildred's chatter toward Mary, Ed and Katy
Keppy re: forensics report
Chat with Florence - balance with Mildred's accounts
Exchange any new information with Keppy
Summarize where things stand.
List questions for further investigation

Masters heard Jack going down the stairs. He had been listening with the door open so as not to miss him. Masters stepped into the hall, closed the door behind him and met Jack on the landing.

"Good morning, Jack," Masters said.

"Hey! Hi there," Jack responded. "I have to have my morning coffee first thing, then I'll be ready for us to go on up to the cabin."

"Sounds good."

They continued down the stairs and into the kitchen. Mildred had the coffee ready. She seemed to have regained a bit of her spunk, but still didn't have her full head of bustle back.

"I'll have omelets ready in a flash," she said as the two men entered the room.

Masters inhaled deeply through his nose and patted his stomach, saying, "We surely have time for one of Mildred's wonderful omelets, don't we Jack?"

Jack smiled and took a seat at the kitchen table. Masters followed suit. Mildred went about her task with a little more vitality, once Jack had decided to stay.

"Jack likes pineapple in his," she said, as if aside to Masters. "How about you?"

"Pineapple!" he said looking at Jack and smiling. "Sure, why not."

By seven-thirty, Jack and Masters were wheeling their way up a narrow, cobble-paved, lane to the cabin. Jack's car was an older model yellow convertible. Although having his hair pummeled by the wind was not Masters' usual idea of a pleasant outing, that morning it didn't seem too bad. Actually, it seemed to be part of some kind of test Jack was giving him (along with pineapple omelets!), so Masters wouldn't have indicated his displeasure even if it had perturbed him mightily. Masters made most of the small talk during the five-minute ride, remarking about the beauty of early spring in the woods and such.

"An interesting car you have here," Masters commented.

"How so!"

"I figured you for a Jag or a Porsche," Masters said.

"No, I'm not into that status stuff. I've had this one almost three years. I bought it from Katy's cousin - O'Day's Garage. He fixes up junkers and sells them. It suits me just fine."

"Is it highway worthy?" Masters asked.

"You mean like for long trips? It would probably get you there. Might not get you back." Jack smiled.

"I was thinking of your recent trip to Bloomington," Masters said. "You took the bus, I'm told."

"Yeah, I don't like driving in cities."

Rounding one more curve, they had arrived. It was indeed a cabin - log walls, stone fireplace, shake single roof and a large flat stone patio, outfitted with rustic, outdoor furniture. Vents on the roof indicated indoor plumbing. That, along with a partially hidden air-conditioning unit, suggested to

Masters that roughing it up there might not be so bad!

"What a charming place," Masters said after a moment of surveying the area.

"It was mostly Dad's place when he was alive. I didn't get up here much then," Jack offered more openly than Masters had expected.

"I come up here a lot, now. I see why he liked it so much. I used to just think he came to keep away from Estelle and me, but now I understand that was just part of it."

"You imply that your father and Estelle didn't get on so well?"

"It wasn't so much that they didn't get on well. They just didn't get on, period!" Jack explained.

"I never could figure why Dad married her. Even more puzzling, I suppose, was why she married my Dad - he was in no way any kind of special catch. Well, he had some money, but Estelle didn't want any part of that. She was too self-sufficient. I'd bet big money they never even hit the sack together."

Jack suddenly seemed to enjoy talking.

"Well," he continued, looking up at the sun, "I'm not about to waste all these great early morning cancer rays. You won't mind if I work on my tan while we talk, will you?"

He announced that more than asked, and began removing his clothes. He took a blanket from the car, folded it triple and placed it on the top of a picnic table. He turned the table slightly so it would be completely bathed in sunshine, and then stretched out on his back. Masters surmised that Jack was more into comfort than sanitation, since the blanket was spotted with, what appeared to be, mud and dog hairs.

Masters went on with the conversation, totally ignoring the fact that Jack had stripped to his birthday suit.

"What kind of a man was your father, if you don't mind talking about him?"

"No, I don't mind. It's a good question. I don't know how to answer it. He and I never got along. I often wondered if he was really my father - we were so different - temperament, looks, needs. The people here in Oak Hills liked him. That's because they really didn't know how he was. He seemed kind of helpless, I guess. People were always

taking advantage of him. Well, most people. He was capable of turning those tables, though."

"How did your Father die? Masters asked.

"A car accident, just on up this road a way. It's a pretty steep hill from here on; lots of sharp curves. He was coming down the hill one night and his brakes failed. It was ruled an accidental death."

"You say that as if you have reason to doubt that it was accidental?"

"Just stating the facts as recorded at the court house. I never liked him much while he was alive, you know, but I really felt lost and alone when he died. He was the last real family that I had left. That's when Mildred came. She was supposed to look after me, poor lady. I wasn't about to be looked after. I just retreated to the third floor."

"When was that?"

"Dad died six years ago, and Mildred arrived the next day. I was twenty-two, for God sakes, I didn't need a nanny!"

"Perhaps you seemed so helpless that Estelle really thought you did need someone," Masters said, flashing a smile in Jack's direction.

Jack looked over at Masters and smiled back.

"Probably so! I never let on I could do anything, you know. If they think you can do something, then people expect you to keep on doing it."

He grew quiet and rolled over to tempt the sun with his backside. After a long period of silence, he pointed into the near-by woods.

"I spread his ashes over there in the woods. I figured he'd like to be close to this place."

Another period of silence ensued. Then Jack asked:

"What else can I help you with, as if that last bit of gibberish was much help?"

"Well, what about the people who worked for Estelle?" Masters intentionally left the question quite non-specific.

"I only really know Mary. I suppose you've already heard about that. She could do a lot better than me. I'll never marry her. I'll never marry anyone. I've told her that, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. I offered to give her an allowance so she could leave Estelle but she wouldn't hear of

it."

"You thought she should?"

"What would you figure? Beautiful, talented, dependable! She could work for anybody. She could even make it as a writer on her own. But no, she stayed."

"Maybe she liked being close to you," Masters fished.

"I stay completely away from all of Estelle's doings. Mary never even sees me when she's at work."

"Sometimes it almost sounds like you care for her," Masters said, a chuckle in his tone.

"Don't take this wrong. Mary's a great person. I owe her a lot, but I've never really been able to care, as you put it, for anybody. I think of her more as my favorite whore. That's really terrible, isn't it? But it's the truth. I suppose you do want the truth."

A long silence followed, eventually broken by Masters:

"How did Mary feel about Estelle? Did she speak of those feelings?"

"I assume she hated her guts like everybody else. We never talked about it."

"Hated Estelle enough to kill her?" Masters asked

Jack rolled over on his side and supported himself on his elbow. Looking directly at Masters he said:

"Sure, she did. We all did. But that doesn't mean any of us would actually do it."

"It seems somebody actually did it, doesn't it?"

Jack nodded and was quiet. He laid on his back, knees up, one hand shading his eyes. Masters was intrigued that he grouped himself along with those who had hated Estelle enough to want to kill her.

"You don't believe it was Bayer?" Jack asked at last, turning his head to address Masters.

"I have no idea at this point, Jack. The evidence so far is just supposition. We'll know better about that once we hear from the police lab in Bloomington."

"You're enjoying all this, aren't you?" Jack said. "It's like a game or a puzzle to you, isn't it?"

"I'm not enjoying it in the sense that I vengefully want to track down the villain and personally string him up. I do enjoy a good puzzle though, you're right there. You also have to

understand, Jack, I've spent my entire adult life sorting out these kinds of situations. It's in my blood, I guess you could say."

Silence set in once again.

"Eddy was my Dad's pet, you know. Dad sort of adopted him after he gave up on me. They spent a lot of time together up here. I used to be real jealous. Eddy was two years older than me. I knew I couldn't compete with him. He made all A's in school. Everybody liked him. He was an orphan. They all felt sorry for him. They all just felt I was an ass hole. They were probably right. ... I was really jealous but never could do anything about it. Once, when I was fourteen, I snuck up here and spied on them."

"Find out anything interesting?" Masters asked.

Jack sat up, apparently bothered by the question, and began dressing.

"It made me sick seeing them together. I never came back again. I wished I hadn't come at all!"

Masters sensed a variety of unexpected emotions - anger, disappointment, disgust, and embarrassment - even a sudden wave of modesty.

"So, how do you think Eddy turned out?"

"Seems to be a nice guy. Like I said, I never got to know him. I never tried. He must be good at his job or Estelle surely wouldn't have kept him around."

"Why do you suppose he stayed with Estelle? My impression is that Eddy's a very bright and talented historian," Masters said.

Jack sloughed off the question:

"Like I said, I really don't know."

"How did Eddy react to your Father's death, do you know?"

"He really didn't seem to care. It wasn't just me; most people thought that was strange. I think I hated him for that for a while. He got to have my Dad all those years and then he didn't even care. It was like he just used him to get what he needed."

"How about Katy?" Masters asked.

really got to know her either. A real downer the few times I was around her, though. Blues City, you know! I don't like

her. She gives me the willies."

"She used to teach at the College, I understand." Masters offered, hoping to keep the conversation alive.

"That's what I hear." Jack paused as he pulled on his socks.

"Now Bayer, there is another weird dude. He scares me."

Masters noticed - though ignored the fact - that Jack glanced his way as he spoke. It was as if to take a reading of Master's response.

"He seemed a capable chap to me," Masters went on. "What do you find so disturbing?"

"Oh, just the way he looks, I guess. It's probably nothing. He reminds me of a villain in a melodrama."

Jack's attitude lightened somewhat as he left the topic.

"By the way, our illustrious Oak Hills City Players are putting on a play tonight at the high school gym. I'm the private detective. Right down your alley, I'd say. Better come. Better yet, I'll have Mary take you. What do you say? She'll be by for you at six-thirty. It's settled, then."

"Should be an interesting evening. I'm sure I will enjoy getting to know Mary," Masters agreed, feeling he had just been steam-rollered into an unknown something, for a reason that was not at all obvious.

"Well, I'm due at rehearsal in an hour, so I guess we'd better soon be on our way," Jack said brushing off the blanket as he rolled it up, eventually tossing it into the car.

"Do you mind if I take just a quick peek inside the cabin, Jack? Masters asked.

"No, go ahead. Here, I'll give you the grand tour."

There were three main rooms and a large bathroom containing a sauna and massive shower. The kitchen was in every sense modern. The bedroom was furnished in a surprisingly non-rustic manner with king sized bed, two overstuffed chairs, a desk and most inviting window seat along the back wall. A small fireplace backed up against the larger one in the main room.

In addition to that massive fireplace, the main room boasted stately, roughhewn log beams, curtained windows, a

pool table, poker table, and a variety of couches and chairs. A huge, and to Masters' way of thinking, ugly landscape painted in florescent colors on black felt, hung on the chimney above the fireplace mantle. Bows and quivers of arrows and all variety of fishing rods and associated gear, hung along the side wall, beside the front door. All in all, it was a wonderful place for a father and son to enjoy time together. Masters couldn't help but think that the knowledge it had all been for Eddy rather than him, must have angered and disappointed a fourteen-year-old Jack in the deepest and most terrible of ways.

Once finished looking around, they went back to Forest Way. Jack dropped Masters off and drove right on to play rehearsal. It appeared to Masters that the tour of the cabin had been harder on him than it had on Jack. Interesting!

Before entering the house, Masters strolled the grounds, for a few minutes - something he had been looking forward to, but had not yet found time to do. It was, indeed, a showplace of beautiful things. There were shrubs and trees and blooming flowers from all over the world. Statuary of every size and design made from granite and marble and other exotic substances Masters couldn't begin to identify.

'And all so beautifully cared for,' Masters thought.

As he rounded a corner of the house, he met the young looking, dark-haired, gardener. Masters introduced himself. Paul was removing one of the large potted plants that had been gracing the sun porch only the day before.

"Is that one of the plants from inside?" Masters asked, casually examining the sick looking leaves and drooping stem.

"Yes Sir. From the sun porch. It was one of Mrs. Forester's favorites, too. A rubber plant."

"What do you suppose happened to it?" Masters inquired.

"No idea! It was good two days ago when I watered it. Look at it now. It is as good as dead."

"Have you done anything to it yet?" Masters asked.

"No, Sir. I don't have nothing to do to it. It's just dead. I am going to put it on the trash pile to burn. If it has mites or something I don't want them to spread to the other plants."

"I'm going to ask you to take it back inside until Chief

Keppy can take a look at it. We can put it in a large plastic bag to protect the other plants. You can understand that we have to be extremely careful when there has been a murder," Masters explained.

"Oh, I didn't mean to do nothing wrong! I'm sorry. I was just doing my job," Paul went on, as if more than used to getting into trouble at Forest Way.

"You haven't done anything wrong. It's all right, really it is. I just think we need to let the Chief see it before you toss it out," Masters said trying to reassure the little man.

Mildred met them as they entered through the rear door of the porch.

"Mr. Jameson was just here, Sir," She announced. "He left these letters for all of Mrs. Forester's employees. They say that we are all still employed until this last book is finished. He made Mary in charge of it. That's a relief, I'll tell you, Mr. Masters."

She handed Paul his envelope and patted his hand. He smiled back at her and nodded politely.

"Chief Keppy just arrived," Mildred then announced. "I seen you outside so I told him you'd be just a minute, Sir. He's in the living room."

"Poor man," Masters thought. "I'd best rescue him immediately from that depressingly dreary place."

Mildred nodded without comment.

"Mildred, I think the Chief and I will have coffee out here on the porch, if it's not too much trouble?"

"Oh, no trouble at all, Sir. No trouble at all."

Masters noticed she was almost back to her usual level of animation. That made him feel good.

The two men huddled on the porch, looking ever so much like the policemen they were. The lab report was particularly complex. Masters sensed that Keppy didn't fully understand it, but wouldn't ask, so he carefully set about explaining it all, doing his best to appear as though he were not trying to explain it.

Estelle had indeed been poisoned. The examination showed she had ingested a rare poison known as Mortiguana. It was also found in the sugar container from the tea set.

Reading further, they found that traces of the three ingredients used in making Mortiguana had been found in the envelopes from Bayer's hat - one in each envelope.

"I guess that pretty well sews this one up," Keppy said, sounding ever so pleased with himself.

"There is more," Masters went on.

"The two teaspoons we took from the silverware drawer seem to have been worth the effort. It's strange though. One of them had traces of one of the ingredients plus sugar, and the other showed traces of all three ingredients plus sugar. And the towels - each one of them also had traces of a different combination of the three ingredients. One had only one ingredient on it. Another had two, and the third had all three. Each one also had traces of sugar."

"What do you suppose that means?" Keppy asked.

"Why would Bayer use two spoons and three towels as he put the poison into the sugar?"

"Why, indeed?" responded Masters.

"It seems to make no sense, does it Chief." Keppy beamed at being included.

Masters thought aloud:

"It could have been that he was afraid that if the three ingredients had been mixed into a lethal dose ahead of time, someone might have discovered the packet, and sampled it to see what it was. You know how folks wet a finger, poke it into a powder and then touch it to their tongue?"

Keppy nodded. Masters continued.

"The perpetrator couldn't afford more than one murder - especially an early arriving murder. That would have tipped his hand. It could account for his having brought the ingredients into the house in three packets. Perhaps he used a new towel after handling each ingredient to make certain he didn't accidentally mix them on his hands or leave traces of the finished product on the spoons."

The two men sat and thought for several minutes - well, more accurately, Keppy sat while Masters sat and thought. Finally, Masters spoke, again, as if thinking out loud for Keppy's benefit:

"Why would Bayer do such a shoddy job of hiding the envelopes in his hat band, afterward? That doesn't fit my

picture of Mr. Spit-and-Polish Bayer. It was truly an ingenious way to smuggle the evidence out of the house, so why would he have so carelessly bungled such a brilliant plan?"

Keppy shrugged his shoulders.

"Bayer was too precise an individual to allow that to happen. If Bayer had been the killer, why would he have made such a big deal about drinking his coffee black? That just makes him appear all the more guilty, after the fact. Again, he's too smart for that."

Keppy nodded in agreement.

"And back again to the most basic problem, what possible motive could Bayer have possessed that would make him want to see Estelle dead?"

Keppy shrugged again, this time shaking his head, as if to more actively participate in the discussion.

"It seems we have more questions to answer, doesn't it," Keppy suggested at last, sounding ever so much the Police Chief.

"Yes, Chief, I think you're right. Oh, one more thing. The forensics lab states here that it found traces of a sticky substance on the back of each of those envelopes. It appears to be the adhesive from something like masking tape."

"Confusing enough, I'd say," Keppy said shaking his head.

"If it were up to you, what would you suggest as a next step, Masters?"

"Well, I assume you already plan on arresting Bayer. The evidence at this point seems to demand that, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes. I plan on doing that when I leave here," Keppy said.

"Then, I think we also have to examine this whole picture as if Bayer weren't even a part of it."

"But he's my only suspect. You just agreed I should arrest him!" Keppy protested.

"I'm not suggesting we overlook Bayer. I realize he's all we have right now. I just mean that in order to look at these several new possibilities, let's put our heads together and see what kind of a scenario would develop if Bayer were not our suspect."

"I see. Of course. Of course!" Keppy said, nodding

with too much, all quite blind, enthusiasm.

"Think about who else had motive and access and things like that." He paused with a sigh.

"Well, there are probably dozens of people with sufficient motive - Estelle wasn't what you'd call beloved around this town. I, myself, on occasion, have wanted to stuff a fist down her throat!"

Masters smiled with understanding.

"But of all of them, which ones had the opportunity to stir these particular compounds into that particular sugar bowl on that particular afternoon?"

"Well," Keppy began, sitting up straight and feeling ever so much important again, "Assuming they had ample motives, and heavens knows they must have, I'd say Mary, Eddy and Katy top the list. Then there could be Mildred, and Florence, and Paul, and, of course, Jack - he's lovable but he's a scoundrel at heart. Jack and Estelle were a lot alike. I think that's why they chose to travel in different circles. Otherwise they'd have killed each other off years ago."

Masters continued to be amazed by the periodic sagacity of the man. Masters then said:

"Jack was at the bus station, having been out of town for a day and a half, and during the time-window we're talking about, Mildred was away from Forest Way, picking up Jack at the bus station."

"OK then, we're back to Mary, Eddy, Katy, Florence and Paul," Keppy said.

"I'm quite sure I saw Paul working outside while I was sitting here waiting for the others to come. He was way across the yard there - digging, I believe. I certainly didn't see him in the house. We must ask around about him, though. Let's make a note to ask Florence."

"Just when was this time-window, you are speaking of?" Keppy asked, turning to a fresh page in his tattered, though relatively unused notebook.

"Well, let's figure it out. I was in the kitchen with Florence having coffee from approximately three o'clock to, oh, I'd say three twenty. The last five minutes or so I was there alone. Florence had excused herself to do her usual cleaning of the living room - three fifteen to three forty-five

every day, as I understand it. I guess that gives me opportunity, as well, doesn't it?"

Keppy batted his hand at Masters as if to say, 'Fat chance you're a suspect.'

"I had used sugar from the sugar container on the tea set in my coffee, so it had to have been poisoned sometime after I left the kitchen. Bayer got coffee after that but he used no sugar."

"Looks like the forty-minute period between three twenty and four o'clock," Keppy said, announcing the obvious as though it were a personal triumph.

"But the crucial time is from three twenty, when I left the kitchen until three forty-five when Florence would have returned," Masters said, thinking out loud.

"Unless Florence was in on it," Keppy added.

Masters nodded his head and continued:

"The dish clothes had to be placed in the hamper during that same time. I had noted the hamper was empty when I dropped in a towel myself as I left the kitchen."

"And where were our suspects during all that time?" Keppy asked.

"I have no way of knowing. I suppose we'll have to ask them," Masters said.

Then recalling something, he added, "I did run into Katy in the hall as I was coming down for tea. It appeared she was leaving the living room. That would have been right at three fifty-four, I'd say."

Suddenly, some of the other pieces began falling into place for Masters. If a single person had added the three ingredients to the sugar, he or she would have stirred all three of them into the sugar using only one spoon. When finished, that person might have then wiped it off on one towel before returning the spoon to the Silverware drawer. But there were three towels and two spoons. Why just two spoons? Perhaps three separate individuals each added just one of the three compounds to the sugar. Two of those people could have, just by chance, selected the same spoon from the drawer, but at different times. That also made sense of the finding that one spoon showed traces of only one ingredient - that could have been the first spoon used, Masters thought. The other

spoon showed all three ingredients. That could be because it had been used by both the second person (thereby getting both the first and the second ingredients on it from the sugar bowl) and then later, by the third person (who got all three ingredients on it, when stirring the last ingredient into the bowl). Masters re-played that scenario in his head one more time and nodded.

That could also have explained the three towels. Each person took a clean towel to wipe away the evidence from the spoon before replacing it in the silver drawer. It began to fit together pretty well according to that theory. Only one problem remained. Masters felt certain that the kinds of motives - at least those of which he was at that time aware - were just not sufficient to move any of those prime suspects to commit murder. A new puzzle! And, the possibility that Bayer had done it by himself, still nagged at his gut.

Masters explained his three-person theory to Keppy, who was amazed and impressed, and, of course, in total agreement.

"Let's just keep this theory under our hats for the time being, Chief. We need a lot more information to make it tenable, and we certainly don't want to tip our hand in case it turns out to involve Mary, Eddy, Katy, Florence or Paul.

Keppy readily agreed and then was on his way. Masters sat back, looking out through the sparkling clean windows to the grounds beyond. During those next few minutes, Masters, with his mustache acting in full partnership, reviewed the information and began the tedious process of sorting through all the pieces once more. There were two theories and six suspects - seven, if Masters included himself. The search for the real motive or motives had to begin. The sparkle in his eyes matched that of the windows. Masters was in his element - the hound had been set free. Now, to catch the scent!

That evening he would have the opportunity to approach Mary. He would have a chat with Florence when her workday began at two o'clock.

As usual, Mildred's lunch had been light and delicious. It was almost two when Masters finished. Eddy, Mary and Katy had also eaten there. They had come into work as usual,

not knowing for sure whether it was the thing to do or not. During lunch, they had mostly talked among themselves about what the immediate future might hold, especially now that they were to finish the book. Masters busied himself making notes as he ate, all the time carefully watching the others. They each still seemed terribly shaken by the previous day's events. As confusing as it rendered things, Masters would have bet his badge, had he still had one, that they were not just acting - and Masters never bet his badge on anything less than a sure thing!

When Florence arrived, Masters requested some of her time.

"Shall we sit out on the sun porch?" Masters suggested, motioning the way. She followed, somewhat reluctantly. It may have been the first time she had ever been allowed to sit on the porch, let alone, be invited to do so. Appearing most ill at ease about the whole thing, she went ahead and took a seat at the table.

"Well, you will find this out from someone so I suppose it should come from me first," Florence began, without even having been asked a first question. Masters sat back silently and listened.

"Thirteen years ago, my son, Benny - he was just sixteen then - was accused of being the hit and run driver that killed Chief Keppy's little son. It happened on the bridge just west of here. It runs over the river that forms the west boundary of the Forest Way grounds. It seems Mrs. Forester was walking along the path by the river near the bridge when the accident happened. She swore it was my son's black car that done it. But, Mr. Masters, he was with me when it happened. I swear to you just like I swore to that judge! Just him and me at home alone. The judge took Mrs. Forester's word over mine, of course.

Benny got sent to the juvenile detention center over in Bloomington for six months and then they released him back to me on probation. He went into that place a sweet boy, but he came out a brute. I didn't even recognize him anymore. He started hanging out with the wrong crowd. He wouldn't mind me. I couldn't control him anymore. I pleaded with him. I tried to bribe him into being good. I even offered to move

away so he could start over. All he'd say was that since everybody wanted to think the worst about him, he'd see that they had good reason.

He got into drugs. Finally, ten years ago, he just left home. I never heard from him again. Then - five years ago, now - I got a call from Chief Keppy saying Benny had been found dead in a gang killing out in California.

A few days after the funeral, Estelle came to my house. That was a surprised, I can tell you! I had never even spoken to her before. She had come alone. She told me she was sorry about Benny. Wondered what she might do to help. As much as I still wanted to hate her, I must say we actually had a nice talk that day. She had that kind of power over people. Well, I was out of work and she needed a maid and cook, so I agreed to come and work for her. I still don't believe I did it, but here I am, and that's my story."

"I am sorry about your son, Florence. I had no idea," Masters said softly.

One lone tear flowed down her cheek. She quickly whisked it away with her apron as if to deny she still had feelings about it.

"Did Estelle ever speak of why she testified as she did?"

"No Sir. The topic never came up. It seemed to me - that day she came to see me, anyway - that she was feeling guilty about it. Nobody else who knew her would ever believe that - that she could feel guilty, I mean. But I'm sure she did."

"I think I can understand what you're saying," Masters said.

"Did you think she treated you any differently from the others around here? Better? Worse?"

"Yes Sir, I believe she was much nicer to me, though I stayed my distance and she seldom spoke to me. I guess it's hard to say."

"How have you felt towards her recently?"

"That's a hard one, too, Sir. For so long, I hated her so much. I really did! I know that a Christian woman shouldn't be saying things like that, but I did hate her. God, forgive me. It was like she took my son from me forever. After that day she came to my house, though, it was like all that got turned off.

Like a switch got flipped inside my head, you know. It's hard to explain."

There was a lengthy pause. Florence appeared to be thinking about just how she wanted to phrase the next part. Masters waited.

"Since I've been here at Forest Way," she began, "It's like I didn't have any feelings about her at all. Could that be? No feelings about another person, at all?"

"Under the circumstances, I'm sure it could be," Masters said.

"Now that she's dead, I can't say I'm sorry. That's terrible, isn't it, but it's the God's truth. Does that answer your question, Sir?"

"You've done just fine, Florence, just fine. I couldn't have known when we began how difficult this would be for you. I hope you understand that."

"Oh yes, Sir. That's no problem. This is just your job, I understand that."

"There are two additional things, Florence. Were there any people in and out of the kitchen between the time you got back there from the living room and four o'clock?"

"Mr. Bayer came in for coffee. That would have been right when I got back."

"That would have been at three forty-five or so?"

"Yes, that would be about right. Probably three forty-six if you want to be more exact."

"Anyone else?"

"No, not while I was in there. I always fix a pitcher of lemonade for Paul, the gardener. He comes in and helps himself, usually while I'm cleaning the living room. I noticed he had been there. He fills his own thermos and takes some along. I seen some was spilled on the counter. With Paul, bless his heart, there's always some spilled on the counter."

"Can you remember anything else that seemed strange in any way?" Masters asked.

"Not in the kitchen, but while I was in the living room, Mary came in and when she saw me she just turned around and left - upset like."

"Does she often come in there at that time of day?"

"Oh, no Sir. She's always in the workroom till tea."

That's how I came to choose that time to do the living room. Nobody's ever in there at that hour. Then, about five minutes later, in comes Eddy. He just hangs around till I leave."

"Anything else you can think of?"

"No Sir. If I do, I'll let you know, though."

"Thanks for your help. I think that's all for now. I may need to clear up a few details later."

"How about I put on a fresh pot of coffee, then, Sir?"

"Sounds great."

Masters leaned close to her.

"Yours is the best, you know."

She leaned back toward Masters.

"It's the pinch of salt I add to every pot," she confided, placing her finger to her lips as if to ask that it be kept their secret

"No one will ever hear it from me," he whispered back.

The two of them had become fond of one another. Masters certainly hoped he could verify every aspect of her story. He would be greatly saddened if she were found to be a party to the murder. When the coffee was ready, he took his cup back to his room.

Positioned at the suddenly comfortable desk, he began reading the forensics report in detail, making certain every aspect of the lab's findings made sense. He came across a sentence he had apparently missed the first time through. One of the teacups in use at the time of Estelle's death showed traces of soil on its rim.

"Soil!" Master thought. "Soil at a tea party?"

He read on and learned that it was the cup having Eddy's fingerprints on it.

It had been bothering Masters how Eddy had escaped being poisoned, considering all the sugar he had spooned into his cup. And the cup was found to be empty when it had been collected for the lab. He had dumped it. Why? It could have been either because he decided he really didn't want tea after all, or because he knew it was poisoned. For either reason, Masters bet he had poured it into the rubber plant that Paul had earlier found to be in such ill health. Eddy had been pacing along the ledge upon which the rubber plant sat.

'I'll bet that soil will show the poison in it,' he thought to

himself. Now, how to discover which of Eddy's possible reasons may have been the valid one?

By the time he had finished studying the report and had made some notes, it was already five fifteen. Dinner would be early that evening because of the play. He quickly looked over the list he had made that morning, crossing out those items he had completed. He had talked with Jack and had looked over the cabin. He hadn't had a chance to corner Mildred yet - that might have to wait until the following day. He had talked with Keppy about the forensics report and chatted with Florence. That seemed about all he would accomplish from the list on that day. He added, "Speak with Mary," at the bottom just so he could cross it off later.

Mary was there for dinner at Jack's invitation. Jack ate and then left early to get to the high school. At Jack's insistence, Florence had joined them at the dinner table. She brought her plate, which she had already filled in the kitchen, and sat, uneasily, across from Masters. Attempts at small talk went nowhere, so everyone seemed relieved when dessert was finished. Masters and Mary helped clear the table. Not used to being included or helped, Florence just shook her head at the whole proceeding.

Mary and Masters left for the play at six-thirty. Arriving considerably early, they had a chance to talk.

"I understand Oak Hills is your home territory," Master said.

"Yes. Born, bred and raised, as they say."

"May I inquire about your family - parents, brothers, sisters?"

"I'm an only child. Mother came from a pretty well to do background and Father was a banker - vice president in charge of something or other. You know banks, instead of giving out raises they give out vice-presidencies."

That had come very close to a joke for sober Mary.

"My grandmother lived with us. She was an invalid. Mother just took care of her. It wasn't much of a life. At the end - the last two years or so - my Farther insisted she get some help. That's when Mildred - the same one you know - came and helped us out. She was at our place two and a half years. Then when Grandmother died, Mildred started at

Estelle's."

"So, you were still living at home then?" Masters asked.

"That's right. I stayed there until I finished my degree."

"When did you go out on your own?" he asked.

"Not until I was twenty-two. Can you believe that! I had started selling some of my stories and thought I could support myself that way."

"And could you?"

"I really never gave it a good try I guess. I came to work for Estelle almost immediately."

"Was that her idea or yours?"

Mary turned and looked at Masters as if in disbelief.

"You can bet it would have been Estelle's idea! She never used anyone else's!"

"I see what you mean," Masters said.

"It was a mutual decision, then."

"Yes, I guess you could call it that." Mary seemed troubled about the topic.

The orchestra began and soon the play occupied their attention. It was, as Jack had indicated, a mystery. Jack played the detective - Mr. Motto, man of a thousand faces. During the course of the play, Jack quite convincingly changed his look a half dozen times. Long hair to short hair; skinny to fat; red hair to brown hair to gray hair - quite an impressive performance, Masters thought.

"Jack really is quite good, isn't he," Masters said to Mary as intermission began.

"Jack could always do anything he ever wanted to. He just never wanted to do anything," Mary lamented.

"He did seem to want to be a policeman for a while."

"When was that?"

"His senior year in high school," Mary began with some enthusiasm. "I thought maybe he had latched onto something, but it ended as quickly as it started."

"What do you suppose prompted him to develop that interest?" Masters asked.

"Jack got into some trouble. It's nothing you won't find out about on your own. He and a friend stole a car and tried to sell it in Bloomington. Not for the car, you understand - just

to see if they could get away with it. They got caught, of course. Estelle got them off.

Officer Keppy took an interest in Jack. Keppy was a sergeant then. He had a Police Explorers group and got Jack to join. Jack would go down on Saturdays and do clerical things at the station. They'd learn about weapons, self-defense - things like that. I thought it was really good for Jack. He was with men for a change; men that seemed to like him. You'd have thought that would have been important to him. I guess not. I guess that's just Jack."

"I hear he's into sports writing these days."

"Yes, I must admit he's giving that a good try. He does well because all the young athletes like him. They'll tell him anything and everything. He was always the best at every sport he ever tried, you know."

"No, I wasn't aware of that," Masters said. "He is certainly built like an athlete, though."

"Well, the kids around here worship him. Last summer when the college soccer team toured South America, they wouldn't have it any other way but that Jack would go along to cover it. He seemed to get really close to all of them on that trip."

"So, he spends a lot of time with them still, does he?" Masters asked.

"Mostly with the younger kids now - junior and senior high school age. Sometimes one of them will call him late at night and he'll just stop whatever he's doing and take off like a bat out of hell - pardon my language," she said, a bit embarrassed at both the words and the amount of emotion she displayed.

"Any idea what that's all about?"

"Not really. Well, I know since he's been clean from drugs, he's been talking with some of the guys about that."

"About staying clean, themselves, you mean," Masters asked to clarify.

"Yes. Jack really does have a good heart you know. He just has never been able to follow through. Never able to commit to anything all the way."

"Tell me, Mary, Jack appears to be an easy-going sort. Does he have a temper?"

"I've never seen it. He's always been very even tempered around me. Rumor has it that he and his Farther used to have non-stop screaming matches. They'd just roam all through the house, yelling at one another all the way. That's hard to believe. I mean Jack can be really rude and inconsiderate, but a temper - no, I've never seen it. He's really pretty sweet when he wants to be."

There was another long period of silence. Then Mary turned toward Masters. She hesitated, just momentarily, as if to give something a second thought. Becoming quite serious, she said:

"How can I say this? Sometimes after we've - well, after we've been romantic - he gets quite philosophical. That's the only time I really ever hear what he's thinking about. Several times he's mentioned how he has thought about going around the World just being a self-appointed hit man and taking out anyone known to be a drug lord or an untouchable murderer - people like that. I suppose it's just more of Jack dreaming dreams that he'll never try to reach. I guess if I thought this one were more than that, it would terrify me."

She just stopped and turned back toward the stage. Presently the lights went down and the last act began. Jack got the bad guy in the end. Masters applauded!

It had been an enlightening day. As he prepared for bed, Masters thought back over the talks with Jack, and Florence and Mary. He mentally reviewed the forensics report and his three-person theory - which still made little more sense than the theory, that had Bayer being the chief suspect, but without a motive. He wondered about the rubber plant and Eddy's role in its demise. He asked himself again about why three conspirators would each risk being discovered adding one ingredient to the sugar, when it surely would have been more secretly accomplished by just one of them adding the mixture of all three. And why would they go to the trouble of implicating Bayer, or perhaps they hadn't set him up. Perhaps they had really counted on Bayer carrying the envelopes out of the house so they could somehow reclaim them later.

If it had been a three-way conspiracy, there was little doubt from which list the killers' names had to come. But why would three killers go about it in a manner that so obviously

made them each a primary suspect? Of more immediate concern for Masters, was, that in his experience, the leader of such conspiracies, all too often made a point of eliminating his fellow conspirators.

"One murder was more than enough for an old cop on holiday," he thought to himself.

Many more questions than answers, but then, as Masters knew so well, without the right questions there could never come the right answers.

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Day Four: Such nice suspects

The room felt chilly as Masters awoke. Looking outside he faced a gloomy World staring back at him. His plan was to remain at Forest Way the entire day, so he thought he would just dress casually. Wishing to forgo his usual coat and tie, he rummaged through the chest of drawers, which still contained many of Malcolm's things. Six years since his death and it appeared as though no one had thought twice about dealing with his possessions.

Masters found a blue cardigan that looked as though it would fill his needs nicely. Apparently, he and Malcolm sported the same basic physique. "Doesn't say much for either one of us," Masters mumbled to himself, momentarily sucking in his stomach. Once on, he looked himself over in the full-length mirror on the closet door. "No Mr. America but not bad for seventy something!" he continued.

As he patted himself along the sides of his stomach, he felt an object in the right pocket of the sweater. He found it to be a key chain. It held only two keys and those were quite small, appearing to be for luggage. Out of habit, he held it carefully by its edge to avoid adding or smudging fingerprints. There was a crest embossed on it, which Masters didn't recognize. It was quite Greek looking with olive branches and such encompassing the letters M. B. L. S. which were intertwined. The M. B. of course probably stood for Malcolm Blackmore. But what about L. S.?

"L. S.," Masters thought,

"What could L. S. after one's initials represent?"

No academic degree he knew of. Even though he

knew it was probably of no significance to the case at hand, Masters was, for some reason, uncomfortable about it. He reinserted into the pocket and set out in search of some of Mildred's early morning fixin's.

He wasn't to be disappointed. Mildred had the coffee on and pancake batter just awaiting his arrival.

"Mildred, you are spoiling me, you know that, don't you?"

She tittered.

"Blueberries or bananas," she asked?

Not having any idea what she meant by that, Masters frowned and wrinkled his forehead. She would explain further.

"In your hot cakes, Sir. I can add blueberries or bananas. Which would you like?"

"Any chance of getting both - I mean so long as you're spoiling me anyway!"

Both it was, done with a flourish and a whirl! What Florence did for coffee, Mildred certainly did for pancakes!

"I need to talk with you whenever you can free yourself this morning. We'll need about an hour," Masters said.

"As soon as you're done here will be fine, Sir. Jack took out the drive in his car as I was coming in, so it looks like you're my only breakfast today."

Masters ate slowly, relishing every morsel. As he sat there, Mildred busied herself with undetermined preparations, probably having to do with lunch - hopefully some luscious dessert - Masters fantasized.

His thoughts drifted back again to the major question in his mind. Why would Mary, Eddy and Katy have remained in Estelle's employ so long, when none of them made a secret of the fact they disliked her so much? Certainly, no amount of money would be worth the amount of grief which she dealt them. Perhaps Estelle had some kind of hook in each of them - hook being Masters' euphemism for some subtle level of blackmail. He hoped his discussion with Mildred would shed some light on that.

As he finished eating, he took a few moments to fuss over Mildred, thanking her for her efforts (much to Mildred's delight!). At that moment, Chief Keppy appeared at the front door. Mildred showed him in.

"I guess you and I will talk later," Mildred whispered to Masters, patting his hand. "You go ahead and take care of your business with the Chief." She hustled on out of the hall toward the kitchen.

"I wasn't expecting you so early, Chief," Masters said, as they walked together through the great room and onto the sun porch.

"Forensics called late last night about the rubber plant. I thought it would be best if I brought you the information in person - a dozen extension phones in this place, you know."

He winked an exaggerated wink at Masters. Masters returned it and nodded, confirming, again, that one could never really know just what to expect from this delightful, but strange little gentleman.

"You were right, Masters. The rubber plant died from the same thing as Estelle. Only difference is, it seems that all that sugar alone would have probably done it."

"Well," Masters said, "Now we know who put what, where, but we still don't know why."

Chief Keppy was bursting to relate another piece of news.

"Bayer's Drug Store was broken into last week. Bayer put it in his arrest statement."

"What was taken?" Masters asked?

"That's the strange part. Bayer says nothing is missing."

"Why do you suppose he even mentioned it in his statement, then?" Masters asked.

"He said it just goes to prove that someone has been trying to harass him," Keppy replied, seeming pleased that he had the answer to Masters' question.

"Why didn't he report the break in when it occurred, do you think?" Masters continued.

"He said that since nothing was gone, he didn't think it was necessary. He didn't want the publicity. Said it might give someone else ideas."

"He is very sure nothing was taken?" Masters asked again, more wondering out loud than asking.

"Strange, wouldn't you say Chief?"

"Yes. Strange. That's what I thought right off!"

"I'll bet, like me, you've been thinking it's about time to obtain some search warrants, haven't you Chief? We should probably add the drug store now to Bayer's house, and the homes of Eddy, Mary and Katy."

"And Florence. Don't forget Florence," Keppy added.

"Good point, Chief. And what about Paul?"

"I suppose so. Ok, Paul, too. Let's see that's - Keppy counted on his fingers - seven warrants, right? My that will make Judge Martin earn his salary this week."

"Let's make the good Judge just a little busier. I think it might be wise if we had a warrant for Forest Way as well - just to cover things from the outset, in case you need any materials from around here as evidence. We don't want it argued later that certain evidence taken was not a part of the immediate crime scene," Masters said.

"I'll take care of them all this morning."

"Before you go, Chief, perhaps you could help me with a couple of other pieces of information I've been fretting over."

"Sure! Shoot!"

"Tell me about Malcolm Blackmore's accident."

"Well it was back in, let's see, that would have been December of 1987. It was a bad night to be driving - we'd just had an ice storm. Malcolm was driving his Macconi down Preston Road - that's the one that runs past the cabin. He loved that car. Only a dozen ever made, I understand. Italian, I think. Well anyway, it was about ten o'clock at night. His brakes failed and he ran off the road. His car ended up in the river. The coroner ruled he had drowned trying to get out of the car."

"So, drowning was the official cause of death?"

"That's right. Drowning as the result of an automobile accident."

"Was the car examined for mechanical problems?"

"It sure was. The brake fluid line had ruptured."

"The experts were sure it had ruptured before the accident," Masters asked.

"Oh, yes. It seems the lining had been loose quite a while and had been rubbing against the frame. It just gradually wore thin in that spot and that night - Plewy! - it busted just at the wrong moment for poor Malcolm."

"Who serviced his car, do you know?"

"No, I don't know for sure. I imagine it was O'Day's Garage, that's where Estelle and Jack get theirs taken care of. I can find out for sure, though," Keppy said.

"Do you remember if O'Day was questioned about the condition of the brake line at the inquest?"

"No, I'm quite sure he wasn't. What are you saying?"

"Oh, just an old cop's suspicious mind working over time, I guess."

"Billy O'Day still runs the place. He's Katy's cousin. I'll ask him. He might remember. Does this have anything to do with Estelle's murder?" Keppy asked, a bit confused by Masters' line of questions.

"I'm not sure yet. Just touching all the bases."

"Maybe we should ask Eddy. He and Malcolm used to work on the car together. Eddy got a merit badge in Explorers for auto mechanics. He's always been real good with cars." Keppy said.

"Well, maybe later if any of that seems to be necessary," Masters said.

"There is one other area I'd also like to know some more about, Chief, and I really hate to bring it up to you this way. It's about the hit and run accident that took your son's life."

"That was a long time ago, Mr. Masters. I can talk about it. What do you want to know?"

"Was Benny the only suspect?"

Keppy sat back, elbows on the arms of his chair, finger tips together on his chin, as if to begin relating an odyssey of some proportion.

"Benny was one of those kids who lived and breathed his car. All of the money from his after-school job went into it. If it came down to a choice between a new stripe across its fender or a date, he'd go for the stripe every time. You know the type I mean?"

"Yes, I do, having been that kind myself a long, long time ago," Masters answered.

"Well, my point is that he had that car fixed up so there was no mistaking whose it was. The accident happened about five o'clock in the afternoon. Marty - that was my boy's

name - Marty was where he shouldn't have been. His mother and I had told him a hundred times not to walk that stretch of road."

"Dangerous, was it?"

"The road runs along both sides of the river and they make ninety degree turns onto the bridge. It's a nightmare stretch of road right there. Well, he knew better than to be on the pavement because you just couldn't see if cars were coming. On top of that, the rapids in the river down below make so much noise you can't even hear a car. It's lucky that road just runs out to the old mine and stops. No one really has any reason to travel it regularly anymore. The mine shut down twenty years ago. Kids have always liked it out there - it's away from everybody. I did too when I was a teenager.

"To make a long story short, Marty was on foot, almost across the bridge, and headed out of town - he was going fishing not 100 yards from where he got hit. The car came around the corner and knocked him thirty feet. He probably never knew what happened, thank God."

Chief Keppy's lower lip quivered. He paused only a second and then continued:

"Estelle was walking along the river path under the bridge. She could see the whole thing from down there. She recognized Benny's car and testified to the fact. That's pretty much it, I guess."

"There were no other possible witnesses around that day? Masters asked.

"No. That's really a pretty isolated spot with a lot of trees and low bushes all around." He paused. "Well, when you say possible - yes, there was one other possible witness, but he didn't see anything."

"Who was that, Chief?"

"It was Jack. He was swimming just below the rapids. If he had been looking in the right direction he could have seen it, but he was looking down stream."

"Did he verify that Katy was with Estelle?"

"No. He claimed he hadn't even seen Estelle. The brush along the edge of the river is so high in there that it did make sense."

Masters shifted the line of his questions.

"Was there evidence on the car itself that it had hit something?"

"No, but then little Marty was only six. He didn't weigh forty pounds soakin' wet."

"I understand that Benny's mother swore that he was with her at the time of the accident."

"Sure, she did. What else would a single mother do? Benny was all she had. She was never married, you know."

"Was there any effort made to locate another black car that did have front fender or head light damage?"

"Well, no! We had an eyewitness, you see. There didn't seem to be any call for a further investigation."

"But there was also an eye witness who placed Benny miles from the scene of the accident when it occurred."

"Where is all this leading, Mr. Masters?"

"I'm not sure. I'm just checking out Estelle's honesty, I suppose."

"She was a lot of things, many of them not too good, but I never knew her to lie. She never had to. She always got whatever she wanted, outright."

Both men sat silently for a while. Masters stroked his mustache just waiting. Keppy shifted in his chair.

"You know," Keppy said at last, "There was one other car in town somewhat similar to Benny's."

"Masters looked up with interest and said, "Katy O'Day's?"

"Why, yes! How in blazes did you know that?" Keppy asked. "She hasn't driven for years and years."

"I just listen and things come up. Was she questioned?"

"No. It didn't even come up at the time but there was no need to."

"No need to?"

"No, she was walking with Estelle when it all happened. According to Estelle, Katy was just far enough ahead down the path that the floor of the bridge shielded her from viewing the accident."

Did she report hearing anything?"

"No, the rapids would have made that nearly impossible."

"So, Estelle and Katy were good friends even before Katy came to work for Estelle? Masters asked.

"Well, no, I wouldn't say that at all," Keppy responded.

"Estelle was never good friends with anyone. I wouldn't even say they were casual friends, actually."

"Then why was Katy visiting Forest Way that afternoon?"

"Apparently, Estelle was interviewing Katy for a job - a job she got, by the way."

"So, Katy, the only other possible suspect - going by the cars, that is - was alibied by the same person who swore it was Benny's car. And even though Benny also had an alibi, he was convicted," Masters said, summarizing.

"Yes, that's all true I guess. It seemed far less questionable at the time. Do you think it was Mary?" Keppy asked.

"I don't think anything, Chief. I'm just trying to think like a cop."

Masters hadn't meant to put Keppy down with that last statement. It would never have been his intention to insult the man's professional ability. As it turned out, it all seemed to go right over Keppy's head anyway, so no harm was done.

Masters carefully took the key ring from his pocket and showed it to Keppy.

"Ever seen this before?" he asked.

Keppy took it, equally as carefully, and looked it over.

"I can't say that I have. Yours?"

"No. It's just something I found around here. Do you have any idea what the letters might mean? Might they refer to a local or regional lodge or a hotel or anything at all around here?"

Keppy thought for a long moment.

"M. B. L. S." he mumbled out loud.

"No, but if you found it here in this house the M. and the B. could stand for Malcolm Blackmore, but the L. and S. - no, they don't ring any bells. I'll keep thinking about it, though."

"Chief, I'm sure I've kept you far longer than you intended to remain here this morning. Like usual, I've enjoyed our chat."

That was Masters' version of the bum's rush! Now, more than ever, he couldn't wait to get to that talk with Mildred.

As Keppy showed himself out, Paul came in the outside

door to the sun porch.

"Oh, excuse me, Sir. I was going to water the plants. I don't know what will happen to them now, but I don't want they should die," he said.

"Come on in, please. You're not bothering a thing, Paul. I've wanted to speak with you anyway. Perhaps I can just follow you around and we can chat a bit," Masters said.

"I didn't see no one kill Mrs. Forester, Sir. I was spading the vegetable garden over on the other side of the grounds."

"Yes, I know that, Paul. In fact, I was sitting right here at the time watching you work. I'm more interested in having you tell me about Mrs. Forester when she was alive."

"Like what about her?"

"Like when she hired you and why? How you liked it here, how she treated you - things like that."

"She hired me in '79. I was a punk kid - dropped out of school a couple of years before and I got into some trouble here."

"Trouble. What kind of trouble, if I may ask?"

"I busted into her car and stoled her radio. The cops found me with it. I wasn't even smart enough to be a crook."

"It seems you're plenty smart to be a great gardener!" Masters said, trying to buoy him up a bit.

"Thank you, Sir. You really think so?"

"Why yes. These beautiful grounds prove that without any doubt at all."

Paul's reaction was one of childlike pride and embarrassment. He grinned and looked away as if to keep Masters from seeing it.

"I never would have found that I could be good with plants if Mrs. Forester hadn't hired me."

"Let me get this straight. Mrs. Forester hired you because you stole her car radio?"

"Well, not exactly. See, I had busted it getting it out, so when she got it back from the cops it wouldn't work. So she said if I'd help out her gardener every day for a month, she'd call it even and not press charges."

"Every day for a whole month! Didn't that seem a bit stiff?"

"I didn't have no choice, Sir. It was either that or juvey."

"Juvey?" Masters asked.

"Juvenile Hall over at Bloomington. It's a terrible place."

"I see. So, you worked here with her gardener. Who was her gardener back then?"

"His name was Ancil. He was real old, even older than you, but he was real nice. I learnt everything from him. I done so good, that after my month was up, Ancil told her to hire me, I guess, 'cause she did."

"Ancil had to go to an old folks home the next year. He got real sick. He died a few years ago. I'd go see him every week while he was still alive. I'd take him flowers and cuttings. I'd tell him how the trees and bushes was doing. Sometimes I'd take him pictures of stuff he had planted a long time ago. He really liked me."

"I'll bet he did. Those were very nice things you did for him. How did you get along with Mrs. Forester?"

"I owed her everything. Well, in one way I did. She give me the chance to be a gardener and all, and I couldn't never repay her enough for that."

He paused, carefully, hand-sprinkling some water on a large plant.

"And you mean in some other way you didn't owe her?" Masters asked, urging him to continue.

"I never could figure it out. She seemed so nice about the radio and the job and all, you know, but then, about three years later when I asked her for a recommendation to go to work for the City Park Department, she just yelled at me. She said if I ever tried to leave her, she'd see that I never worked anywhere in this town again."

"How did that make you feel? Masters asked.

"I was really surprised, at first. Then, guess I hated her for it. I still liked her for the break she give me, don't get me wrong, but I hated her for that. I went ahead and tried to get some other jobs anyway, but everywhere I went it seemed Estelle had told them how I couldn't be trusted and stuff like that. She really done it to me good around here."

"So, you remained here?"

"Where else could I go, you know."

"How did your wages compare here with the other jobs?" Masters asked.

"They were all close. ... Well, honestly, I was making a lot more here. It wasn't the money, I just wanted to get away, you know, be on my own finally. See if I could cut it somewhere else."

"How did Mrs. Forester usually treat you?"

"Do you have to ask?" Paul said, looking at Masters with a half-smile.

"Like she treated everyone else."

"And that was ..."

"And that was like horse crap, Sir! It's like she was nice to you till she had you trapped and then she turned on you - a real Dr. Jackal and Mrs. Hind."

Masters assumed that was an ill phrased idiom, rather than having intentionally been the humorous play on words that had tumbled out.

"Thanks for your time, Paul. You have been a big help."

"I have? Gee, thanks, Sir."

He wiped off his wet hand on his jeans and reached out to shake Masters' hand.

"I don't even know your name, I guess."

"I'm Ray, Paul. Thanks again."

With that, Masters went searching for Mildred. But, as the fates of the day would have it, once again he was sidetracked. He met Eddy in the great room.

"Good morning, Eddy. Say, do you suppose you could put Herbert to work for me again?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"Two things really," Masters began.

"First, I have the name of a fairly rare chemical substance here, and I need to know what it's used for, where it comes from, things like that. Do you suppose you and Herbert can help me?"

"A piece of cake," Eddy said.

Masters handed him the name on a slip of paper, watching Eddy's expression ever so carefully as he read it. Eddy gave no indication of surprise or fear, or even that it was in any way familiar to him. Either Eddy was a great improv

actor or he should not be a suspect in a murder conspiracy.

"I'll access our own information bank first. I set it up when I first came because Estelle was always and forever needing this kind of information for her books."

Eddy systematically pressed all the right buttons.

"Well, we don't have it in here," he said at last. "We'll try the University's Expanded Chemistry Depository."

A few more mystical passes over the keyboard and the monitor came to life with an ivy-covered building in the background and the words Expanded Chemistry Depository in the foreground. He typed in some numbers - Masters assumed an access code - and then the name on the paper: Mortiguana. The console made its unique brand of whirls and clicks and the screen scrolled out the information:

Mortiguana

Common name: None

Origin: Middle Amazon basin, Brazil

Use: Poison. Used by indigenous tribes on spears in wars and defense.

Special Characteristics: Effects nerves and paralyzes cardio-pulmonary system in humans and other primates. Death occurs within seconds. It may be administered through digestive system or directly into the blood stream.

Secondary Uses: None

Chemical make-up: Composed of equal parts of three ingredients, all indigenous to the Amazon basin. Piataconi, Tiablanca, Piranhazanna. (SEE)

"I can bring up more details if you like," Eddy said, as the information flow came to a halt.

"No, that's fine on that one, Eddy," Masters said. "Let's see what we can find out about each of those three ingredients."

Eddy copied down the names on at the bottom of the paper Masters had provided him, and once again began pushing buttons. The screen went black. He then typed in the name of the first compound, Piataconi. The screen darkened for just a second and then began to present line upon line of information:

Piataconi:

Literal translation: Bright white glaze.

Origin: Amazon basin, Brazil.

Use: Potters glaze.

Special characteristic: Produces the most brilliant white of all glazes, therefore highly prized. Short supply makes it expensive and difficult to obtain. Brazilian government restricts its export. It is used by several tribes in middle Amazon basin.

Secondary uses: It is also used as one of three ingredients in a poison used on spear tips in aboriginal tribal wars. (See Mortiguana)

"Is that enough? Eddy asked. I can get more."

"That's plenty for now. Let's go ahead and look at number two," Masters said eagerly.

Tiablanca:

Literal translation: My Purest Aunt.

Origin: Upper and middle Amazon basin in Brazil.

Use: Tribesmen use it as a body-paint, reserved as a gift for a special aunt. Upon receiving it, she paints her face white and all know she stands as most revered by a niece or nephew.

Special characteristics: In abundant supply. Artists who mix their own paint prefer it to many other white pigments.

Secondary uses: In combination with two other ingredients, it becomes a quick acting poison to humans. (See Mortiguana)

"Enough." Masters interrupted.

"OK, here goes number three." Eddy seemed a bit more on edge.

Piranhazanna:

Literal translation: Life giver from deadly fish.

Origin: Lower and middle Amazon basin, Brazil. Made from ashes of burned Piranha fish.

Use: Widely used as a fertilizer among the crop growing tribes of the area.

Special characteristics: Produces rapid growth and brilliant colors in orchids, and members of the African violet family. Often used by the serious botanist outside of Brazil. Easily obtainable Worldwide.

Secondary uses: In combination with two other ingredients it becomes a deadly poison to humans. (See

Mortiaguana)

"Herbert, you are miraculous!" Masters said in amazement.

"He usually comes through, all right," Eddy said, though not as enthusiastically nor as relaxed as when they began.

"You said there were two things," Eddy said, as if eager to move on to something else.

"Yes, there are, but can you get me a print out of all that, or should I have asked sooner?"

"No problem. Old Herbert here has two memory systems. In that way, he is quite different from almost any other system. The working memory holds information you need to use often - like on a day to day basis. It can be easily accessed with just any key words - doesn't need any special access code. When that's erased, the backup memory still keeps it in the background until it is specifically erased there, too. You have to access the backup memory in the same way you entered it originally. In this case the names of the ingredients. If we had stored it in working memory with a code, then we'd need that code to locate it in back up. This second memory system is fantastic, but the girls always forget about it and I end up having to purge the backup memory every few months just to make room for necessary new information.

While he was explaining, the printer began churning out the hard copy.

"Now, as for that second item," Masters began, "I found this key chain...."

"That belonged to Mr. Blackmore," Eddy broke in.

"He only carried it when he was going out of town. It never had any real keys on it - regular sized ones, I mean. I always figured it was just his travel luggage key ring."

"Did Mr. Blackmore travel often?" Masters asked.

"He'd leave for a few days around the first of every month. Never said where he went. Different places though, I'm sure of that."

"Sure, how?"

"He'd bring me things back - shirts from France, do-dads from Thailand, just stuff. They were from all over the World."

"Did you know where he kept the key chain here in the house when he wasn't carrying it?"

"No. I never even set foot inside this house all those year he and I were ... friends."

An interesting place for a pause, Masters thought to himself.

"Did Blackmore ever tell you what these four letters on the key chain represented?"

"No. I just assumed they were his initials, and ... well really, I never thought much about it."

"Do you think you could describe it some way to Herbert and get him to do a search of some sort? It looks to have been mass-produced. Perhaps it's a club or lodge logo. A hotel, somewhere, even. Could you and Herbert work on something like that?"

"Sure. It's probably going to be quite simple, in fact. We'll just access the Emblem and Coat-of-Arms Museum in Toronto, like this ... and ask it to call up an Item Description Work Sheet like this ... and then we just answer its questions. Its shape is oval. Its border has stems and leaves on it..."

"Try olive branches," Masters interrupted.

"Olive branches it is, then. Markings or symbols would be the letters M. B. L. S. Edge finish is smooth. Thickness about three to four centimeters. There, let's poke the button and see what happens."

Not three seconds had passed when the screen scrolled out the information.

Man-Boy Love Society. Medallion used to gain access to local club facilities located in large cities throughout the World. A loose association of men who prefer boys as sexual partners. Outlawed in all countries except Burma, Thailand, the Netherlands, and Brazil. Still active in many other countries, however.

No address or other contact information is listed.

"That Bastard!" Eddy shouted.

Then, immediately recognizing that his reaction had produced an awkward - even embarrassing - moment, Eddy got up and stormed out of the house without further comment.

"My," Masters thought out loud, "That certainly struck a sensitive chord."

An entirely new slant on Malcolm Blackmore, and perhaps on Edward Planter! Masters thanked Herbert, giving him a loving pat on the top of his monitor.

"Let's see, Herbert. When Eddy wanted hard copy he pressed print. Let's give that a try."

Out it rolled! Masters was quite pleased with himself. He then carefully slipped the key chain into an envelope, sealed it, and called Chief Keppy to send someone over to pick it up and get it dusted for prints. Once again, he was off in search of Mildred.

That time he located her in the kitchen. She was preparing lunch.

"I'm sorry about all the interruptions, Mildred. Would it bother you if I just sat here and we chatted while you go about your business?"

"That will be just fine, Sir. I'm not much good at sitting anyway. You might have guessed I can talk, though, anytime."

She chuckled to herself, shaking her head. Masters nodded his thanks for the fresh cup of coffee and paused, wondering how to begin. He sat back and just let it start:

"Mildred, Mildred, Mildred, what can you tell me about all these people around here?"

Not at all to his surprise, Mildred took a deep breath and then rattled on for the next hour and ten minutes. 'She does make my work easy,' he smiled to himself.

"Well, I'll start with Mary because there's something about her I think you should know. In 1984, I went to work part time for Mary's mother - helping her out with her own poor sick mother. I got real close to the family. When you're with a family every day you get that way - you see things and hear things, too. It was in late 1986 or early '87, because Jack was in that drugs rehab place in Bloomington and Mary and I would go visit him sometimes - I'd drive her. Well, I've never told no one except Mrs. Forester about this. Mary doesn't even know that I know, but I overheard her talking with her mother late one night. Mary was crying and so was her mother. It seemed Mary got herself pregnant by Jack and she'd had an abortion by some back-room doctor over in Bloomington. She didn't want Jack to know, partly because

she didn't want to put any pressure on him to marry her, I suspect, and partly because Jack was as much against abortions as he was against marriage. He'd go off halfcocked whenever he heard of one, I'm told. I'm sure she figured he'd break up with her if he ever found out about it. So, there it is, I thought you should know that about Mary.

"You say you told Mrs. Forester about the abortion?" Masters asked.

"Yes, Sir. That was soon after I come to work for her - it would have been early in 1988. Mrs. Forester and I was here alone one morning and we just got to talking. You know she'd never really talk when anyone else was around - had to keep up her tough-guy play acting then. Anyway, we was just talking and somehow I let it slip out about Mary's abortion. Mrs. Forester had a way about her that just made people say things. I was sorry as soon as I said it, but she assured me it was ok. That she would never let Jack know. Well that was quite a relief, if you know what I mean? I'm sure she kept her word."

"I can imagine it was a relief," Masters said. "Anything else about Mary?"

"Mary was a hard one to get to know. She used to raise beautiful plants when she lived at home. African violets like you've never saw, and orchids. My, she has the green thumb. She always has flowers or a plant on her desk here.

"She come to work here for Mrs. Forester the same year I did. She'd moved out of her parent's house and I thought she intended to write stories for a living. She's a real good writer, you know. But she comes here instead. To be close to Jack, I thought. About two years ago, she was offered the job of Assistant Editor of the Sentinel - that's the Oak Hills paper. She turned it down though. Assistant Editor and she turned it down! I never could figure out why. It seemed like a real step up the ladder to me. ... I guess that's about it for Mary."

"What about Katy, then?" Masters said, priming the pump.

"I knew Katy as a girl. She was so happy and outgoing back then. Not at all like now. Since she come to work out here she seems so down in the dumps. I always thought

she'd grow up to be some famous artist. She was really good back then. One of her paintings hangs this very day here in the living room. A gift to Mrs. Forester."

"Which one would that be?" Masters asked.

"The one on the West wall between the windows. It's a picture of the old mine outside of town. Pretty it is."

"I'll have to give it a closer look later on," Masters said.

"She taught art to my son at the high school when he and Eddy were freshmen. They was best buddies that year - Mark and Eddy. Then she took a job teaching typing and bookkeeping and things like that out at the college. A few years later she shows up here. Let's see, I started for Mrs. Forester early in 1987 so she come in late 1988 it was. Never could figure that. Her giving all that up and coming here."

"You told me before that she used to drive." Master said.

"Yes, Sir. Before she come here she did. Then I hear one day, boom, she just stopped. Had her car towed to her cousin's garage and just stopped, that's what I'm told she done. She's seemed like a sad person ever since. So different now from before. She does a lot of charity work at the Orphanage and with the police youth groups. Maybe she's happier than she seems. I sure hope so. She never married. A woman ought to marry."

"She never married?" Masters said.

"No Sir. She never did. Could have, I'm, told, but never did."

"You said your son and Eddy were friends."

"Yes. Just that one year they was real close. Drifted apart later on. Eddy spent way too much time with Mr. Blackmore if you ask me. He never had time to go places with the other kids. School, homework and Mr. B. - that's all he ever had time for."

"What was Eddy like as a person, back then? Intense, easy going, how?" Masters asked.

"Eddy was a real nice boy, one I was ok about having Mark be with, you know. He was really into his studies and always made the honor roll. He never swore - not in my presence, at least. He was really easy going. Well, he was real easy going to begin with, but he got really up tight and

edgy as the year went along. That's one reason Mark sort of left him I think. He was never into fights or trouble, though. He was pretty normal I'd say. Only time I had to get onto him was once when he brought some dirty magazines over for Mark - nudies, you know. I can't believe some women will get their pictures took that way. Anyway, I knew it wasn't nothing abnormal - boys liking to look at naked women - but I had to get onto him anyway. You understand that."

"Whether I understand or not is probably not relevant. Did Eddy date, back in those years?"

"Yes, but I think he only ever dated Margaret. He didn't have much time for it, really. He ended up marrying her. They went together all through school. She was an orphan too, but she got adopted when just a little tyke. Was raised up in a really good family - the Philberts over on Fenton Street."

"Did you ever see Eddy lose his temper?"

"No Sir, not back then, but I suppose you heard how he flew off and beat his little son last year. Not at all like him. Not at all. Got into a lot of trouble with the authorities on that one. I'm not sure, but I think Estelle helped bail him out of it. She had a lot of influence around this town, even if nobody really liked her."

"Did you ever hear what triggered it - the beating incident?"

"Well, this is just gossip, and you know I'm not one to spread gossip, but since you asked and all, Betty Ward - she's a good friend of Margaret - she told me it was because Eddy caught his son playing doctor with that Brandon boy across the street."

"How old was the Brandon boy."

"Too old to be playing doctor, if you ask me. He was in eighth grade."

Masters paused and thought a while. Why would a father not take it out on the older boy, rather than on his own, much younger, son? After several moments, Masters went on:

"Tell me about Paul, the gardener."

"There is one really nice thing Mrs. Forester done in her life. When Paul was just a kid he stole her car radio, and she

made him work it off by helping around here. Then she put him on permanently. A real nice thing, I think. He's been here ever since. He stays pretty much to his self. Just takes care of things without much bossing."

She paused in her batter mixing and assumed her confidential tone:

"I did see Estelle slap him a few years ago. I was looking out the kitchen window at the time, and the two of them was out at the garden shed. She just slapped him a good one and then turned around and came back to the house."

"Ever hear what that was about?"

"No Sir. Never did and never asked."

"Tell me about Florence. You two seem to get on quite well."

"Florence is a fine lady. Lost her only son some years back. Tragic. Poor lady. She started here that same year, the year after me - 1988 that would have been. She's a good worker. Awfully quiet though. Not much on conversation. A good listener. We get on really well."

She paused thoughtfully - not a typical Mildred-ism.

"What?" Masters asked softly.

"Well, Florence is my friend and I sure don't want to get her in no trouble, and if you knew her as well as me you'd know she couldn't have done it, but really she has the best reason of any of us to want to see Mrs. Forester punished."

"The situation with her son and the Keppy hit-and-run accident, you mean?" Masters said, spelling it out so Mildred wouldn't feel she had betrayed her friend.

"You already know, then. That's good. But you can bet your soul she never done it."

"How did she get the job here after all of that, do you know?" Masters went on.

"It sure surprised me, I'll tell you. But you soon learn not to try and figure things out around her. Between Mrs. Forester and Jack, that would drive you to an early grave."

"Speaking of Jack - talk to me about him."

"You probably noticed I have a soft spot for Master Jack."

Mildred smiled a motherly smile and became quite

subdued and soft-spoken.

"He lost his mother when real small and never got along with his father and he was so spoiled by the time he got to Oak Hills that none of the kids would have anything to do with him - except Mary, of course. Jack didn't have no friends at all. I always felt sorry for him, but what could you do? He was into drugs for a while, but you know that. He's been clean since 1987. He hates everything about drugs now. Mrs. Forester really hired me at first to look after him when he got out of rehab. He was twenty-two. I couldn't really look after him. Not in the usual ways. I did find little things I could do special, just for him."

"Like pineapple omelets?" Masters said smiling.

"Yes, like pineapple omelets, and driving him places, and seeing that Mary would drop by when I seen he was feeling down. Those kind of things. I had got to know him just a little bit when he was over in Bloomington in rehab. Like I said, I was working at Mary's then and I'd sometimes see him over there when I took her over. Well, after I'd been here a while, he finally got to the place he'd let me tidy up his room and make his bed and such things as that. He doesn't let many folks into his quarters upstairs, you know."

"No, I wasn't aware of that."

"He sure is a messy boy. My Mark was neat and clean next to Jack, and I always thought Mark lived like a pig."

Mildred giggled, just thinking about it.

"He'd always take the sports section out of the paper and study it - he wanted to be a good reporter someday - then he'd just toss the rest of paper anywhere. I'd collect what he'd threw away and bring it down here to wrap the coffee grounds in."

"How would you describe him as a person?" Masters asked.

"Jack was always an overconfident, spoiled brat who never cared about nobody but himself. ... My that sounds terrible doesn't it. In spite of all that, he's always treated me like a lady and never raised his voice to me. Like I said, after a while we come to work out a pretty good arrangement - the two of us."

She again assumed her super-confidential stance.

"Jack doesn't know that I know this, but every year on my birthday and on every Mother's Day, he sends me flowers and a little gift."

Masters could see that just telling about it delighted her. She wiped a building tear from her eye before it could spill over onto her cheek.

"He doesn't know that you know? What do you mean?"

"They always come with a card that just says. 'I love you!' And it's always signed, Pest. In my heart, I always knew they was from him, but one time I come to work early and saw him putting them here on the table. I never let on. He seemed to want it that way."

"Mildred, like usual, you have been a fountain of important information. I can't thank you enough," Masters said, getting up from his chair and leaning down to kiss the top of her head.

Mildred turned the proverbial seven colors of the rainbow.

"Thank you, Sir. I do hope I didn't get nobody into no trouble."

"I assure you that you didn't." Master said.

By then, it was well past time for lunch. Watching Mildred prepare it had only heightened his appetite. He ate his fill, and then lingered over his coffee, sorting through the several revelations that morning had presented. It was close to three o'clock when he at last set off for the living room.

He wanted to see the painting that Katy had done for Estelle. It was no Rembrandt, but, on the other hand, it was far superior to that of an amateur. He noticed the picture was hanging a-tilt - ever so slightly, actually, but Masters had an eye for such things - so he attempted to straighten it. It didn't move easily, as if somehow stuck. He pulled it out a bit from the wall, thinking it may have been caught on an old nail or tack. The back of its frame felt tacky to his fingers. He freed it and took it down. On the back of the lower part of the frame he found four pieces of masking tape, formed into loops - sticky side out as if there to hold the picture in place against the wall. There was one toward each corner and two in the middle.

Something about all of that rang a subconscious bell for

Masters. He continued his examination of the sticky surface. It hit him. It appeared ever so much like that which was found on the backs of the small white envelopes from Bayer's hat band.

Then Masters noticed something else. On the wallpaper, behind the picture, were too tiny patches of white powder - hardly any, but enough for Masters' trained eye to catch. He would have Keppy's men take samples of both the tape and powder later on.

Masters' first thought had been that perhaps the frame was somehow improperly balanced, and tape had been put on the back to hold it level. But the stickum was still quite fresh. It had all been done quite recently. He replaced the picture - straight that time - and sat down to think.

Presently, Florence entered to do her daily dusting and straightening. They were glad to see one another.

"Do you know when the tape might have been put on the back of this picture and for what reason?" he asked her, pointing at it as he spoke.

"Tape? No Sir. I didn't know about any tape there."

"Have you noticed any trouble keeping it hanging level - tilting one way or the other?"

"No Sir. I dust it once a week and it always seems just fine to me."

"Have you dusted it yet this week? Masters asked.

"No Sir. This is the day that gets done. Shall I go ahead and do it now?"

"No. Skip it today, and please don't even touch it. I want to get it dusted for fingerprints. In fact, don't do any of the pictures in here today."

Masters went right to the phone and called Chief Keppy. Within ten minutes Keppy, himself, and an officer arrived. The officer went right to work dusting the frame and taking the samples, while Keppy delivered some other news:

"That key chain had Malcolm Blackmore's prints on it all right, and also, one other set that, for the life of me, I just can't figure out," Keppy said.

"You can't identify them, you mean?" Masters asked.

"Oh know. I sent them though the state print ID center and come to find out it was my station that sent them there, in

the first place. The problem is, they belong to a vagrant we ran in on a disorderly charge, one night way back in 1981. His name was Jimmy White. He was just passing through town and left the next morning. Nothing else on him anywhere in the country since that time."

"Yes, that is strange. Why would - how could - they be on Blackmore's key chain?"

"That's a strange one, for sure," Keppy said shaking his head.

The officer spoke:

"Here's something else that's strange. Look at these prints I just lifted. Looks like five sets. Most of them belong to the same person, but look here. I'd swear it's identical to that vagrant's we just worked up from the key chain."

It was soon verified that the officer's hunch had been correct. The other prints were also interesting. The most prints were those of Florence - no surprise, since she cleaned it each week. The other three sets belonged to the three musketeers: Eddy, Mary and Katy.

"Chief, just for comparison sake, why doesn't your officer dust the other six pictures in here, also," Masters suggested.

"Great idea," Keppy agreed.

None but Florence's were found.

"The plot thickens, as they'd say in those murder mystery novels!" Masters chuckled.

Masters and Keppy made plans to conduct a search of the Drug store, first thing the following morning. The policemen left with the tape and a sample of the powder for analysis. Florence went on about her business. Mildred popped in to say she was leaving for the day. Masters retired to his room for a period of deep thought. It was time to lay out all the pieces - end to end and top to bottom. One could almost see his mustache wince in anticipation of the painful workout it was about to experience!

Beginning, as was Masters' style, with a large number of small slips of paper, he methodically jotted down each event that he thought might be related to the murder - one event per slip. He was constructing a time line. The first slip read, "1973 - Malcolm begins managing Forester Publications

from his Chicago Office." Soon he had several dozen such slips of paper. Referring to his pile of carefully prepared notes, he went back, and added missing dates to some and verified those of the others.

He then arranged them in chronological order. Finally, he copied the time line onto a single sheet, leaving spaces for new events to be added, should they come along.

Estelle Forester Murder Time Line

1973 - Malcolm begins managing Forester Publications from his Chicago office.

1975 - Jack's mother dies (Jack is ten)

1976 - Malcolm demoted to manage Oak Hills firm

1977 - Estelle and Malcolm marry

Malcolm begins seeing Eddy (Eddy is 14)

Mildred's son (Mark) and Eddy are best friends

Katy teaches art at the high school

1978 - Katy begins teaching in business Dept. at college

1979 - Paul begins work for Estelle after stealing episode

1980 - Florence's son, Benny, accused in hit-and-run accident (August)

Katy offered Dept. Chair at college but instead, takes job with Estelle.

1981 - Jack steals a car and is caught

Jack involved in Police Explorer Scout program with

Keppy

Benny in detention center (January) - later released to Florence on probation.

1982 - Vagrant (Jimmy White) finger printed

1983 - Benny leaves Florence's home

1984 - Mildred begins work at Mary's parents' home.

1985 - Jack involved in using drugs

1986 - Mary's abortion

1987 - Malcolm dies in car accident (Jack 22/ Eddy 24)

Jack in drug rehab three months

Mildred leaves Mary's home and joins Estelle at Forest Way

1988 - Mildred lets Mary's abortion slip to Estelle

Mary begins working for Estelle

Eddy finishes Master's degree in history

Eddy begins working for Estelle

Florence's son, Benny, is killed in gang shooting

Florence begins working for Estelle

1989 - Bayer moves to Oak Hills and buys drug store

1990 - Bayer re-opens the 1950's soda shop at drug store

1991 - Jack begins as sports reporter

1992 - Jack's trip to South America with soccer team

Jack joins Oak Hills Players theater group

1993 - The murder, by poison, of Estelle Forester.

Jimmy White's fingerprints show up at Forest Way

With that job done, Masters raided the refrigerator and turned in for the night. He now felt that he only needed a few more pieces and he would have this one wrapped up. It was truly a shame that so many of the suspects were such nice people.

Day Five: a multitude of motives

For just a moment, Masters wasn't aware of why he awoke with such a start. Then it rang again. It was the phone beside his bed. He struggled into a sitting position and picked it up.

"Detective Raymond Masters, here. May I help you," he said out of habit, reflecting forty years of early morning calls.

"Sorry to call so early," came Keppy's voice through the receiver.

"We have another police matter that I have to take care of this morning, so wanted to let you know I'd be late getting to Forest Way. I do have all the warrants we talked about though, so feel free to snoop around over there if you like. Oh, by the way, that powder on the wall paper matched two of the ingredients used in the poison and the sticky material is an identical match to that on the envelopes."

"Thanks for calling, Chief. I guess I'll see you when I see you."

His daily list had already changed before his feet hit the floor. A glance at his watch on the bedside table told him it was just about six o'clock. Mildred didn't arrive until six thirty, so it would be just he and the birds for another half-hour. A good opportunity, he thought, to take care of something he had been wanting to do, anyway. He dressed and went down to the kitchen. First things first! He started the coffee. Then, donning one of Mildred's aprons - slender Florence's apron didn't begin to cover his vital areas - Masters began cooking. In no time at all he had the kitchen in shambles! He hummed

hymns from his childhood and busied himself most happily for the next twenty minutes.

When Mildred entered, right on time, she looked around, cupped her hands to her mouth and said, "My God, Sir! What's happened?"

Masters looked around the room.

"I never could cook and be neat at the same time," he said.

Mildred poked her nose here and there.

"So, it's cooking you call all of this?" she said with her usual grin.

"Yes, Mildred. Sit yourself down. This morning breakfast is on me."

It was also on the counter tops, the stove, the floor, the sink and his mustache!

"I didn't know you was a chef as well, Sir," she said playing along.

"Well, I'm not, actually. My Pennsylvania Dutch Grandmother taught me how to make one breakfast dish. That's the extent of my culinary skills. But, since this is breakfast, who needs more than that anyway?"

After a few more minutes, he opened the oven door, filling the room with an amazingly delicious aroma. Masters inhaled deeply, eyes closed, savoring the moment.

"Scramble. That's what Grandma called it," he explained, at last.

He removed it from the cake pan in which it had baked and proceeded to slice it into thin strips. It was served, topped with powdered sugar or maple syrup, or both, as Masters eventually demonstrated.

It would have 'done in' a lesser pair, but Mildred and Masters valiantly stayed with it until every crumb had been enjoyed. At last, they sat back, chuckling at one another, knowing full well, they had stuffed themselves beyond any reasonable limit.

"I don't know what to say, Sir. That scramble is wonderful. Thank you. I just don't know what to say."

"Nothing is required," Masters said. "It's just my way of trying to say thanks for all your kindness these past several days."

"You are going to stay and help clean up this mess,

aren't you," Mildred said, hands on hips and shaking her head, as she looked around the room.

Then, as Masters opened his mouth to respond she shooed him out the door.

"Shush, now, I'll have this place spic and span in no time at all.

Masters left before she changed her mind.

"I do want that recipe, though," she called after him.

During the exchange, Masters had managed to grab a cup of coffee. Then, with a smile on his face and a good feeling in his heart, he returned to his room. It was Malcolm's room really, of course, and he thought that might be a good place to begin snooping. He had no idea just what he was looking for, but that is often the lot of a detective.

He began in the closet, since past experience suggested that was where people tended to put things they wanted to get out of sight in a hurry. Once there, they were also, often out of mind. In that case, however, nothing but racks of neatly hung slacks and coats and shirts, seventeen pairs of shoes and a dozen belts. Just what one would possibly do with all those shoes and belts was beyond Masters' realm of imagination. He had just two of each, himself.

He then began with the three chests of drawers - sweaters, underwear, socks, towels, sheets and pillowcases - just the usual things. The smaller top drawers of one chest held some jewelry and other trinkets - surprisingly inexpensive, considering the wealth Malcolm had supposedly accumulated. There were matchbooks from places on five continents. Bar napkins with phone numbers scribbled on them - all without area codes, so not much help. Several belt buckles and shirt buttons. Several, partially spent, candles, Masters assumed for use in case of a blackout. Again, not much that seemed useful.

Masters then began making his way through all three chests in a more deliberate and systematic manner. As he turned every sheet and waved every sock, he was again struck by the huge size and outright ugliness of the furniture he was exploring.

"Large size," he said out loud.

"Large size chest but small drawer."

He went back to the first dresser and removed the first two drawers, placing them on the bed. The top drawer was six inches deeper than the second. Assuming a kneeling position in front of the dresser, Masters saw just what he expected - another drawer nestled in the space behind the narrower drawer.

He reached in and slid it out. It was about five-inches front to back and the same width as the chest. He placed it on the desk and opened its lid. Inside were a large number of Polaroid photographs - immediately disgusting photographs from Masters' point of view, though not entirely unexpected. He started sorting through them. They were pictures of nude boys. Some younger - early teens- at the beginning, and then progressing, in order, as if age by age, to others, well into early adulthood.

Upon closer examination, it became obvious they weren't of many different boys at all, but all the same boy, taken at different ages. Several had been slid down behind and at a right angle to the others, as if taken out of sequence and just haphazardly returned to the back of the drawer. Masters carefully removed them. He saw that they were four pictures of Malcolm engaging the boy in the nude.

The pictures of the boy, grown into young adulthood, showed, to no surprise of Masters, that it was Eddy. Masters had suspected as much for some time, but had no way of proving it. He took those four loose photos and slipped them into an envelope. Having things dusted for prints had become a most revealing procedure in this investigation, so why stop at that point?

"So," Masters said to himself, "How does this effect things. It could have provided Eddy a motive to kill Malcolm, but hardly a motive to kill Estelle. Eddy certainly seemed to have had the mechanical skills necessary to tamper with brakes. Or it could have provided Eddy a way of blackmailing Malcolm into paying his way through school. But if that were the case, why would he have murdered his Sugar Daddy?"

Lots of interesting twists to the motives for Masters to now begin considering in a serious way. Did this discovery in any way impact the current investigation? Of course, if Estelle

had found these pictures, it would have given her material to use in blackmailing Eddy to stay and work for her. She'd show them to his wife if he left her employ! It might also have angered her enough to kill Malcolm, herself.

Masters replaced the three drawers as he had found them, wishing he had been a bit more careful where he had put his own finger prints as he had examined the chests.

To satisfy himself completely that the younger boy in the photos was, indeed, Eddy, he went looking for Mildred. She was tidying up the great room. Katy, Mary and Eddy had returned and were going about their work. Masters asked Mildred to step into the hall.

"Would you happen to have any pictures of Eddy and Mark, from back when they were buddies in high school?"

"You know us Moms pretty well, don't you, Sir. Come to the kitchen, I have some in my purse."

A quick peek convinced Masters that the boy in question was without any doubt, Eddy.

"Handsome boys, weren't they?" Mildred said, beaming.

"They certainly were!" Masters agreed. He thanked her for her time and help.

Masters called Keppy's office and again requested that his print man come out to Forest Way. As that call came in, Keppy was just finishing the other matter so he answered the phone himself. They arrived within fifteen minutes, a definite advantage of small towns, Masters noted.

The print man once again impressed Masters, as he had thought to bring samples of the other prints that appeared to be relevant to this case. He dusted the photo as Masters and Keppy talked.

"So, Malcolm was fooling around with young Eddy. Terrible! I never even suspected anything like that. Just thought old Mal had decided to do one really decent thing in his life. "Terrible!" Keppy said shaking his head in disbelief.

The officer spoke. "Well, guess what?"

"Let me try," Masters interrupted. "Malcolm, Estelle, and the vagrant."

"How in the World!" the officer exclaimed.

"That's it exactly. That's all of them. Estelle, Malcolm

Blackmore, and Jerry White. I won't even ask," Keppy said.

"But what's with this Jerry White? Why do his prints keep showing up around here? Do you know where he is?"

"I have my suspicions, but we can handle that later. Let's get on over to Bayer's Drug Store. Could you have Bayer brought to meet us there, Chief?"

"Just let me make a call."

Masters reminded the officer that knowledge of those photos was strictly confidential among the three of them. Keppy re-emphasized it - as he was prone to do.

Masters told Mildred he was leaving, and then left with Keppy. It was only a five-minute drive - but then, in little Oak Hills, everything was only a five-minute drive. Keppy had the key and they entered.

"Do you want prints lifted from anywhere special?" asked the officer.

"Perhaps later," said Masters surveying the large open room.

The pharmacy was toward the rear with four rows of display racks and counters extending from back to front, each containing the usual drugstore ware. The soda shop, with its fountain, booths and small round tables and chairs, was to one side at the front.

Masters strolled through the store, stopping to give careful consideration to the soda shop.

"Brings back memories, doesn't it?" Masters remarked, touching the tables, and booths and fancy wire-backed chairs.

"These look to be new booths. Do you know?" Masters asked.

"Yes, they are. He bought all new seats for the booths. Same tables though. And the same little round tables and chairs that were here when I was a kid," Keppy answered.

"I suppose the upholstery on the old booth seats was probably in bad shape." Masters said out loud.

"No Sir. Not really," the officer said.

"The Dew Drop Inn bought them, and they're in use in their dining room now, just as they were."

"The what?" Masters asked, amused by the name.

"The Dew Drop Inn - it's our best cafe." Keppy explained.

At that time, a patrol car pulled up and Bayer was shown inside. His explanation for the new seats was plausibly but not convincing to Masters.

"Preventative maintenance. Put in durable material right from the start and you have fewer problems later on."

"As to the break-in," Masters began, "You say nothing was missing. Was anything out of place or moved around. Anything to tell you where the intruder had been or what he or she might have been looking for?"

"He'd made himself a milk shake and then broke the shake glass. There was a candy wrapper on the floor. That's about all."

"What did you do with the broken glass?" Masters asked.

"I tossed it into the trash container under the counter. It may still be there."

A quick search by one of the officers and the glass was retrieved."

"Let's bag that for prints. You can work on that later, at your convenience," Masters said.

Then turning back to Bayer, he asked:

"Where do you keep the special drugs - the odd ball drugs, the ones you don't have much call for?" Masters asked.

"Several different places. If they need refrigeration, like some of the snake anti-venoms, then they're kept in the refrigerator, back in the work-room. Otherwise, in that top cupboard, there," Bayer said, pointing above Keppy's head.

Masters pulled a step stool over and climbed up to give it a look. After a brief search, he stepped down, a brown mailing box in his hands.

"UPS from Brazil," he said. "What do we have here, Mr. Bayer?"

Masters removed a bottle from the package.

"Surprise, surprise! It is labeled, Piataconi."

"What do you mean, surprise? That's just a glazing compound. I special ordered it a month ago, for that potter out by O'Day's garage."

"What potter is that?" Keppy asked.

"He's been in town a couple of months. Surely, you've seen him. Black hair down to his shoulders, full beard, dark

glasses. Right out of hippy town. You couldn't have missed him."

"Well, I did. How about you men?" Keppy said turning to the two officers. Neither had any knowledge of this, suddenly mysterious, new potter.

"Do you know the place he speaks of," Masters asked.

"I suppose it's the old antique shop," one of the officers said. "That's the only vacant building in that vicinity."

"I suppose you have some sort of record of that order," Masters asked Bayer.

"Certainly. It will be right here on this little clipboard. That's where I keep all special orders until they are picked up."

Bayer searched through the order blanks.

"It isn't here. I can't understand it. Why wouldn't it be here?"

Frantically, he looked around, picking things up to search beneath them, and rechecking the clip board time after time.

"A most convincing performance," Masters thought.

"Did you perhaps place it somewhere else in the store?" Keppy asked.

"No. There is no other place I keep such records. This just doesn't make any sense."

"Perhaps, we have found what the intruder came to steal," Masters said.

"Or there was no order in the first place," Keppy added.

"Why would you be interested in that in the first place?" Bayer asked at last. "It's harmless enough. What's this all about?"

"Would it remain harmless, as you put it, when mixed with tiablanca and piranhazanna?" Masters asked casually.

"Well, let's see," Bayer said, giving the problem some thought.

"No, I believe that does become poisonous. I can check my library for you and find out for sure. ... Wait a minute! What are you saying? What aren't you telling me?"

Another convincing performance, to Masters' way of thinking!

"We aren't telling you that it was that particular, three-part poison, that killed Mrs. Forester, and that we have just

found the key ingredient here in your cupboard, Mr. Bayer," Masters explained.

"But it isn't even open," Bayer protested.

"But it is," said Masters, displaying the broken seal.

"Let's weigh the contents to make certain. The bottle says ninety grams. That's close to three ounces, I believe."

Masters poured the remaining contents onto the scale. It weighed just a tad over two ounces.

"Seems we have a problem here," Keppy said.

"Isn't it obvious that the intruder stole that, too," Bayer said.

"That is entirely possible," Masters replied.

"It is also entirely possible that there never was an order and that you used the piataconi to kill Mrs. Forester, yourself."

"Well I did not kill Mrs. Forester, for God sake! I had no Earthly reason to kill Mrs. Forester!"

"I assure you that we will look into every possible alternative," Masters said.

"If there is a bearded-hippie potter, he will be found. Do you have anything else for Mr. Bayer, Chief?"

"No, I think that's about it," he replied.

"Take Mr. Bayer back to the jail."

"Let's take a look at that potter's place. Who owns it? Can we get inside someway?" Masters asked.

"If it's the building we're thinking of, Billy O'Day owns it. I'm sure he'll let us look around," Keppy said.

Another five-minute drive, then two more to gain permission and the key. It was a small, deteriorating, unpainted frame building, with large store-type windows in front. In general appearance, it was not unlike a shack on the edge of Dodge City during Gunsmoke days. Inside, it was dusty and ill kept. Billy said he had rented it to a man who fit Bayer's description of the hippie. He hadn't been around there much since, however. Billy said the man did work on pottery and had a potter's wheel and things like that. He'd seen him working through the window on several occasions. He hadn't talked to him though, since the first day when he had paid three months' rent in advance - cash. There was still a month and a half left on that time.

Whoever had been there had cleared out, evidently some night after Billy had closed up the garage next door. There were a few pieces of broken pots in a cardboard box in one corner, and a number of newspapers, spread around, helter-skelter. Sitting here and there were a few half-empty, half-pints of paint, and brushes with partially cleaned, though now hardened bristles - not the mark of a serious potter. Masters rummaged through the box. One of the pot fragments seemed to have a thumb imprint on it, as if the pot may have been broken and discarded while still wet, thereby leaving the imprint.

"Let's have your print man see if he can get anything from this thumb imprint." Masters said.

The officer began examining it. Masters continued to rummage, beginning to assemble the newspapers back into their original form - date by date, page by page, section by section.

"Interesting," he said, then asked that the papers be sacked as evidence.

The officer doing the print match said, "I think we've found Jerry White."

"You mean the imprint on the fragment matches the vagrant's?" Keppy said in total surprise.

"Sure looks like it to me."

And it sure looked like it to Masters, also.

"Before we leave, Chief," Masters said, "I think you and I need to ask a few questions of Billy on another matter"

The officer excused himself and Masters began:

"Billy, I understand that Katy is your cousin and that some years ago, she just, one day, abruptly stopped driving. Do you have any idea why that was?"

"Well," he said, addressing Keppy instead, "Katy got so upset over your little boy's death that she just fell apart. Little kids were always so precious to her. She wanted so much to have a family of her own, but that never seemed to work out, you know. Next best thing I guess, was her teaching."

"But why so upset that she would stop driving?" Masters pressed.

"I have an idea but I just can't tell you, Sir," Billy replied.

"It's really important that you do," Keppy said, putting

his arm around Billy's shoulders, in that way typical of an old and trusted friend.

"It's real important, or you know I wouldn't ask it of you."

There seemed to be emerging, a tender side of the Chief, that Masters had suspected, but never before witnessed.

"OK. Here it is. This is really hard. ... Katy's car had the left front fender banged in when I got it from her the afternoon of the accident. She called me about six o'clock and asked me to come over and pick it up immediately and sell it for junk. I never asked her about it, but it hadn't been damaged that way when I filled the tank for her that morning."

"You need to go ahead and say it," Keppy urged.

"Well, it just seemed to me that since her car sort of fit the description and all, that maybe she hit the little tyke herself."

"Why didn't you say something before this?" Keppy asked.

"She was family, Mort. You know, family!"

Keppy patted him on the back.

"Come by the station tomorrow - anytime. I'll need you put that in the form of a statement."

"Sure. OK. I feel like dregs, you know. First that and now this awful thing at Forest Way. She's been through so much."

Billy turned and walked back toward his garage, the very picture of a whipped puppy.

"You really handled that in the finest possible way, Chief. My hat's off to you," Masters said.

They took a few steps toward the car and Masters turned his head toward Keppy:

"Mort?" he asked.

"Short for Mortimer – from my great grandfather. Don't let it get around. Most folks here about have forgotten that!"

They laughed quietly and Masters put his hand on Keppy's shoulder as they continued on their way.

Next stop was Mary's apartment. A police officer had been sent out to Forest Way to give her a ride. Mary was so nervous she needed help fitting the key into the lock. But then, who might not be nervous, surrounded by policemen and

being a suspect in a murder investigation?

Inside, it was a neat, homey place, decked out in Early American decor and appearing to have been recently redecorated. Mary said she had redone it herself, and seemed proud and pleased when Masters commented on what a nice job she had done. Her writing area was in one corner of her living room - a computer-type word processor, paper, a file cabinet - just the expected things.

There was a large picture window at the other end of the living room. It was populated with all manner of plants. As Mildred had suggested, there were African Violets, and orchids, along with other exotic varieties. They were much prettier than the yellowing philodendron hanging on to life in the window at Masters' home. Just off her kitchen was a small area Mary used to do the potting of her plants. Masters inventoried the materials. There it was among her fertilizers - piranhazanna! Masters picked it up. "This good stuff, is it?" he asked her.

"It's special, for orchids, mostly," came her response.

She didn't disguise the fact that the discovery greatly upset her, but she said no more.

"I think I need to tell you, Mary, that piranhazanna is a chemical that was found in Estelle's body and contributed to her death," Masters said softly.

"You can get it lots of places. A great many of us serious indoor gardeners use it all the time," was her reply.

"You're absolutely right, of course, but we'll need to take this with us for the time being until this whole thing gets cleared up. You understand," Masters continued.

"Oh, sure. Do whatever you have to."

"We just need to look around a bit more, then we'll be out of your hair. I'm sorry we have to inconvenience you like this," Masters said.

Masters checked her personal correspondence, the trash cans, behind pictures and even under her mattress - all places amateur criminals might hide something. Nothing was found that remotely resembled that which Masters wanted.

They were soon finished there and moved on to Katy's home. It was a lovely little white house near the edge of town. The picket fence was newly painted and its gate squeaked,

just the way a good picket fence gate should. Katy had already arrived. She seemed more at ease there at home than when at work. Understandable, Masters thought.

The house had a small living room on one side of the front entryway, with a dining room of the same dimensions on the other. Behind the dining room was the kitchen. Behind the living room were two bedrooms off a long, wide hall. At the end of the hall to the right was the bathroom. The walls of that hallway were a miniature gallery, adorned with a dozen or more of Katy's oil paintings. To Masters' way of thinking they were all, far superior to the one he had seen at Forest Way. Again, understandable, he thought, smiling to himself.

Her easel and painting area were in the back bedroom - a surprisingly spacious looking area for such a small house. There were large windows on the two outside walls, and a skylight had been installed just to meet her particular needs. The look of a serious painter, "Or would that be paintress?" Masters mused to himself. The studio was every bit as neat as the house in general. There was a painting in progress on the easel - a landscape with a bridge over a river.

"Do you ever make your own paints, Katy?" Masters asked, picking up a large mortar and pestle set from the table.

"On occasion," was her response.

"I see you have a supply of tiablanca. I understand that makes a particularly fine white pigment," Masters went on.

"Why yes it does. I didn't have any idea you were into such things. Do you paint, yourself?"

"Oh no. The only brush I have sits right here under my nose."

Masters had waited years to be able to use that line. The lack of response was somewhat disappointing to him.

He smiled at her and then became immediately more serious.

"Mary," he began, "Tiablanca was found in Mrs. Forester's body and contributed to her death. You'll understand, then, why Chief Keppy will need to take this along for a while."

Katy wilted into a chair and nodded, making no other response.

The remainder of the search was unfruitful. Within a

half-hour, they had come and gone.

In the car on the way to Eddy's home, Keppy had a question for Masters:

"We already have all three ingredients. What do we expect to find at Eddy's?"

Masters was privately amused at Keppy's use of the word we.

"I have no idea, Chief," he said. And that was the unabashed truth!

It was a modest home. The two boys were playing in the front yard. Eddy had pulled into the driveway just ahead of them, having been called to meet them there. The boys eagerly rushed to greet him. It appeared to be a rare treat to see their daddy at that time of day. He picked up the small one and put his arm around the older as they strode together toward the house. He scooted them inside, and turned to greet the visitors.

"If we could wait just a minute. Margaret is going to take the boys next door while you're here - no need to upset them, I figured."

They waited briefly and then entered. The officers went right to work with the search. Masters was surprised to see such expensive looking things in Eddy's home - hand-crafted furniture, original oils on the walls, real silverware, imported china, and more. Eddy figured what he was thinking, after all, it was pretty obvious.

"You're wondering how I can afford all this on my salary from Estelle?" he said.

"Well, yes, frankly," said Masters.

All those years Mr. Blackmore was supporting me, he gave me an allowance - a really big allowance. I banked most of it. When I got married, I decided to use a portion of it on things that Margaret and I had never before been able to afford."

"It certainly turned out lovely. It's a beautiful home," Masters said.

"Just for the record, under these circumstances and all, would you happen to have a bank book that could verify those deposits and withdrawals?"

"Come with me."

Eddy led Masters into a study, every bit as lovely as the rest of the house. It reminded Masters of a stately library in an Old English home, where one might expect to find some retired general or Lord. Bookshelves along three walls. A heavy oak desk. Four plush chairs. A matching oak credenza under the large, many-paned window. A large, beautiful, globe on a stand in one corner. Even a small bear skin rug in front of a little fireplace which was flanked by books and topped with a thick mantle of matching oak. A mariner's clock sat ticking away on the mantel as if keeping watch over the whole array of precious things.

"Here is what you want," Eddy said, after a short search through a desk drawer. And it was exactly that. Deposits dating from 1977. Fifty dollars a month through 1979, at which time they grew to one hundred each and eventually two hundred dollars. Over ten years that added up to a tidy sum. Masters handed the book to Keppy who gave it a most official once over.

"I think that's all for now, don't you Chief," Masters said. Keppy nodded in agreement.

"We may need to come back later on," Masters added.

"Chief why don't you and the others go on and conduct the search of Mr. Bayer's residence. I want to talk a bit more with Eddy, and I'm sure he'll give me a lift back to Forest Way."

It was agreed, and the others left. Eddy motioned Masters to take a seat.

"Sitting there behind your big desk, in front of shelf upon shelf of history books, you look ever so much like a college professor, Eddy," Masters said.

"I'd really like to get a Ph.D. in history and do just that, Mr. Masters. Find a nice little college far away from Oak Hills and just settle in for long, contented life."

There was a moment of silence.

"So," Eddy said, "What's on your mind?"

"Eddy," Masters began in a suddenly somber tone, "I have discovered evidence that incontrovertibly documents your sexual relationship with Malcolm. It covers the period from the time you were fourteen until the time of his death when you were twenty-four."

"What are you talking about?" was Eddy's first response.

Masters pulled the envelope of pictures from his coat pocket and laid them on the desk for Eddy to examine. At the sight of the envelope, Eddy's presence mellowed.

"I know what you have there, of course," he said, choosing not to look at them. I guess I knew this time would come sooner or later."

"Why don't you tell me about it?" Masters suggested.

"I was an orphan, I suppose you know that. I lived my whole life at the County Home. They were good to me there. I had what I needed; never more than that, but I never lacked for clothes to wear or food to eat. They were all old ladies out there, bless them. I had never had a man interested in me in my life."

"One day when I was fourteen, just out of the blue, Mr. Blackmore - the rich Mr. Blackmore, to me - showed up at the Home and asked to take me for a drive. Of course, I went. His big car! To be out with a guy! We drove over to Preston, a little town just east of here. We ate lunch at a real restaurant. He let me have two pieces of pie. I was fourteen, Mr. Masters, and I'd never before had two pieces of pie at the same meal."

"We got along really well. It was easy to talk to him. He seemed really interested in me - what music I liked, what I liked to do - all that kind of thing. We laughed and had a great time. It was a wonderful feeling like I had never known before."

"We did that same kind of thing several more times, and then he finally took me up to his cabin. I loved the place. It was like something out of a Jack London book. Well, that day we tramped the woods, waded the creek, and got absolutely filthy having this wonderful time together. When we got back to the cabin, Malcolm commented on how dirty we were and suggested we needed to shower. That presented no problem for me. I'd showered while old women looked on my whole life. We stripped down and showered together."

"Well, you can guess the rest. He did some things to me in the shower and, though stunned, I just let him do it because I felt I owed it to him. I also knew all those good

times would be over for ever if I refused, so I let it go on."

"When he let me out at the Home that night, he slipped me a twenty-dollar bill and squeezed my hand. Money. Affection. I had never had a twenty-dollar bill before. I'd never had a man who liked me, before."

From then on, the sexual activity became a regular finale to all our times together, and he always gave me money. At first, it seemed ok. I don't know why it should have seemed ok, but it did. For several years, I went along, pretending that I was really into it, just like he was. Then later, when I really began to be infatuated with girls, I tried to balk. He reminded me of the pictures he'd taken, and how he would show them to the authorities if I didn't just cooperate as in the past. He said they would send me to a reform school where they would beat me."

"Well, I resigned myself to tolerate the situation, but also, to get everything I possibly could out of the old leech. I learned how to work him for anything I wanted. Clothes, an education, money. After all was said and done, I guess I used him every bit as much as he used me."

Masters then said:

"The other day when we were working with Herbert and you found the information on Malcolm's medallion, you became quite upset and called him a bastard. Can you explain to me what you meant by that?"

"As I got older and more knowledgeable about sexual practices, I became concerned about sexually transmitted diseases. I talked with Malcolm about that, and time and time again, he had assured me that I was his only sexual partner; that I had no reason to ever be concerned about that. He was always so damn convincing! I believed him. I really believed him. But if he was off cavorting with boy prostitutes on all of those monthly trips of his, who knows what he may have acquired and then passed on me. Who knows what terrible things I may have flowing through my body right now. And Margaret? What if I have passed something awful on to her? So you see, Mr. Masters, I had reason to become upset when we found out the meaning behind that medallion, and if I could of thought of a more virulent term than bastard, you'd better believe I would have used it!"

"Did you murder him?" Masters just dropped that one out of nowhere.

"Murder him. You mean Malcolm? Me? Of course, not! I had crafted a good thing there. I hated him, but I didn't want him dead. Why would I murder him? I could never knowingly kill anyone, Mr. Masters."

Silence followed.

"Why in the World do you think Malcolm was murdered? It was ruled an accidental death," Eddy then asked.

"It's just one of several possibilities I'm looking into. I'll ask you not to talk about it, please."

"Ok. No I won't say a thing, and, Mr. Masters . . ."

"Rest assured," Masters interjected, "I won't tell a soul about your relationship with Malcolm unless it becomes obvious there is no alternative."

"Thank you, Sir. It would kill Margaret, and the boys, you know."

"Speaking of the boys, I guess I understand now why you over reacted so violently to that incident between your oldest son and the Brandon boy."

"You know about that, too, do you. Yeah. I just flipped out. I went wild seeing him let that older guy touch him that way. It just triggered all those years of pent-up anger and guilt. At that moment, I felt that I just had to teach him to never ever allow any guy to do that to him again."

"Sounds like you have been working on all this," Masters said.

"I'm in therapy in Bloomington. Dr. Custer specializes in adults who were sexually abused as children. Sometimes I think I'm doing pretty well and other times, well, it's really hard, you know. Margaret thinks it's all about being an orphan and that sort of thing. This will kill her if she has to find out. If it's going to have to be made public, please promise me that you will let me tell her beforehand."

"Of course, but I think you may be short selling her, Jack. Wives have a way of understanding things no one else in the World can understand," Masters added.

Masters glanced at the clock.

"Well, we best be getting back to Forest Way."

It was well on to two o'clock when Masters arrived back in Mildred's kitchen. She was waiting for him.

"After our heavy breakfast, I just fixed sandwiches and a salad for lunch," she said.

Masters sat at the kitchen table and she pulled out all sorts of fine looking things for him to enjoy.

"Mildred, do you recall anyone around town by the name of Jerry White?"

"Jerry White. No, Sir, I can't say as I do. There was an old lady named White that used live on the South side, but she died back in '80 or '81. No Sir, no Jerry White."

As Masters finished his lunch, Jack came in. Masters hadn't seen him all day.

"Jack, old man. Where you been keeping yourself?" Masters said, pulling out a chair for him.

"Oh just here and there I guess. What about you."

"Busy, busy, busy," Masters replied, feeding Jack no more information than Jack had fed him.

"By the way, I've been wanting to read some of your sports columns. Folks around here say you are really good. How can I get hold of some?"

"I'm a pack rat, Masters. I've got everyone I ever wrote upstairs. Come on up after lunch if you have time. You can read to your heart's delight."

A knowing look passed between Masters and Mildred - Jack was letting Masters into his quarters - quite an honor!

With lunch finished, Masters made his way to the third floor. Jack had left the door open, expecting his arrival.

"Come on in," Jack called, seeing him approaching.

Masters entered. The rooms were actually far neater than he had anticipated from Mildred's description. Jack did have to remove a box of play props from a chair so Masters could have a place to sit, but no bother. Jack pulled a stack of sports sections from a shelf above the couch. Each had been neatly re-folded so the article faced out. Jack handed them to Masters.

"Read away. Just make yourself at home. I'm going to shower." And at that he disappeared into the bedroom.

It gave Masters an opportunity to do some chair-side snooping. A bookcase full of paperbacks and what appeared

to be old college text books lined the wall to Masters' left. A brief survey suggested Jack had wide interests. There was a large section on drugs - no surprise. Another on art and the theater. There must have been fifty paperback mysteries and an equal number of sports hero type books. Across the room there were bows and quivers of arrows on the wall. Centerfolds were thumb tacked here and there about the room. His furniture was rustic, much like that at the cabin, in fact. It was comfortable, sturdy and informal - a lot like Jack.

Masters peeked into the box just removed from his chair and saw, what must have been the wigs and such Jack had worn in the play. Beside it on the floor, laying open was a chemistry book. No desk was in sight, and Masters wondered where he wrote these great sports columns. That reminded him that he'd better get to reading before Jack reappeared.

Although Masters didn't consider himself a literary critic, he was genuinely impressed with the articles. They each focused on athletes rather than on athletics - the person and not the game. Masters found that surprising, both from his personal knowledge of Jack and from Jack's own admission that he had never been able to really care about anybody. They were beautiful essays about people - kids overcoming the odds. Something Jack, himself, had apparently seldom tried.

Masters noticed several phone books on the stand beside his chair. One contained numbers for Oak Hills and the surrounding area, and one was the Bloomington book. That second directory was three years old. It interested Masters that Jack would have kept such a long since out of date book. He picked it up and began flipping through its pages, eventually coming upon a dog-eared page in the business section. The name and number of Crystal Banks, MD was circled. Perhaps he was a physician who assists in some way in the treatment of drug addiction, Masters thought. He flipped on to the yellow pages, to see if she were listed under any specialty. Before he could accomplish that, Jack reappeared, from his shower, toweling himself off.

"So, what do you think, am I a great writer or what?" he said, laughing as he finished drying his back with a South American looking beach towel.

"Quite honestly, I'm amazed." Masters said.

"This is great stuff. You seem to really understand what makes kids tick - what's important to them. I really like what you write!"

"I'll have to engage you as my syndication agent." Jack snickered, as he pulled on some jeans dragged from a pile of clothes heaped up on the floor.

"You obviously work hard at this writing, don't you?"

"Figured I should master something before my time is up."

Masters recognized that as a strange statement, but didn't press for its meaning.

"I was just thinking, looking around here I see no desk. Where do you write?"

Jack flashed one of his broad, boyish smiles.

"I write down stairs on one of the word processors. I go down at night after everybody's gone. Those gadgets fascinate me. Estelle would have blown a cork if she had known I was using her equipment."

"Part of the fun, no doubt," Masters said smiling at Jack.

Jack returned the smile and nodded as if to say, "You're ok, after all, old man."

"You and Estelle just never communicated?" Masters asked.

"No we never did, not even when I was a kid. Back then, I used to work things out of her. At first my big mistake was coming right out and asking her for things. That never worked. Later on, I recognized that with Estelle, everything had to be her idea. She'd never take anyone else's.

So, when I wanted to go to summer camp I'd indicate to her my wonderful plan to stay around Forest Way all summer, but I had sent off to have all kinds of camp material sent directly to her. That way, I got camp, she got the credit, and neither of us had to see each other for two solid months every summer."

"Ingenious!" Masters said.

"It must have been hard around here for you in those days."

"You learn how to survive," he said.

Masters got to his feet, as if to stretch, feeling freer to roam a bit, once Jack was present. He passed by the bookcase as they talked, removing several books and thumbing through them casually. He picked up a small vase from one shelf.

"I'm not a student of such things," Masters said, "But this vase has a South American look to it.

"Good eye. I picked that up down there last summer. That's where I found this towel. Isn't it outrageous?"

He held it up so Masters could see the whole towel. Hidden, before as Jack was using it, was a nearly life sized sunbathing nude - female, of course.

"I can see why you enjoyed South America," Masters said, raising his eyebrows.

Jack smiled. He kept trying, but he just couldn't find a way to get to that old man.

"Tell me about this vase. The colors are so vivid. How do they achieve that, do you know?"

Ever so briefly, Jack gave Masters that, "Oh, Oh, what's up, look" - the one indicative of the momentary fear of being found out. He then began rattling on about something irrelevant, though perhaps slightly related. Masters didn't pay attention. He had already obtained his information.

Masters took down another book - World's greatest puzzles.

"You're into puzzles, too, I see."

"I dabble," Jack answered seemingly more and more uneasy.

Jack picked up a cube puzzle and tossed it to Masters.

"I'm more into this type of physical puzzle."

"I have no sense for how to do these things," Masters said and tossed it back, noticing again that Jack was left handed.

"You seem to enjoy mysteries, also," Masters commented, pointing to the shelves of paperbacks.

"Mostly when I was younger."

"And sports? Masters asked.

"I read them mostly to get a sense about sports writing style. Recently I've been loaning them to guys over at the drug rehab center."

"The one in Bloomington?"

"Yeah. I took them another bunch when I visited over there earlier this week," he said, nodding toward the foot-long empty space on one shelf.

"That's where you were the day of Estelle's death?"

"That's right. I go over about twice a month and just rap about sports and staying clean and stuff like that."

"How nice of you!" Masters said.

"Hey, you'll ruin my reputation using words like nice."

"I suppose it's none of my business, but do you usually go over by bus?"

"No. I just didn't feel like driving this week."

Sensing a growing uneasiness on Jack's part, Masters felt he was about to overstay his welcome, so he excused himself:

"I must be on my way, now, Jack. Thanks for the chance to see your articles. It's always nice to chat with you. Hope to see you later on at dinner. Nice digs, by the way."

Jack managed a smile as he closed the door.

It was a quarter of four as Masters descended the stairs from the third floor. Although he wanted to sit down with a paper and pencil and begin putting everything together, he decided that first, he should investigate Estelle's room. It was next door to Malcolm's, though in every way separate. Masters was beginning to think Jack's somewhat vulgar "no sack time together" comment may well have been the case.

To his surprise, upon entering he found that there were three rather spacious rooms, forming a lovely apartment. They seemed not at all like Estelle. Lacy curtains at the windows. A mixture of contemporary and Mediterranean furniture - all quite comfortable looking - a stark contrast to the rest of the house. There were pictures on the wall of people who must have been important to her. One section contained just photos of Jack - another of Eddy. There were several with Mary - taken through the years since childhood. Mildred and Florence were both there. One was of an old man with a boy. Masters assumed it was a younger Paul with the former gardener, Ancil.

Several bookcases lined the sitting room. Masters perused them. There was everything from the classics to

sleazy romance novels. Picturing Estelle with a romance novel was a jump Masters' mind would just not take. There were beautiful books on art and nature and travel. Many dozens of modern novels filled one complete bookcase. Opening several of the books at random, Masters quickly ascertained that they had each been read, cover to cover. Masters noticed her habit of dog-earing pages - perhaps marking where she stopped or perhaps making later reference to some particular item more easily possible.

As the centerpiece on a long narrow table, which stood against the outside wall of her bedroom, were her own novels - nineteen of them, lined up like proud soldiers, ready for parade.

On her nightstand were several pictures of a lovely young lady, at about fourteen and seventeen, Masters judged. Closer examination revealed they must have been Estelle. On a dresser, a middle-aged couple - probably her parents. In the center of her dressing table was a young soldier, probably of Korean War vintage. The inscription on the picture read, "Estelle, until I return. I'll love you forever. Tommy." Underneath it, proudly displayed, was a Purple Heart. Tommy had never returned.

Masters wiped a tear from his cheek, and went on with his search. The huge bed was similar to the one in Malcolm's room, although it seemed more at home there in Estelle's room. One difference between the two was immediately noticeable - In the foot board of Estelle's bed was a drawer. It was locked. Using a hairpin from her dressing table Masters had it open in a moment. He removed it and took it over to a table for examination. It contained mostly papers and ledgers and file folders, but what caught Masters' attention was the flat, low fire-proof box. It took significantly longer that a moment, but Masters soon had that open also.

Its contents seemed to have been planned from the outset to incriminate Estelle for her own dastardly deeds. In a heat sealed plastic sack was an oily mechanics rag wrapped around a steel file with what looked to be aluminum filings still among its teeth. A paperback manual on maintaining and replacing brake lines in foreign cars. A single Polaroid photograph, lifted, he was sure, from Malcolm's' collection,

showing Malcolm with Eddy - when about age fifteen - doing their thing. In the bottom of the box were three single sheets, typed and signed. The first was a confession from Katy, stating that she had been the hit and run driver in the Keppy child's death. The second was from Mary, stating that she had been pregnant by Jack and had the child aborted. The third was from Eddy, confessing the nature of his relationship with Malcolm.

It fell together rapidly for Masters. Estelle had maneuvered each of them into a position, where, if they didn't sign, she would expose them. If they did sign and remain in her employ, she would remain silent. Blatant blackmail! Add to this the fact that she had indeed carried through on her blackmail threat to Paul - seeing that he could find no other employment once he had crossed her - and the other three knew she meant business. She not only had the finest staff money could buy, but she had the finest staff blackmail could keep!

Masters could hardly wait to hear the reading of Estelle's will the next day. He had found no copy of a will among her things - something he had hoped to discover.

Masters went back to his room and called Keppy, asking him if he could procure a drug sniffing dog for their use sometime in the near future. He also arranged a meeting with Keppy for the next morning.

Jack chose not to join them for dinner, so it was just Masters and Florence. It was a pleasant, small talk conversation. Florence expressed concern over her own future employment. She had one lead, but knew Mildred would also be applying. Masters reassured her, as best he could.

After dinner, Masters settled into his room for an evening of reflection. The main item on his list was the time he had spent in Jack's apartment. The glaze on the vase had most likely been Piataconi, and something in that exchange about the vase had definitely troubled Jack. Jack's trip to South America had certainly provided him the opportunity to hear about the poison - especially if he had been in the market for one.

One of the murder mysteries from Jack's shelf was,

The Maniacal Mechanic, a story, Masters happened to know, which centered around a car mechanic who killed off all his mother's lovers by tampering with their vehicles. Beyond the obvious surface connection to Malcolm's death, Masters found it interesting that the pages which began the story's presentation of the break line tampering incident, had been dog-eared on both the right page and on the left page as the book would lay open. Jack, being left handed, would tend to turn down the corners of left pages, while Estelle, or some other right hander, would tend to turn down the right corners. Perhaps, Masters thought, it had been Estelle's book and had been dog-eared first by her, as she planned Malcolm's murder. Then the book and its telltale dog-ear had been discovered sometime later by Jack. Jack dog-eared it also out of habit when it occurred to him that Estelle had copied that method to kill his father. Since everyone knew that copying anything at all from someone else was definitely not Estelle's style, it made an absolutely perfect cover for her to go ahead and do exactly that.

One of Jack's phrases kept haunting Masters. "Figured I should master something before my time is up." Such a strange thing for a healthy, vigorous young man to say. It seemed he was just beginning to finally get his life sorted out and on its way. Why would he be thinking about his time being up? Had he perceived himself to be in some sort of danger? Masters had a hard time letting it go, but, having no answer, he moved on.

He was thinking back to the articles Jack had written. They each had included something to dissuade youngsters from using drugs. Many of them poked fun at kids who had nothing better to do than use drugs or hang around soda shops. It seemed like a strange set of behaviors to push together like that as a set - drugs and sodas. Jack was obviously on an anti-drug crusade. That may have been all well and good, but Masters had to wonder, how far Jack would really go? Mary's revelation about Jack's 'hit-man fantasy', made it all the more troublesome.

On a pad beside Jack's phone, Masters had noticed a phone number, written not on the pad paper, but up on the binding, as if to keep it there, so it could be used time after

time. The number, as written had an extra number -"2"- at the end. An extension number perhaps. Masters reached for his phone and dialed it. He waited. It rang just once. Then he heard: "National drug hot line. To report a dealer, please press 2. To talk to a counselor, please press 3."

It provided additional confirmation of Jack's anti-drug crusade. An indication, perhaps, that Jack had been receiving information about dealers and calling it into the hot line. A possible explanation of his real interest in sports reporting - to get close to the kids in the community and gain their confidence. It might also explain Jack's dropping everything after receiving calls from youngsters and immediately leaving. Could Jack Blackmore be one of the good guys after all?

Next, Masters dialed information in Bloomington and got the physician referral service. He soon had them on the line. He requested information about Crystal Banks. His eyebrows raised as he heard she was not at all what he had proposed, but instead ran an abortion clinic.

"Was she practicing in 1986?" Masters asked the helpful voice on the other end. There was a brief pause, then, "Yes, Sir. She opened her practice here in 1980, and then opened the clinic later in 1988."

With all due apologies to the sensitivities of Raymond Masters, the plot thickened once again!

Another book on one of Jack's shelves had not been fitted in among the rest. Its spine extended in front of the others, as if it had been used since the last time the bookshelf had been strengthened by Mildred. It was a beginner's instruction book on making pottery. Masters had not taken time to pull it out and examine it, but had noticed dried gray clay on the top of the pages as it sat there. Masters took that as a sign that it had probably been used while practicing pot making.

At the pottery shop, Masters had spent some amount of time organizing the discarded newspaper he found there. They had been recent editions of the Sentinel. He had discovered that they were complete papers except for the sports section, which was missing in every case. Jack could have given his waste newspaper to this mysterious Jerry-hippie-potter person to use there at the building, or Jack could

have been there himself, reading the sports pages and taking them with him while leaving the remainder of the papers behind. Someone else at Forest Way could have also given Jerry the papers. Mildred? Florence? Jerry's fingerprints suggested he had fairly free run of the house at one time or another. Perhaps he picked up the discarded papers by himself. It was not a very productive clue at that time.

There was one final thorn in Masters' side: something about the box of play props sitting on the floor in Jack's room. He couldn't place just what it was. There was a well-worn copy of the play book and another book on makeup and disguises. Both seemed to be reasonable items, and yet. Then there was the black wig and beard and "the dark glasses," Masters said to himself.

The wheels began turning. In the play, Jack had appeared as a red head and in a brown wig and mustache, and in a gray wig and beard, but not in a black set. Neither had he wore dark glasses, something Masters remembered having thought at the time was strange, given their popularity as disguises.

So, what could this mean? Jack could have trained Jerry White in pottery making and provided a disguise for him to use when ordering the Piataconi from Bayer and again when renting the building from Billy O'Day. But why go to all that trouble just to get a glaze. Another possibility: Jack could have taught himself how to make pots. Since Bayer had no way of having known Jack, Jack could have used the disguise himself to order the piataconi and then rent the building. But why? So, he could go back later and steal it to use in the poisoning of Estelle. But Jack was not even in town when the poisoning occurred. Perhaps he or Jerry stole the other ingredients from Mary and Katy in such small a quantity that neither noticed it was missing. Of course, either Jack or Jerry could have obtained the other ingredients legally, the same way as Mary and Katy presumably had done.

Jerry's prints on the pot fragment and the picture frame, made suspicion lean in his direction. What motive could he have had? Had he been related to the old Mrs. White, whom Mildred had spoken about? Had Estelle wronged her or Jerry in some way at some time, and Jerry was taking his revenge?

If so, how did he gain access to the house without being seen? How would a vagrant know about that particular, esoteric combination of ingredients that made up the poison?

At that point it popped into Masters' head that what he had noticed on Jack's blanket that day at the cabin, may not have been mud and dog hair, but, instead, potter's clay and hair from the black wig. At some point - most likely at the pottery shop - the wig could have been wrapped in the blanket and in the process got the clay on it. Those substances could be verified, of course, and it would be investigated.

Once again, many more questions than answers, but at that point, that was just fine with Masters. The questions must come first, and that day's questions were truly great questions! The next day should reveal the last few missing pieces of the puzzle, for then would come the results of the last several residential searches, and the all-important reading of Estelle's will.

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Day Six: Fifty four words

At seven A.M., on the day she was to be buried, all the principals in the life and death of Estelle Forester had gathered in the living room of Forest Way. There was to be no visitation. There was to be no funeral. There was, in fact, to be no memorial service of any kind. All of this, of course, was being done precisely in accordance to The Grand Dame's stipulations. Mr. Jameson, her attorney, made his opening statement:

"Mrs. Forester completed her last will in private, having only its signing witnessed and notarized. She sealed it inside this envelope herself, in my presence, and it has remained unopened in my safe since that day - January 22, 1993. Like you, I have no idea what it may contain. I only know that you people are those whom she required to be present at its reading. Due to the rather unique circumstances surrounding her passing, I have requested that Mr. Masters and Chief Keppy also be here this morning."

Masters looked across the gathering with great interest. He and Keppy stood toward the rear, near the hall door. Katy sat alone off to one side, already weeping silently to herself. Mary and Jack were sitting together on the settee, holding hands - Mary, sober and nervous; Jack calm and unaffected, as if waiting for the main attraction to begin at the local movie theater. Eddy sat on a chair under Katy's picture. Appearing to be deep in thought, he stared at the floor - a distant, exhausted expression on his face. Florence, dressed in black, sat erect and proud, though sober, at the back of the room. Mildred sat close by, looking out of place in her tawdry maid's

trappings. Paul sat alone in a corner. He wore a tie as his attempt to dress up his blue denim work shirt for the solemn occasion. A sweet overture from a simple young man, Masters thought.

"Such nice, and yet such troubled people," Masters said to himself.

Jameson opened the envelope, paused for a moment to look out over those present, and began to read:

"There are only seven people in the World about whom I care - Katherine O'Day, Edward Planter, Mary Dwyer, Florence Bently, Mildred Clapper, Paul Santos, and Jack Malcolm Blackmore. Since Jack is already provided for, I direct that my entire estate be liquidated and divided equally among those surviving from the other six. - Estelle Forester"

Fifty-four words that would turn seven lives upside-down. No eye was dry. No one spoke. No one moved. No one understood. There was pleasure tainted by shame. Anticipation dampened by despair. In the end, Estelle Forester had managed the last laugh. At the least, she had insured their lasting financial dependence - tied to her even in her death. At most, she had instilled a lifetime of guilt for the dark feelings each had harbored toward her. And somewhere in between, she had, to her own delight - no doubt - left them bewildered forever as to the true nature of Estelle Forester.

As, one by one, the others began to stand and stir about, Keppy and Masters retired to the sun porch. There was some brief period of talk about the will, then Mildred arrived with coffee, still teary-eyed, but presenting herself as near normal as she could manage.

"Thank you, Mildred," Masters said. "Would you please bring a phone out here when you find time?"

Masters turned back to Keppy.

"Who do you know over at the drug rehab center in Bloomington?" he asked the Chief.

"Lots of folks. What do we need?"

"We need to confirm that Jack was there on the day Estelle died."

By the time Mildred brought the phone, Keppy had already found the number in his book. In another three minutes, Jack's alibi had been confirmed three times over.

"What did the search of Florence's home produce?" Masters inquired, noticeably eager.

"Nothing like poison. One thing though. She appears to be a religious woman and has a table set up in her bedroom with candles and religious pictures and an open Bible. We used our pocket scanner and made a copy of two passages she had marked with book marks."

Masters took the sheets and read them. The first page was of the Ten Commandments, with "Thou shalt not kill," circled in red ink. On the second page was the golden rule, with some words crossed out and others written in above them so it read: "Do unto others as they have done unto you."

"Downright scary to me," Keppy said.

"I see what you mean," Masters answered. "Was there anything else?"

"No. Just a very tidy, gloomy, little three room house," Keppy said.

"Looks like Florence is a sad lady with a big struggle going on inside," Masters added compassionately, even though it did not make complete sense to him.

"I suppose this has to move her up on the list of suspects, doesn't it?" Keppy said.

"Yes, I suppose it does. The motive has always been there and now there would seem to be at least some circumstantial evidence of intent," Masters said reluctantly.

Chief Keppy nodded, then broke the silence that had set in:

"The drug-sniffer will be here at ten this morning. The State Police are glad to help. They usually want a mound of paper work first, but when I told them Raymond Masters needed it, they just said to name the time and they'd be here."

"That's very flattering to hear, Chief. I just hope my hunch pays off. We have some time before they arrive, then. Let's go on out and look over Paul's gardening shed and pay a visit to his quarters. He lives in a room on the second floor of that building."

They left the porch directly to the outside. It was no more than a forty-yard walk. Paul had already returned and was just sitting on the ground, leaning against the shed. He looked ever so lonely, as he halfheartedly struggled to remove

his tie.

"We need to have a look around, Paul," Masters said.

"Sure, go ahead. My place upstairs is unlocked, too, if you want to go up there."

Masters and Keppy nosed around downstairs, first, reading labels and opening bins and drawers. Among the fertilizers was a large quantity - about twenty pounds - of piranhazanna. Paul's hand printed note on it read: "This stuff is expensuff! For afercan viluts ONLY." Both Keppy and Masters smiled, partly at the delightful immaturity of the message, and partly at the loyalty it suggested.

Upstairs was an unexpectedly tidy room. A small TV, an inexpensive stereo, a single bed, a couch and matching chair, a small table with two kitchen chairs, a small stove and refrigerator. The sink was in a back corner. What seemed to be the inevitable, bachelor pad centerfold was on the wall at the foot of the bed. There was a tiny bathroom over the stairwell. It was all taken care of in a way that suggested its occupant appreciated what he had there. Masters approached a picture on the back wall over the table. Upon close inspection, it was seen to be a rock group poster, taped to the back of a small bulletin board. The poster had several little holes in it, as if poked through from the back. Masters turned the bulletin board over, easily done, since it was hanging by a single string from a nail above it in the wall. There, thumb tacked to the corked side of the board, was a good-sized picture of a person's face - a picture cut from a newspaper. It had been devastated with hundreds of holes, as if used for a dartboard. After some study, Masters and Keppy determined that it had probably been a picture of Estelle. The top drawer of the chest produced three sharp and shiny tavern darts.

"He's a good shot, I'll give him that," Masters said, replacing the board as he had found it.

"More than a little hostility, there, wouldn't you say?" Keppy said.

Masters agreed, saying,

"Undoubtedly better, though, to do her picture in with darts, than to kill the real McCoy."

In a small bookcase, were all sorts of books on

gardening, horticulture and plants. A beautiful picture book on World Famous Arboretums lay on top, and on top of it, the most well-worn looking dictionary Masters had ever observed. The young man seemed determined to learn his trade. On the floor beside the head of the bed, were four, well studied, paper back manuals - review books to prepare for the GED.

"A young man on a self-improvement mission," Masters said to Keppy, a tone of admiration in his voice.

The two men left Paul's room with a new appreciation for him.

Paul had begun hoeing around the forsythia some distance away, so Masters just waved to him, indicating they were leaving. Paul nodded his understanding.

"What do you think, Chief?"

"I really don't know. Paul was the rascal of all rascals until Estelle somehow straightened him out. There wasn't any crime that I wouldn't have thought him capable of back then. But now? I just don't know. He seems to have become such a nice kid."

"Were you aware Estelle blackballed him around here so he couldn't get another job as a gardener?" Masters said.

"Yes, I'd heard the rumor, but truthfully, Masters, no one would have hired him anyway. Even Paul had to have known that. He really had a terrible reputation as a trouble maker in this town," Keppy explained.

At ten o'clock, Masters and Keppy arrived at the drug store. The State Police were already there. Chief Keppy introduced Masters and they all met Lucky, the specially trained Doberman.

Masters began outlining the plan.

"I'm sure we will find illegal drugs in there. My guess is that the major stash will be located in a compartment in the seat or back of one or more of the new booths. I wouldn't have needed Lucky for that, but I assume Bayer had a handier, more readily accessible hiding place, where he kept small amounts of drugs - a place from which he sold. That's what I want Lucky to find for us. It may be a sliding panel, a disguised drawer or door, a hatch in the floor, false compartments in cupboards. It could be anywhere, though probably somewhere safely out of sight of his customers and

store help."

They were no more than inside the door than Lucky was onto the seat in the third booth. With just a little effort, two release latches were located. The seat opened up to reveal several dozen, kilo sized, bags of cocaine.

Then on around the room he moved. Lucky sniffed out every corner, every cubical, every chair, table and display rack. Nothing!

"Let's try the work room," Keppy suggested.

Again, there was no reaction from Lucky. Masters knew it was there, somewhere. They tried the rest rooms and the small office. They tried the safe, the refrigerators and the water cooler. Still nothing. A light went on in Masters' head. If it was not inside, then ...

"Out back. He wouldn't risk selling from in here."

Once out the back door, Lucky was soon yelping at a small boarded over window in a corner of the building - a spot well out of visual range of passersby in the alley. Once located, it was found to swing open like a door. Behind it, a sturdy safe, permanently mortared into the side of the brick wall.

"Chief, why don't you give Bayer a call down at the jail and see if he wants to give us the combination or have us torch it open," Masters said.

The combination was procured and close to another kilo, made up into smaller bags, was found stashed inside along with a sales book, in which the entries were in some type of initial code.

"So, we have Bayer on drug possession with intent charges, but how does this tie in to his murdering Mrs. Forester?" Keppy asked.

"All in due course, Chief. There still remain a few very important loose ends," Masters replied. "I'd like to have another look inside. I think Lucky's job is finished."

Back inside, Masters and Keppy began going through Bayer's records, page by page, not sure just what it was they were searching for. Something to help tie all of this together. Something to tie Bayer to Estelle, perhaps, or something to tie Bayer with Mary, Eddy and Katy. Something that might shed some light on the identity or whereabouts of Jerry White.

"The whole thing is just not tidy enough," Masters said.

"It gives every appearance of being two distinct cases, and yet it feels so much like one."

Masters remembered that some of Bayer's records were kept on that clipboard by the register. He began flipping through them. They were mostly order blanks and receipts, just as Bayer had explained.

"Bingo!" he said at last.

Keppy came on the trot - not an easy feat, given his pear-shaped physique.

"What did you find?"

Masters carefully removed one sheet from the stack. He and Keppy studied it. It was a note written in big bold printing - not from a typewriter, the letters were oversized and very black.

It read:"

I know what you are doing,
Bayer, and you will pay with
your life!!!

-Zorro

"I don't suppose there is any way to trace the printer, is there?" Masters thought out loud. "Every-other house on every block in town probably has one these days."

He and Keppy sat at a table and thought, reading and re-reading the threat.

"It must refer to the drug dealing, don't you suppose?" Keppy suggested.

"Yes, I'm sure you're right, Chief." Masters said, now quite used to reinforcing the obvious from the Chief.

"I'm sure it's from one of two people, but how to prove it?"

"We could confiscate the printer ribbons from the computers at Mary's and Eddy's for a start," Keppy suggested.

"The lab boys might be able to read something off of them."

"Good idea!" Masters agreed. "And do the same from all those in the work room at Forest Way."

And then as an afterthought, "Florence didn't have one at her home did she?"

"No Sir. No other place we searched had one," Keppy said.

It was nearly lunchtime, and since neither Keppy nor Masters was prone to miss a meal, Masters was dropped off at Forest Way. Mildred had lunch waiting. She wanted to talk.

"What do you think of what Mrs. Forester went and done for all of us?"

"It seems pretty nice to me. How do you feel about it?" Masters said sliding into a chair and feeling right at home.

"I guess I should be really happy with all that money and all. Mr. Jameson says he can't be for certain, but he thinks the six of us will be splitting up about eighteen million dollars. I can't even think how much eighteen thousand would be. But millions! It's a real shock, I'll tell you Mr. Masters. Nobody ever expected nothing like this. Everybody's just been walking around here like zombies all morning. Nobody's talking or working. Just walking around like zombies."

"She sat down across the table from Masters, folded her hands on the table, and looked him right in the eye. Tears welled up in her own:

"I don't know what I'll do if I can't go to work every morning. It's my whole life, you know. It's all I've ever knew."

"What says you just can't keeping on working somewhere?" Masters said, hoping to divert her thinking along more positive lines.

"Oh, Sir. There are too many people needing jobs these days in order to support their families. If I kept working, I'd be taking up a job that one of them should have. No I couldn't do that. Not with all that money I just couldn't."

So, she had thought it through. Bless her great big heart, Masters thought. He reached across the table and clasped her hands in his:

"Perhaps, you could volunteer - say out at the Children's Home, or at the hospital, or with the home health agency. A volunteer isn't taking up anyone else's job, and it would still mean you'd be working every day and that the people you'd be helping would most certainly need you."

A faint smile broke across her face. She cocked her head in Mildred-fashion. After a moment, she began nodding.

"You're a wise man, Mr. Masters." She patted his

hands. "You're a wise man."

"I'm sure it's nothing you wouldn't have come to by yourself, once you had a chance to stand back and look at things," Masters reassured her.

While the others ate in the dining room, Masters and Mildred stayed in the kitchen together, finishing the rest of their lunch in silence - Mildred trying to put her new future into some kind of perspective, and Masters contemplating his next move. Knowing who had done what to whom, and how, was only half the fun for Masters. Now he had to prove it!

That time had come, when Masters needed to be alone and sort out the evidence. He decided to walk down along the river - one place he had not as yet explored. He shed his coat and tie, leaving them on the sun porch, and set out across the grounds, sauntering along at a most leisurely pace.

Masters was convinced that it was Mary, Eddy and Katy who poisoned Estelle. The question remained, though, "How had they mustered such a genuine and sincere show of grief?" Masters fancied himself a good judge of character - a fact proved many times over during his long career. If they had each conspired to murder her, then why the exaggerated grieving over someone they all obviously hated - well, at least disliked intensely? It was as if the murderers had not intended to kill her - like the murder was unforeseen, or at least unintentional, and had truly taken them by surprise. How could that have been the case? The murders would have had to have known the potency of the poison - why else use it?

But, just suppose they hadn't known the potency of the poison? What if they thought it would only harm her in some less extensive way? Perhaps only scare her into releasing them, under the threat of a more serious consequence the next time? Still, anyone with the sophisticated knowledge necessary to know about that particular combination of ingredients would have certainly known about its absolute lethal quality.

Assuming that these three actually did not know it was lethal, but still took part, then there had to be a fourth person, a mastermind, a coordinator who fed them false information. There had to be someone who knew about the deadly combination, but somehow convinced the other three that

some lesser result would occur. It had been someone who merely used the three of them to do his or her own dirty work.

Before considering that further, Masters had an even more basic problem to consider. Why would these three murder Estelle in the first place, knowing as they did, that Estelle still had their signed confessions - confessions that would surely be found once her things were searched?

Masters' mustache called out for mercy!

A new scenario began to fall into place. There would be a coordinator who possessed knowledge of the deadly effect of these three ingredients when mixed together. A coordinator, who knew the other three were being blackmailed by Estelle, or at the very least, knew that they would be willing to harm her. The coordinator had to have reason to make Bayer the fall guy for the murder - unless, of course that coordinator was Bayer, himself. The coordinator had to have some means of easy communication to and from the others; separately, and privately, and probably anonymously in order to protect himself or herself.

The Candidates-For-Coordinator List was not short. Paul made the list because of proximity, but he just wasn't bright enough to pull it off. Anyway, it was unlikely he knew the other player's situations intimately enough to include them. Florence had no known reason to involve Bayer. She, herself, was not being blackmailed. And she too, though a nice and gracious lady, was just not cunning enough to plan and coordinate such an undertaking. It might, however, have been possible to have coerced her into being a dupe - like Eddy, Mary and Katy - and she remained a back-up on that list in case one of the three primary suspects failed to pan out. Mildred had no motive, no knowledge of drugs, no reason to be involved with Bayer, and had not a mean bone in her ebullient, Jello-like body. She did possess many of the pieces of information which would have been needed to be known by such a coordinator - the week spots, for instance, which Estelle might have been exploiting in each of the other suspects. She might even have known much more than she had revealed to Masters, though that seemed so unlikely that he smiled to himself at the thought.

How about Estelle, herself? Unlikely, again, Masters

thought. Not because she wasn't fully capable of such a plan, and not because she wouldn't have delighted in setting it up in such a way so that the conspirators would have to live with the guilt of the deed forever. Was she, perhaps, such a sad person, deep inside, that she wanted to end her life? Masters thought that was doubtful, despite some incriminating evidence in her apartment. But why would she take her own life when, as she had said, she was, "just reaching her prime?"

Jack came out as one of the two top candidates. If, as Masters suspected, Jack had known that Estelle had murdered his father, he might have taken it upon himself to take revenge. There were probably enough pieces of evidence to make that case - the double dog-eared murder novel alone, built a strong case for Jack's believing that she had killed him.

If he knew of Eddy's relationship with Malcolm, and if he knew that Estelle knew that also, then he would have reason to suspect Estelle's blackmail of Eddy. That would have encouraged him to try and enlist Eddy in his plan. Masters still needed to find that link between the Malcolm-Eddy relationship and Jack. He suspected that Jack had known because of the way Jack had described his own reaction to that one attempt at spying on them at the cabin. But that was not solid evidence. Masters, however, still had one ace up his sleeve in that area, but it would have to wait.

Jack had the phone number of the Bloomington abortionist. More than likely, it was Mary's doctor, though that was yet to be proven. If he knew that Estelle had knowledge of the abortion, and that she realized he would have severed his relationship with Mary because of it, there was the blackmail connection with Mary. Having known that Mary had aborted his unborn child may have angered Jack enough to include Mary in the plot, just to take his revenge on her. But, how could he have come to know that Estelle knew about the abortion? For a sharp intellect like Jack's, it wouldn't have been much of a strain to strongly suspect that fact, merely by ruling out all other motives for Mary's remaining in Estelle's employ. That, coupled with the timing of her employment, may have been sufficient to make the case in Jack's mind.

Masters' impression of Jack was that he certainly had no compunction against a little lie, now and then, nor a huge one, on occasion, if it worked in his favor. Suppose he actually had witnessed the hit and run accident, and had seen that Estelle was all alone that day, and had recognized the car as Katy's - all well within the realm of possibility, given his position in the river at the time. Jack was not the kind to get involved in anyone else's problems - not at that time in his life, anyway. It stood to reason, then, that he would claim ignorance as a witness, just to stay clear of the whole thing. He had no relationship with Benny so would have cared less that the boy was being railroaded. Compassion wasn't a cornerstone of Jack's nature. That Estelle knew the truth about the accident, would, no doubt, have been apparent to Jack, so that blackmail connection would have been a lock.

How would Jack have gained knowledge of that particular, rare and little known, poison? His interest in drugs and his trip to South America seemed to make convenient bedfellows in Masters' mind. The glazed vase and the look of trepidation he shot at Masters during the conversation about it further supported the connection. It was enough for Masters to proceed, at least cautiously, with this scenario.

Assuming that Jack knew of Bayer's drug operation - and as close as he was to the young males in the community, it was unlikely that he would not have known - Jack might have sought to take Bayer down in a big way. He had to know that drug dealers, even when convicted, too frequently served only soft time in prison, but a murderer - now there was a different, big, hard time, matter.

"Zorro!" Masters thought. Jack easily could have been Zorro! A well selected name - The Fox - for if this new scenario were true, it had been crafted by a most sly and cunning individual.

That brought another connection to mind. Masters remembered how Jack had described the ways in which, as a child, he worked Estelle for things he wanted from her. "It had to be her idea," he had said. And then there was Mildred's comment about how odd it was that Jack would have left the folder of Bayer's drug articles in the front hall, since he never passed that way. It just could have been that Jack had

intentionally fed Estelle that folder of information, and she bit, eventually getting Bayer on her pay roll. It was inevitable that two such strong willed individuals as Estelle and Bayer would at some point make a scene over some disagreement, thereby suggesting at least some minor motive on Bayer's part. And they had! A fox, indeed!

But still, most of that was unsubstantiated supposition.

Masters just walked a while longer, enjoying the beautiful day and attempting to skip a few stones the way he had done (far more effectively!) as a boy. He began reconstructing the events leading up to and following the murder.

The three conspirators - let's assume they were Mary, Eddy and Katy - had, one way or another, each obtained their one necessary ingredient, and had been instructed somehow by someone in how and when to bring their compound to Forest Way. Since the three envelopes were identical, the coordinator must have supplied them in some anonymous fashion - the mail or a drop spot - something like that. Mary and Katy had obtained their own ingredients quite legitimately in light of their interests and activities. Eddy was still a question mark in the acquisition department, but assume the coordinator somehow supplied it to him - unless, of course, Eddy, himself, was that coordinator - still a possibility.

Masters paused in his thinking as he walked, and just let his mind go blank, hoping things would reorganize themselves. For Masters, important things frequently just popped in from nowhere. During that next forty feet of path, something important did emerge.

But first, continuing with the Murder scenario. Each had their white powder in its own little envelope. Each had been given an exact time at which to enter the kitchen and deposit their compound. Since Florence was out of the kitchen every day from three fifteen to three forty-five, that was their time frame. Each one, in turn, perhaps even without any knowledge of the others' participation, stirred their contribution into the sugar bowl, wiped the spoon clean of powder and fingerprints, placed it back in the silver drawer, and deposited the towel in the hamper - all according to their instructions.

Then each proceeded to the living room, where they

secretly slipped their envelope under the bottom edge of the picture frame, sticking it against one of the three pieces of waiting tape- one to receive and hold each envelope. But there was a fourth tape?

Soon after all that had been accomplished, it would be tea time. Each of the three reacted to the tea break in their own way that day. Katy, taking no tea at all. Mary taking hers plain, when usually she used sugar. Eddy going overboard the other way, and piling in the sugar to feign no fear, but then, later, dumping it when no one was watching. Florence, who, as Mildred had noted, had the most intense motive to kill Estelle, unknowingly delivered the deadly potion to her, on Malcolm's wedding gift, no less. Ironic hardly fit the treacherous scheme.

All this time, Jack would have been conveniently on the bus or coming back to Forest Way in the car with Mildred, establishing an iron clad alibi for himself as well as for the driver - his favorite person in the whole World. Upon entering the house, he could have secured the three envelopes from the picture frame and deposited them in Bayer's hat band, making sure that at least one was so precariously inserted that it would fall out later at the opportune moment. He placed himself there at that moment to make sure!

That fourth piece of tape? If Jack had stolen the piataconi from Bayer, he could have stuck it behind the picture, in its little envelope, for Eddy to pick up some time that morning, according to special instructions.

Another quite different basic scenario would put Eddy as the coordinator. His access to knowledge on any subject, through Herbert, would have made it easily possible for him to search out just the right poison. His friendship with Katy and Mary made it inevitable that he would have known about their interests in painting and gardening. He and Herbert could have used that information quite creatively in the search for a poison.

Eddy's long standing anger about Malcolm could have been transferred to the equally despised Estelle. Eddy was a sensitive and highly intelligent man. He would have picked up on any hints dropped by Mary and Katy that Estelle was doing to them what she was doing to him, and that they were both at

a point where they could be convinced to do something about it.

Eddy could have been in contact with Jerry White who assisted Eddy. It is conceivable that he could have even located White's whereabouts through some of Herbert's specialized connections. But why Jerry? Why anyone else, in fact? Eddy, himself, could have been the potter and the drug store thief (although the preponderance of evidence pointed to Jack or Jerry.). He could have, thereby, supplied the piataconi to himself. He could have placed the empty envelopes in Bayer's hat and it could have just been a happy coincidence for Eddy that Jack happened to be there when they dislodged. But then there was still that forth piece of tape.

Eddy certainly had access to printers that could have spit out the Zorro note. But why would Eddy want to involve Bayer? Perhaps it was as simple as just using someone with drug knowledge to take the blame? How would he have known of Bayer's illegal drug business? Maybe he didn't. Maybe Bayer was just a convenient Patsy. The Zorro note could have been just a ploy to make Bayer feel threatened and nervous, so he would begin acting suspiciously. All of that could have gone on entirely separate from any knowledge of the drug dealing.

Masters thoughts kept coming back to something Eddy had said to him. It had been strangely worded and a most odd thing to come from the mouth of a murderer. During their conversation, in Eddy's study, Eddy had said, "I would never knowingly kill anyone." That one word, knowingly, bothered Masters. He could understand having someone say, "I would never kill anyone," but why add the word knowingly. Why, unless he knew that he had, indeed, killed someone unknowingly. If he had been the coordinator, it certainly would not have been unknowingly.

Masters sat down on the lush lawn, and leaned back against a beautiful tall oak tree. He was thinking of how Paul had so carefully and lovingly cared for those grounds during the past fourteen years. That would put Paul in his late twenties, even though at first glance, he could certainly still pass for nineteen or twenty.

From Masters' lawn-level vantage point, he could see

the grounds and the house, and hear the playful splashing of the rapids behind him. He took his notebook from his pocket and began to make a list of all the missing links.

Jack's knowledge of the Malcolm-Eddy relationship

The coordinator's means of communication to Mary, Eddy and Katy

Jack's knowledge of Mary's abortion

Jack's possible relationship with Jerry White

Eddy's possible relationship with Jerry White

The current whereabouts of Jerry White

Jerry White's method of access to Forest Way's interior

As Masters sat there thinking of the profound contrast between the absolutely gorgeous day happening there outside, and the terrible agony being experienced inside the house, he noticed an approaching visitor, of sorts. He watched Katy make her way toward him, somewhat circuitously, stopping several times as if uncertain whether or not to continue.

"Hello Katy," Masters said in greeting as she drew near. "It's such a lovely day, why don't you join me down here in the shade."

She hesitated for a moment but then seated herself a few feet away and slightly to one side, as if not wanting to speak directly to him. She picked at the grass. Masters just waited, remaining silent as he gazed up at the small, white, puffy clouds adrift above. He finally broke the silence:

"Well, Katy, have you decided what you'll be doing with your inheritance?"

"No. That hasn't really been on my mind yet. I suppose if I have a choice, I'd just like to travel the World painting everything I saw. All I've ever really wanted to do was to paint. I know I'm not great - I never will be - but I do love it so."

She had displayed a degree of passion Masters had never sensed before. He was pleased it was still, somewhere, there inside her. Another period of silence, this time broken by Katy:

"I guess none of that will ever happen now because I've decided the time has come to own up to several things," she began, with breaks and quivers in her voice.

"I just can't live with myself anymore, Mr. Masters."

Masters interrupted: "If this is going to be about a potential police matter, don't you think we should call Chief Keppy and secure an attorney for you?"

"I could never say this in front of Chief Keppy and, no, I don't want an attorney."

Masters sat quietly, repositioning himself a bit so he could more easily observe her. She continued to speak, still more at the ground than toward Masters.

"Many years ago, I drove the car that killed Mortimer Keppy's young son. At the moment it occurred, I panicked and just kept driving. I still wake up nights seeing the terror in that little boy's face just as I hit him. It is a terrible thing with which I've had to live."

She paused to maintain control.

"That evening - perhaps an hour later - Mrs. Forester came by my house and said she had seen the whole thing, and that it had obviously been an accident and nothing I could have avoided. She was very supportive of me, and as only she could do, she convinced me to remain silent about it. She graciously agreed to provide me with an alibi.

"A young man was punished for my accident, Mr. Masters - Florence's boy, Benny. Mrs. Forester had said that since he was just a boy, the court would go easy on him and it would all be ok - that he would just get probation and it would all be over.

"The day before the inquest, Mrs. Forester came to me again, this time with a paper for me to sign and a proposition. I was to admit to the crime on paper, and come to work for her, and no one would ever know what really happened. I was so mixed up, so upset, so terribly frightened, that I signed, and the following week began work as her personal secretary.

"The work wasn't all that bad, really - I even found it interesting and challenging. She paid me as much or more as I would have been making at as the Head of the Business Department at the college - I had just been offered that position at the time of the accident. So, financially I was doing fine.

Emotionally, though, I was in terrible turmoil. I tried to make up for what I had done by helping the youngsters at the

Children's Home. But it was never enough. It was just never enough. Over the years - gradually, I suppose - I grew to hate Estelle Forester for what she was doing to me. But my hands were tied. I even once thought of shooting her. Isn't that just terrible, but I did think about shooting her."

Katy began to sob. She sobbed for several minutes, then, gaining some control, she continued:

"I knew that if I did such a thing, the paper I had signed would be found and then I'd be in even worse trouble. So, year after year, I just bit my tongue and did my job. "

"I'm sure this has been a terrible burden for you, Katy, but I really do think you should secure an attorney before you say any more."

"Don't you see, Mr. Masters, now that Estelle is dead, the paper will be found and I'm automatically incriminated anyway, so an attorney can't really help me, now can he?"

"Still ..."

Katy waved him silent and continued:

"That is not all there is. I have been a terrible woman, Mr. Masters. I think that I killed Estelle. I didn't know I was killing her. The letters just said it would make her become senile. I really didn't know it would kill her."

She sobbed some more.

"To what letters do you refer, Katy?" Masters asked after another minute.

"I got the first one several months ago. I never learned who they were from. That first one said he - I'll say he, it just as well could be she, you understand - he said he knew Estelle was blackmailing me into staying in her employ and that he knew a way out for me. If I was interested in pursuing the matter, I should leave my bathroom light on all night on Monday. I thought about it long and hard, and finally decided why not, at least, see what else he had to say, so I left the light on. I supposed that was so he could see it as a signal through the window.

"That very next Wednesday, I received a second letter. It said how there was this drug that would destroy her mind - make her senile overnight - but not harm her in any other way. The letter made a strong case for the idea that, it was a fate she deserved for all the terrible things she had done to so

many people over the years. It was most convincing; at least it was to me in that state of mind. Again, if I wanted more details, I should make the same signal that next Monday night. I did.

"A third letter arrived several weeks later - I was afraid something had happened - it had taken so long. I guess that's when I realized how much I really did want to go through with the plan. It instructed me what chemical to purchase - tiablanca - and he enclosed a computer printout that told all about its use in painting and pigment blending. I was to learn all of that, become an expert, and then destroy it by flushing it down the stool in the same way he had instructed me to destroy all the letters he sent to me. I was told where I could purchase the tiablanca, and that I should do so that same week. So, I did, again signaling him that I had followed through with that step.

"Then I waited another two weeks. Then, three. Finally, it came. It outlined exactly how to go about it. Step by step. Just how to fill the little envelope he had included in that letter. The exact time I was to enter the kitchen. Behind which side of the picture in the living room I was to place my empty envelope. If I were willing to go through with this at some as yet unspecified date in the near future, I should again give him the signal.

"By that point, I was into the whole plan with all of my heart and soul, Mr. Masters. I felt the wheels had started turning and nothing could stop it. Though it's hard to believe today, it all seemed so right. I felt like Joan of Arc - a martyr, if necessary, to bring justice to that force of evil. Those kinds of powerful thoughts weren't at all like me, but they really felt good, Mr. Masters. I can't explain to you how very much I enjoyed them! The whole thing provided me with a purpose like I hadn't had for years.

"Then weeks passed and finally that final letter arrived with the date - just two days away. The rest you know, I believe. You see, Mr. Masters, I killed Estelle Forester. I truly didn't think I was killing her, but now I am certain that I did."

She broke down into hysterical crying. Masters scooted to her side and just held her close for many minutes as she sobbed.

Finally, when she had regained her composure - more or less - Masters spoke:

"Do you believe that you and this person who wrote you the letters, were in the plan alone - just the two of you, I mean?"

"Why yes. Of course!" she said with a note of genuine surprise in her tone.

"It was his plan and my delivery service, you might say."

No one spoke for several moments, then, quite philosophically Katy said:

"You know, Mr. Masters, Estelle could have had the very best people in the business working for her if she had just acted like a decent human being. She was a vastly talented writer. People would have flocked to work for her except for her well-deserved reputation as a she-devil."

Katy paused as if reflecting.

"Estelle and I were a lot alike, you know, Mr. Masters.""

"And how is that?"

"Neither one of us had ever learned to love ourselves. She pushed her way through life, making herself feel superior by putting everyone else down. She never really believed that she was, in fact, the Grand Dame of historical novelists, but she was, you know. Without a doubt, she was. Me, I just gave in to the forces around me, assuming they were superior to me - after all, I was just a no talent nobody. We insecure people build walls, Mr. Masters - walls that prevent us from ever learning whether or not we really might be lovable. I think the possibility that we might find out we truly are not lovable, is so terrifying and overwhelming, that we just don't dare look."

After another period of silence, Katy looked up at Masters as if to ask, "What's next?"

"We need to call the police, now, you know," Masters said.

"Yes, I know. One thing, though, can you please see that someone other than Mortimer Keppy comes for me?"

"No problem there, I'm sure. You know that the time will come, however, when you will have to face him."

"I know, but just not right now, please."

They walked slowly back to the house, Masters' arm around her waist. He made the call and sat with her until an officer arrived to take her into custody. She appeared almost serene for the first time since Masters had met her.

One thing was obvious to Masters - Katy was truly convinced that only she and the letter writer were involved. She had no idea that other ingredients and other delivery people, as she put it, were involved. She only knew the person behind all of this had lied to her about the potency of tiablanca, and had set her up to take the fall for Estelle's murder.

It had seemed to be a grand relief to Katy that something had come along that forced - no allowed - her to confess to the earlier hit and run killing.

"Poor Katy." Masters thought. "First used by Estelle and then used by this murder mastermind. Her life really hadn't been her own for thirteen years."

He had to wonder if, perhaps, it had not been her intention all along to admit to having harmed Estelle, and thereby receive what she felt was her long overdue punishment for having killed the boy.

Since Katy felt she had acted alone in delivering the poison, and since it appeared that Eddy may have believed he had killed Estelle, while not meaning to have done so, it stood to reason that both of them had been enlisted by a third party.

If Katy had been the mastermind, she wouldn't now be confessing to the earlier crime. If Eddy truly hadn't intended to kill Estelle, then he could not have been the mastermind.

Assuming all three helpers had received the same kind of messages, and then destroyed them according to their instructions, how could Masters prove they had, in fact, ever actually been received by the two remaining participants - most likely Eddy and Mary? He couldn't count on two more, out of the blue confessions. Even if he found the master copies somewhere, that wouldn't prove they had been delivered or agreed to. Masters could see that after dinner he would need to take a very special walk.

At dinner, it was again, just Masters and Florence. She seemed a bit less restrained, a bit more forward, even. Masters was caught off guard when she took the initiative and

began the conversation.

"I've come into a lot of money, you know."

"Yes, I know. I'm very happy for you," Masters said.

"Mr. Allison says it means I will be able to do anything and everything I ever wanted to do. That it is so much I can probably never spend it all. Can you imagine that? A Bentley being rich! My father was a minister. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't."

"He passed on twenty years ago - Mother almost seventeen years ago, now. They always wanted to be missionaries, but thought it would be too hard an existence for me. They had planned to do that later in life, but Father got sick and they never got to that part of their dream."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, from time to time, I've thought that I'd like to finish that dream for them. In fact, it has really become my dream too. So, do you know what I've decided to do, Mr. Masters?"

"Tell me," Masters said, pleased to see the sparkle in her eyes and hear the determination in her voice.

"My church has mission projects that work in poor sections of cities - slums and ghettos - the very kind of troubled places that Benny was when he died. I'm going to start a whole new life working as a missionary in one of those neighborhoods. My minister is working out all of the details. I can support myself and help out those who need it, and who knows what else may come up."

"You're obviously happy about this, aren't you?" Masters said.

"I'm just thrilled. I don't know when I've ever felt like this in my entire life. It's terribly frightening, you know. But, my whole life has been frightening. Who better than me to be able to face up to it? Maybe my whole life up to now was just preparation for this very thing."

"I'm so pleased for you, Florence. I will miss your good coffee and scrumptious dinner deserts."

"I'll be so rich I can airmail you something special from my kitchen every week!" It was the first-time Masters had heard her laugh. It was the first time in decades that Florence had heard herself laugh. It must have felt so good.

Just seeing his dear Florence so happy made tears appear in Masters eyes. At least one of the meek had, indeed, inherited a part of the Earth, he thought.

"Florence, may I ask you something that has been bothering me?" Masters said.

"Certainly."

"When your home was searched, the police found a passage in your Bible - the part with the golden rule - reworded in red ink. The way it was done just made no sense to me. I really shouldn't pry I suppose, but could you clear that up for me?"

"It was Benny's Bible, Mr. Masters. I use it now to feel closer to him. He marked it up that way after he came home from the Juvenile center. He was so confused then. That's why it was re-written that way."

"Thank you for sharing that with me, Florence. Now it all makes perfect sense. I was so afraid that you were, well ..."

"I'm just fine, now. I thank you for your concern, but really, I am just fine."

It was six-thirty and would soon be dusk, as Masters began stepping off to explore the sidewalks of Oak Hills. He had two destinations in mind.

At six forty-five, he reached the block in which Eddy lived. It was a scene right out of a Norman Rockwell painting from the nineteen-forty's - kids playing ball in the street, grandparents sitting on the porches, fathers and teens washing cars, and mothers tending to skinned knees. It was like a time warp back to a kinder and simpler time.

That evening, the children showed great interest in the formidable stranger entering their territory. The younger ones approached him immediately, while those a bit older hung back, awaiting some signal of friendliness first. Soon Masters was chatting with them - even tried a few hopscotch squares, much to the kid's delight. He declined an invitation to jump rope! In Masters' mind, hot chili peppers were to be savored, not jumped!

Having satisfied their inquisitiveness, the little ones then returned to their play. Masters approached an elderly gentleman, sitting on the porch of a house kitty-corner across

the street from Eddy's. They made small talk for a few minutes and then the man said to Masters:

"You're the detective who's trying to pin Mrs. Forester's murder on Eddy Planter, aren't you?"

"I'd really much prefer to prove him innocent, if there is a choice," Masters replied. "Anything you can tell me that might help do that?"

"It's a real nice family over there. The little ones always mind the grown-ups. They're always polite youngsters. They aren't noisy in the evening. Maggy sees to it that I get goodies from time to time."

"Goodies?" Masters asked.

"She bakes all the time - cookies, cakes, bread. She always sends a sample over with one of the boys. She's a good woman. Eddy's a lucky man to have her."

"Have you noticed anything that seemed strange over there these past two or three months?" Masters asked.

"Strange? No. Well maybe I don't know for sure what you mean," the old man said.

"Oh, things like lights left on all night that usually aren't or anything like that, that has seemed out of the ordinary?"

He sat and thought for a few moments.

"Well, now that you mention it, there might be one thing. Eddy is a very careful, neat man. You can tell that just from looking at how good he takes care of his place over there. So, when he left his garage door up all night, I thought that was strange. I even called him up about eleven o'clock the first time it happened to tell him about it. He thanked me, but then he still left it up."

"About when was that, would you say?"

"Well, it wasn't just once. It happened at least three different times, and always on a Monday night. That wasn't at all like Eddy. I didn't call no more, though. I figured he thought I was just a meddling old coot. I really only meant to be helpful."

"I'm sure that would have been your intention," Masters said. "When was the last time that happened?"

"It was just last Monday. It hadn't happened for some time and I figured whatever it was about, was all over, but then there it was again last Monday night."

Masters took out a pocket calendar.

"Do you suppose if you looked at this calendar you could remember exactly which other Mondays those would have been?"

The old gentleman took the calendar and began figuring, flipping back and forth among several months.

"Billy Morgan broke his arm here, and that was the first time. I remember because I figured that accident had all of us on the whole block upset, and maybe that was why Eddy forgot the door. The next time..." He paused and thought, looking up and down the block as if trying to latch on to some special clue. "I'm not sure. It was either here, or here," he said pointing the two possible Mondays."

"You've been a big help, Sir. I do thank you for your time and information."

"Anything to help out little Eddy," he said.

Feeling every bit the lowest form of traitor, Masters walked across the street and tried to strike up a conversation with Eddy's two boys who were busily engaged, though not really successfully, in a game of croquette. Masters spoke to them as warmly and cheerfully as he could.

"Hi there, guys. How are things going this evening?"

The younger boy quickly positioned himself so as to be peeking out from behind his older brother. It was the bigger one - the five-year old - who spoke:

"Are you a stranger?" he asked.

"Well, I know your father, but, yes, I guess to you two, I am a stranger."

"We can't talk to you then. I'm sorry," the boy replied, and the two of them went back to their game.

More than a little amused, and fully understanding what had just occurred, Masters moved on.

"What a World," he thought to himself, "Where kids have to be taught not to talk to strangers." The Rockwell image began to fade!

He then walked in the general direction of down town, trying to locate Main Street and Mary's apartment. It was just beginning to get dark when found the block for which he had been searching. He walked down the alley behind the stores and picked out Mary's apartment from the rear. A long,

wooden stairway, open to the elements and badly in need of paint, led from a parking area in the rear up to her apartment. On his previous visit, Masters had entered from Main Street out front, through a neatly decorated, enclosed stairway.

As he moved in to take a closer look, he found that he had intruded on a teenage couple enjoying a kiss-and-grope exercise. They were partially hidden in the shadows and were as startled at his sudden presence as he was at theirs.

"Oh, I am sorry, kids. I didn't mean to interrupt anything, here. Please forgive me," Masters stammered, not knowing for sure what might be the proper thing to say in that rather awkward situation.

"No problem, Pops," the boy said as if it were a nightly occurrence. "Are you looking for somebody or something?"

Masters was amused. Even Oak Hill's youngsters, in the middle of making out, were bound to the town's friendly and accommodating tradition. As long as the boy had asked, Masters thought, "Why not go ahead!"

"I had been talking with Miss Dwyer earlier," he began. "She lives up there."

"Yeah, we know. She's Jack Blackmore's girl. The cops think she did his old lady in - Mrs. Forester, I mean."

"What do you think?" Masters said

"If it wasn't Mary, it could have been a hundred others, I suppose. At any rate, the old witch probably deserved it."

"You didn't like Mrs. Forester, then?" Master said

"Oh, we didn't have nothing personal against her," the boy said looking at the girl. "She never done nothing to us. We just hear stories about what a bitch she is. Nobody who's ever knew her, liked her."

"I see," Masters said.

"I suppose you two come back here every once in a while, to get away from the bright lights, so to speak."

The boy grinned and nodded, giving his girlfriend a squeeze around the waist. The girl blushed.

"So to speak," the boy said.

Then, joking right along, he added,

"Sometimes these days we can't even get away from those bright lights way back here."

"How's that? It seems like a pretty cozy and private

place to me."

"Usually, but sometimes she turns on the yard light and forgets to turn it off all night."

"Bummer!" Master said laughing. "I'm surprised you didn't just go up and unscrew it."

"Not a bad idea, Pop. You're OK, you know!"

"Well, hard as it must be for you to imagine, I really was young once, myself. You wouldn't happen to remember what nights she forgot the light, would you?" Masters asked, thinking why not milk this momentary camaraderie for all it might be worth.

This time the girl spoke:

"It's always been on Monday nights."

"It has?" the boy said, looking at her with marked surprise.

"How do you remember that?"

"Take my word for it, son," Masters chuckled, "women just remember things like that. She can probably even tell you which shirt you wearing those nights."

They laughed together. The boy nodded in agreement. Then, as if to prove Masters was correct, she began listing the boy's wardrobe for each of the three nights in question. He looked at Masters. In unison, the two fellows shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads.

"Well, I know you have far more interesting things to be doing than standing out here having me bend your ears, but just one last thing if you don't mind. Do you happen to remember the last time Miss Dwyer left the light on?"

"Sure," the boy replied. "It was just last Monday. I remember because we got here a lot later than usual. Mitsy - this here is Mitsy - had a late band practice. We saw Jack drive by that night, too, but he didn't stop. I thought that was strange. Maybe he seen us here. I don't know. His car is here lots of nights. The way he looked up there, we figured he was just checking up on her that night."

Masters reached into his front pocket and, pulling out a ten-dollar bill, handed it to the boy saying:

"Thanks for your help. Here, treat Misty to something very special, on me."

He tipped his hat, turned, and left. The stunned couple

called a belated, "Thanks." Masters acknowledged their message with the back of a waving hand, raised high, as he disappeared around the corner.

"What fun," Masters thought, reflecting on his walk. "And what nice people live here in Oak Hills. Big city life was just never like this. "

He returned to Forest Way at eight forty-five, made himself some hot cocoa - plenty of marshmallows - and retired to his room, his heart suddenly filled with rekindled memories of young love.

Day Seven: the switch

Masters approached the kitchen at six-fifteen, expecting to put on the first coffee of the day, but Mildred had already arrived and seen to that. Any hustle that had left her bustle over that last week appeared to have found its way back. She was resolutely humming some quite unrecognizable tune as Masters greeted her.

"Good morning, Mildred."

"It is a good morning, Sir."

"I can tell you've regained your sparkle, Mildred. That's certainly nice to see."

"Ever since our talk yesterday, I've been on the upswing. When I woke up this morning I said to myself, life has always been great and just because I'm rich now doesn't mean it can't still be great - I'll just have to work a little harder at it, that's all, but I can do that."

Masters was amused at Mildred's apparent equating of wealth with a necessary state of unhappiness. He was sure that had been her observation and, unfortunately, had frequently been his own.

"Good for you!" he replied. "What's for breakfast?"

"Pennsylvania Dutch ham, egg and cheese breakfast casserole, Mr. Masters. I found the recipe in one of my mother's old cookbooks. I do hope it lives up to your Grandma's good fixin's."

It did! Oh, my, how it did!

Keppy arrived early also. By seven twenty, the two men were again huddling on the sun porch, which had begun to feel comfortable as their office away from home.

"How is Katy doing?" Masters asked immediately.

"She seems relieved, poor lady. They say she just sits there, hour after hour. I haven't approached her yet. Sometime soon, though, I must talk with her and try to convince her that I don't harbor any bad feelings. Accidents are accidents. ... That's going to be a very difficult meeting for both of us. Poor, poor Katy."

"Will the State's Attorney be pressing charges on the hit and run?" Masters asked.

"It's been thirteen years, for God's sake! I hope not! There must be a statute of limitations to consider," Keppy replied.

"It's just all so hard, right now."

In silence, Masters put his hand on Keppy's shoulder as if to say, "I know, good friend. I wish there were some way I could help, but I know there really isn't."

Chief Keppy understood the message and managed a faint smile at his new friend. After another minute, Keppy spoke:

"The lab's analysis of all the printer ribbons came up empty. Mary's was old, but showed nothing remotely related to the case. The same for the five from here - well used but a big zero. "

"They go through so many around here in a week, I'm not surprised." said Masters. "Anyway, I suspect that the Fox was cunning enough to destroy that kind of evidence. Do you know if there were any of Jack's sports columns on any of them?"

"Well, let's take a look here."

Keppy opened his brief case, took out a multi-page computer printout and began scanning it, page after page.

"Yes. Here is what looks to be a column. Let's see, it was from the printer attached to the research terminal designated here as Eddy."

"That's Herbert, and that news may just break the case," Masters said rubbing his hands together.

"Herbert? Not Eddy?"

"That's what they call the main research station - Herbert." Masters explained. "We'll want to follow up on that after a bit. Anything else?"

"A biggy here, I think, Masters. Just like you

suspected, those metal filings left on the file you found in Estelle's bed drawer, were aluminum. They had traces of brake fluid on them - barely, after all these years, but it was there. And, get this, the model of Malcolm's car was the only one Macconi ever produced with aluminum brake fluid lines. Looks like a wrap on that case."

"Looks like it," Masters agreed. "I guess no way to prosecute that one."

Keppy managed a smile and then asked:

"How does that help us with Estelle's murder? Malcolm certainly didn't come back and do her in."

"Let's think about it," Masters said.

"At the time of his death, who would have been angered the most if they had found out Malcolm had been murdered?"

"Well, Eddy would have lost his Sugar Daddy, so to speak. Since it now appears that Eddy wasn't Malcolm's murderer, I suppose he would have been angry. And then there's Jack. Even though he and his father never got on very well, I suspect he would have been angry, especially if he thought Estelle had done it. She did get all of Malcolm's money, you know."

"My thinking, exactly, Chief."

Keppy took that as a fine complement and sat tall with pride, unable to check a blossoming, ear-to-ear grin.

"What's next on the agenda today?"

"I think the time has come to confront Mary," Masters replied. "I believe if we just lay out the entire story for her, as we have reconstructed it, she won't ask for proof, but will just concede."

"You must have some new information," Keppy said.

"I took a most enlightening walk up and down the streets of your little town last evening, Chief. I found your citizens, old and young, to be most obliging. Just follow my lead."

Chief Keppy met Mary as she arrived for work at eight o'clock and escorted her to the sun porch.

Masters rose and offered her a chair.

"Mary, we have reconstructed the murder of Mrs. Forester, and now know exactly what role you played,"

Masters began.

Mary moved uncomfortably in her chair.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Masters," she said.

"Well then, let me tell you this little story. About two months ago, you received a letter from an unknown writer, telling you that he or she - I'll say, he, for ease of storytelling - told you he knew you were being blackmailed by Estelle and that he had a way for you to put an end to it. If you wanted to hear more you should leave your back, outdoor light on all night that Monday."

Keppy raised his eyebrows and leaned in closer. Mary looked away, remaining silent.

"Then a few days later a second letter arrived. In it was a detailed account of a certain chemical that could render Estelle senile in a matter of hours. The letter went on to make the case that since she deserved at least that much punishment for all her ill deeds over the years, it was only giving her what she deserved. Again, if you remained interested, you should purchase the piranhazanna which he described, and then you should give the same signal on the next Monday night."

"You did, and a few weeks later the third letter arrived with the exact details of the plan, in step by step fashion. Even the small envelope for the piranhazanna was enclosed. All you lacked then was the specific date. That arrived last week in the same manner, and again you signaled your commitment to cooperate, using your outdoor light."

Mary broke into tears.

"I would never have killed her. I really wouldn't have ever agreed to be a part of it if I had thought I was going to kill her. The letters just said it would affect her mind. I hated her plenty enough to do that, but not to kill her."

"I have no doubt that you wouldn't have participated, had you known that," Masters said, attempting to offer some support.

"Jack will hate me for this, you know. Besides my own family, Jack's the only one I ever loved and now he will hate me."

She sobbed quietly to herself.

"We will need to go down to the station now," Keppy said gently, and he escorted her to a waiting officer.

Presently the Chief returned to the sun porch and, approaching Masters, said:

"That must have been some walk you took last evening!"

"Most fruitful, indeed," said Masters. "It was partly thanks to good planning, partly thanks to adolescent hormones, and partly to just plain dumb luck! I'll fill you in another time."

"Well, are you ready to confront Eddy?" Masters asked.

"You're doing all the work. Why not?" Keppy said.

"I wouldn't bet your marbles, yet, on the outcome of this little get together, Chief. Eddy's make up is very different than the ladies'."

Masters caught Eddy's eye and motioned him to the sun porch. The same scenario was played to him - the letters and their contents, the garage door signal on Monday nights, the final step by step plan, and at last, the date for the murder. Eddy listened quietly and unemotionally, shaking his head from time to time. He was not budging one iota from his claim of complete innocence.

Masters wasn't one bit surprised at the outcome of their chat. Still, it bothered him in no small measure that Eddy truly seemed to believe that he was innocent. It had seemed that way before, during the interview in Eddy's study, and even more so during the interview just completed. Had he missed something? Was the garage door sequence all just some kind of eerie coincidence? Earlier in the day, Masters had even commented to Chief Keppy, that ever since that conversation at Eddy's home, Eddy had seemed to be considerably more relaxed - more at peace.

For one fleeting second, Masters even let his thoughts suggest that the old man from the night before might have been Jerry White, cleverly trying to implicate Eddy for Jerry's own crime. As he thought about that, Masters was again fascinated by the lengths to which one's mind would go to free itself from a seemingly irreconcilable problem.

At any rate, Masters would continue the search for that elusive and vital link that would tie Eddy to the crime - the

master copies of those letters. Since their contents would necessarily stipulate that incriminating garage door signal, they would make the link indisputable.

"Well, if you are innocent, Eddy, and I truly hope that you are, I'm sure you will be eager to help us prove that, won't you?" Masters said, loosening the line the bit, while beginning to tighten the noose ever so slightly.

"Sure. Anything. How can I help?" came Eddy's most amicable answer.

"Let's have another chat with Herbert," Masters said.

At that, Eddy visibly relaxed, as if to say, "Great! They are on the wrong track now. I've left no evidence in Herbert."

Having sensed that reaction, Masters then knew who the mastermind had to be, and confirmed in his mind the exact roll Eddy had played.

"Earlier in the week," Masters said, addressing Eddy, "You were telling me about Herbert's double memory. That even if something were erased or deleted from the working memory, it still had to be specifically deleted from the back up memory, is that correct?"

"A good memory yourself, Sir. Yes, that's exactly right."

"I want to search that back up memory for some documents that I am sure have been deleted from the working memory. But I don't know for sure what the entry codes would be. Is there any way to do a search under such circumstances?"

"The only possibility in a situation like that is to try some codes you think might be right. If you begin coming close, Herbert will accept that part of it, and then ask you to be more specific. That way you might eventually locate it by trial and error. It won't be easy though without the exact entry codes. It may be impossible."

"How many characters do you need in an entry code? Eight like in most PCs?" Masters asked.

"Oh no. Herbert here will take any code from one to twelve characters," Eddy explained. "I just fill up the blank spaces with zeros."

"Twelve characters! That only makes it more difficult, doesn't it?" Masters said aloud, but mostly to himself.

He began doodling on his pad with his pencil.

"We'd better pull up some seats, I suppose, Chief. Looks like this could be a long process," Masters said, planting himself firmly in the most well-padded chair in sight.

"Try the initials, J B or J M B, first," Masters suggested.

Nothing!

"Try Jack."

"Nothing.

"Articles or columns."

"Not even a nibble, Sir," Eddy said.

Keppy began to understand what was going on. He offered a surprisingly astute suggestion:

"How about trying, Zorro?" he said, raising his shoulders and hands in one motion as if to say, "What do we have to lose?"

The screen went blank. The console made new sounds.

"Herbert's found something," Eddy said, with a noticeable sense of satisfaction bordering on eagerness.

There on the screen in big dark letters was the Zorro note that had been left at Bayer's Drug Store.

"Is that all there is?" Masters asked. "Just the note?"

Eddy tried scrolling up and down, but to no avail.

"Looks like it. If you need more, we'll need some other ideas," Eddy said.

"Print that one for us and mark it with the access code. Then try Zorro 2, or Zorro II, or Zorro B or Zorro More, or Zorro Letters," Masters said, just trying to spin related possibilities.

One by one Eddy entered each. One by one, Herbert flashed his insufferably irritating Insufficient Code message.

As Keppy and Masters sat resting and bewildered, Eddy suggested:

"Well I have no idea what you're looking for, but how about combining parts of several of your ideas, like ZorroColumns?"

Masters leaned close and watched the screen.

"Do it," he said.

Quite unexpectedly, Jack's sports columns appeared.

"Eddy, that was brilliant. Now we know Jack was Zorro," Masters said to Keppy, but, we still haven't found what

I'm looking for."

That pronouncement from Masters seemed to be quite meaningless to Eddy, who just sat waiting patiently for the next instruction.

Masters sat back and closed his eyes. A few minutes passed. Then, one of Masters' out-of-the-blue experiences washed across his mind:

"Try ZorroRevenge," he said.

Compliantly, Eddy typed it in.

"Nice going!" Eddy said. "You've hit something this time, too!"

Eddy finally seemed to be entering into the project with his more typical degree of enthusiasm.

But then, just as quickly as that enthusiasm had arrived, it faded. As Eddy began scanning what Herbert had found, Masters discerned a look of terror flash across his face. Eddy panicked, and in a swift, final effort to maintain his innocence, he reached out for the Delete button. Masters' hand was faster, and it grabbed Eddy's arm in time. Keppy stood and secured Eddy from behind, while Masters scrolled through the material. All of the letters to each of the three participants were there. Masters stopped at the third letter to Eddy. He read it out loud:

Dear Mr. Planter.

The ingredient you will add to Mrs. Forester's tea will be made available to you on the morning of the date to be specified in the next and final letter. You will find it secured to the back of the picture on the West wall of the living room, ten inches in from the lower left edge of its frame. Procure it immediately upon arrival. At precisely three twenty-one, according to the grandfather clock in the workroom, you will enter the kitchen. Delay your activity if anyone is there, but return and complete your mission at the first possible moment. The usual, tea time sugar bowl, will be sitting on the tea service tray. You know the one. Take a clean towel from the stack by the sink and use it to open the silverware drawer in such a way as to leave no fingerprints. Remove one teaspoon from the silver drawer. Empty the ingredient from the envelope (in which it will have been provided to you) into the sugar bowl, being careful not to spill any. Put the emptied

envelope into your pocket. Stir the ingredient into the top one-inch of sugar in the sugar bowl. Wipe the teaspoon completely clean of powder and prints and then replace it in the drawer just as it had been. Rinse off your hands in the sink, wipe them completely dry on the towel and deposit it in the hamper. This entire task, from the moment you enter the kitchen until the moment you leave should take you no more than one minute. Practice it ahead of time at home in exactly this way. Should you be interrupted, by someone entering the kitchen, use the towel to wrap up your materials and immediately leave with them. Go back and finish the task just as soon as you can. Once the towel is deposited in the hamper, proceed to that same picture in the living room and secure the empty envelope to the backside of the lower frame on the far-left edge. There will be tape arranged there to hold it. Make sure it is pressed securely and completely out of sight. Return immediately to your workroom. It is that simple.

If you agree to carry out this mission, use the usual signal of leaving your garage door open all of this coming Monday night.

Eddy ceased straining against Chief Keppy's restraint and became suddenly silent. The letter's last sentence had drawn the noose tight. He relaxed further and sat up straight in his chair. Staring at nothing in particular, and in a soft and ever so loving voice, he said, "My dear, dear Margaret." He then just peered off into the distance. All expression left his face. Within seconds his gaze was fixed and his body rigid. He would not be heard to speak again for many months. The years of anger, and anguish, and self-recrimination had taken its emotional toll so deeply, that in that moment of confrontation, his mind had set itself free from its terrible and exhausting struggle.

Within minutes, the ambulance had arrived, and Eddy was on his way to the hospital, where he would begin his long and difficult journey back toward sanity. Witnessing Eddy's tragic transformation had left the others in absolute shock. Mildred, doing all she knew to do, served fresh coffee. Masters and Keppy withdrew to the porch. Few words were spoken during those next fifteen minutes.

There was, however, still one major piece of business

to be attended to. Leave no escape route for the Fox!

Earlier in the day, Masters had secured the unwashed mug that Jack had used for his coffee that morning. He took it along in a paper sack as he and Keppy drove to the police station. There, Jack's prints were lifted from the mug.

"So why new prints from Jack? Keppy asked. "We still have them on file from back when he stole that car as a kid."

"Let's see if you really do," Masters said, taking Keppy by surprise.

The print expert assisted. Jack's file was brought up from the microfilm records and compared with those just taken.

The print man shook his head as he said:

"I can't explain this, Sir, but there is not even a remote match here."

Before Keppy could say whatever was on his mind, Masters rushed on:

"Officer, will you please now bring up Jerry White's file for comparison."

A new spool was loaded onto the comparison deck, and after a few turns of the crank, it was ready.

"Now, what is it exactly you want from White's file, Sir."

"I want you to compare those fingerprints with this new set from Jack," Masters directed.

A few moments of silence ensued.

"Well, as you somehow seem to have already known, Mr. Masters, they are identical. White's and Jack's prints are identical."

"How can that possibly be?" Keppy stammered.

"We all know that Jack is Jack. He hasn't been replaced by Jerry White. What in the World has happened here?"

"This is my theory," Masters began. "For some reason, who knows what - perhaps just an adolescent whim - I believe that when Jack was working around the station in the Police Explorer program, he switched his prints in the records with those of the vagrant's - Jerry White."

"Then that explains why we kept finding White's prints everywhere we really needed to be finding Jack's," Keppy said. "They were Jack's all along, but we kept wrongly

identifying them as this, White's, because of the switch."

"Right," said Masters. "And now with this information all sorted out, several baffling aspects of the evidence fall into place. The thumb print on the pot fragment from the potter's studio makes Jack the potter, decked out in the wig and beard you will find in a box in his apartment. Because of his prints on those Polaroid photos, it also makes the connection we need to assure us that Jack did know of the Eddy and Malcolm relationship."

"Also, it is now Jack's print on the living room picture frame rather than Whites." Keppy added.

The print man removed a large brown envelope from his brief case and rummaged through its contents.

"I think," he said at last, "You'll now be interested to know that I raised prints from the sticky side of the tape found on the back of the living room picture and just guess whose prints were on all four pieces?"

"Jack's!" Keppy said, as if it needed to be announced.

The print man continued:

"When I found they were White's, I just filed them in here for future reference, since that whole White thing seemed to be leading nowhere. Here's one more item that may be helpful now. We raised a partial print from the broken milk shake glass that Bayer said the intruder had used the night of the break in. It was on the edge of the ridge around the base of the glass - like where you might hold it if you were going to intentionally smash it against the counter. It's only a partial, like I said, but even at that time I thought there was enough similarity to probably confirm that it was White's. Now that's Jack's, of course."

"A superior job," Masters told him, patting him on the back with no little enthusiasm.

"Chief, you're truly fortunate to have this talented man on your staff."

"I selected him myself," Keppy said with a wink.

Accompanied by two officers, Masters and Keppy returned to Forest Way to confront Jack. He was in his apartment when they arrived. Keppy spoke first:

"Jack Blackmore, I am here to place you under arrest for conspiracy to murder Estelle Forester."

Jack stood silently and calmly as Keppy proceeded with the reading of Jack's rights. Masters went ahead and began pointing out the various pieces of evidence the officers needed to collect, mark and bag. There were the wig and beard, the book on pottery, the dog-eared paper back mystery, the vase, the folder of Bayer's articles, the phone number on the pad, the marked Bloomington phone book, the sports columns, and that all-important item that had caught Masters' eye on his first visit - a tattered copy of what looked to have been one of Jack's most precious childhood books - The New Adventures of Zorro.

The officers removed the evidence from the room leaving Jack, Masters and Keppy there together. Masters briefly recited the nature of the evidence, the print switch and Herbert's several contributions.

"So, old Herbert had a second memory, did he? What about that!"

Jack smiled and nodded. No denial. No resistance.

"You're good Masters," Jack said. "You know, I almost postponed my plan when I first learned you were to be here. But then, I looked at a picture of you in one of those real life detective magazines and said to myself, "Since when can a seventy-year-old, fuzzy billiard ball in a coat and tie outwit Jack Blackmore? My mistake, Masters. My mistake."

Masters smiled a strange smile, reflecting both amusement and great sadness. He had grown to like Jack. He had enjoyed their mental sparring. He had felt the grand potential, hidden deep inside the troubled young man.

"Well, Jack, you can take some consolation in the fact that I am not truly certain of just what all of your motives may have been, so you see, you did outwit the old billiard ball on at least that score."

"It looks like I just might have plenty of time to fill you in, if you're really interested," Jack said, looking to Keppy for permission.

Keppy nodded. They all sat down.

"I hated Estelle even before I ever met her. She was taking my Dad away from me and trying to replace my mother. I never gave Estelle a chance. I never liked Dad much either, but he was all I had and I was still just a kid.

Jack crossed his legs, making himself more comfortable.

"This plan of mine was designed to send five murderers to their doom."

"Five!" Keppy repeated, settling in for the duration.

"First there was Eddy. He killed any chance I had to have a good relationship with my Dad. Once Eddy came into his life, it was as if I didn't exist to Dad anymore. It was as if my Dad had been killed. That's when I started calling him Malcolm. I had plotted to punish Eddy long before that day I discovered him and my Dad doing it up at the cabin. That moment really finished things between me and Malcolm. I knew that if a Dad required that kind of thing from a boy, I surely would never be able to compete with Eddy. Then and there, I gave up on Malcolm."

"So," Masters broke in, "Eddy became your first murderer because he had, in essence, dispatched your father from your life. You no longer had anyone who treated you like you felt a father should treat a son."

"Right. So, I knew I wanted Eddy involved in my plan.

Then, there was old Estelle. I hated her, but I admired her, too - the way she always got just what she wanted. When Dad had the accident and died, I wasn't convinced for a moment that it had been an accident. He was too proud of that car. There had been so few of them made, it was virtually one of a kind. He had it serviced every week. It just couldn't have happened the way they said it did."

"Just by chance one day when I was going through Estelle's things - I had made myself a key to her rooms the second week I'd been here at Forest Way- I ran across the Maniacal Mechanic in her book case. It was placed out of order - not with the rest of the mysteries. I took it along mainly because the title intrigued me. When I was little, Estelle had often referred to me as maniacal. When I found it was a blueprint for Dad's death, and that the specific section describing the accident had been dog-eared, I was certain she had killed him. I figured it was because she, too, had discovered the true nature of his relationship with Eddy. But for her it was more than just that. Estelle was such a proud and vain person, I'm sure she took Malcolm's relationship with

Eddy as a personal affront - no, that's not nearly a strong enough word - as a personal assault on her dignity. So, Estelle became my murderer number two, and in my mind, the one most deserving of the severest punishment. She would play the part of the victim."

"It sounds as if you saw yourself as a playwright, drafting this grand and ingenious plot," Masters said.

"Yes. Exactly!"

"Please continue, Masters said.

"I had seen Katy kill that kid on the bridge. At first I figured she had something on Estelle and forced Estelle into being her alibi. Later, I figured differently. At any rate, I didn't personally have anything against Katy, but she needed to be punished, so I would use her in my plan if I needed her."

"Katy, then, was your third murderer," Keppy inserted.

"Yes, she was number three."

Jack turned to Keppy, a stark look of realization on his face.

"Chief, I didn't mean to sound insensitive to the fate of your son, just then. Honestly, I had forgotten who it was till just now."

Keppy waved it off.

"Later, at a weak moment in my life, I suppose, I decided that I wanted to marry my girlfriend, Mary. At almost the same time, though, I found out she had had an abortion of my child. That happened this way. A boy, who somehow knew about her abortion, came to me for a loan to pay for his girlfriend's abortion. I really flew off the handle at him because I hate that whole abortion concept. Anyway, in the exchange that followed, he threw up to me the fact that he thought I'd help him since I must know how it was and all, considering Mary had had one. Later, I did some checking and sure enough, the kid had been right. I really hated her from then on. She had killed my child. Murderer number four!"

Jack sat quietly for a moment, looking far away out the window, as if to heaven itself. Then he cleared his throat and continued.

"Estelle had really been responsible for that Benny kid's death you know. If she hadn't let him go to jail, he might have turned out ok. Florence was a good mother."

Masters interrupted. "Of course, you could have prevented that conviction with your own testimony, too, couldn't you, Jack?"

"Yeah, well I guess it may be a semantic difference, but Estelle's was a sin of commission when she outright lied about who did it and who didn't. She intended to wrongfully hurt young Benny. Mine was a sin of omission. I wasn't trying to get anyone into trouble."

"An interesting interpretation of the facts," Masters said.

"Well, I guess I'm the one who has live with that now," Jack replied.

"But if you're keeping tabs on all the bad stuff that old Jack here's done, there's still more. When I was into drugs I gave some cocaine to a kid one night and he went berserk, jumped out of a window and killed himself. That terrified me as nothing before in my entire life. It was at that moment I decided I had to get myself clean and stay that way. It was also the night I decided to run the drug dealers out of this town."

"Enter Mr. Bayer?" Masters said.

"Yes, enter Mr. Bayer," Jack repeated, nodding at Masters, and looking somewhat surprised that he had made that connection.

"Soon after I got back from rehab, I found out what he was doing here. I took the reporting job to keep in contact with the kids - to gain and keep their confidence - to keep my finger on who was selling what to whom. It worked. I turned all the little guys in to the federal drug hot-line, but I just had to find something very special for Bayer, himself."

"It seemed so tidy to make Bayer the fall guy for Estelle's murder. You know his stinking drugs have killed kids. There's no way that they haven't. He deserved to die, not just to be put away for a few years. So, I set him up as the murderer. I joined the actor's group mostly just to learn about disguises and to cover myself if ever found with the evidence. I kept it around because I thought I might have to use it once more if any of my delivery boys - that's how I thought of Eddy, Mary and Katy - tried to back out.

"So, Bayer was murderer number five." Keppy said.

"You had been working on this plan for a long time,

then," Masters said.

"About three years," Jack answered. Little by little it just all came together - one part, one person at a time. I was in no hurry."

"The last big breakthrough came on my South American trip. I met a college professor at one of the soccer games. He happened to be an expert in Native American potions and poisons. I must admit the meeting wasn't really by chance. I had done my homework. I cultivated his friendship, posing as a reporter, and picked his brain. He had just what I needed. Actually, there were two possible poisons. The other one required four ingredients. For a time, I thought about including Paul, but he turned out to be a really nice guy with no murdered skeletons in his closet. So, as it worked out, three suited the circumstances best.

"Once I had found the right poison, the rest happened rather quickly. I slipped Bayer's articles to Estelle so she'd think it was all her idea to use him. Even before that though, over a year ago, in fact, I started feeding her gobs of other information on unsolved murders down through history. I had books sent to her, magazines with related articles in them; all kinds of stuff sent from many different sources. I knew she'd put it all together eventually. Estelle lived for impossible challenges. Once she had her new book formulated, I knew she'd include Bayer on her team. He was a nationally known expert and readily available. I hadn't counted on you, though, Mr. Masters.

"So, this book we were to work on was really your idea," Masters said. "Now there's another aspect of this case that certainly had not occurred to me, Jack."

Jack smiled. "I know! I'm good, too, you see!"

"I'm curious," Masters said.

"How did you know Bayer would be at Forest Way on that date at that time?"

"Mildred knows everything. Pineapple omelets get one much more than just fruit and cholesterol," Jack answered.

"So, I've Learned," Masters said. He then continued:

"It does appear that, except for dumb luck, Bayer and I could have been poisoned as well."

"That was always a possibility. Before you arrived, it

was only Bayer I had to consider. I thought, so what if Bayer gets it, too. All the better - two for the price of one, so to speak. As it turns out, three for the price of one would have been more to my advantage, wouldn't it?"

"But then you would have lost your patsy, Masters added."

Jack smiled at Masters.

"That's why you always need a plan 'B'. If it's of any consolation to you, Masters, if I had known you before, like I do now, I would have taken steps to protect you. You're an ok kind of guy."

"And somewhere deep down inside, so are you, Jack," Masters said, solemnly.

"The best part of my plan, the part I'm proudest of, is yet to be tested." Jack said, hoping to move the conversation away from any hint of sentimentality.

"Yet to be tested," Keppy repeated. "What you mean, 'yet to be tested'? We have you in custody."

"May I?" Masters asked, looking at Jack.

"Be my guest! You've done pretty well so far, Jack said."

Masters began: "The plan had to have two possible conclusions. One if the murder wasn't solved and the three of them remained free, and a second if they were found out and tried for the crime."

Jack nodded, admiration showing on his face.

"You see, the way Jack's plan was set up, no one actually killed Estelle. Jack had only plotted to kill her, but didn't personally deliver the poison. Nor had he hired anyone to do it, in the traditional, legal sense. Neither of the other three contributed a lethal dose of poison, because none of the separate ingredients was in any way poisonous by itself. Therefore, none of them actually murdered her. They weren't even involved in a conspiracy to commit murder, since the evidence will clearly show each of them thought he was merely going to disable her. The test of their responsibility will come, of course, in the courts."

Masters stood up, walked to the window and continued: "Based on past experience, it would appear that Mary, Eddy and Katy can, at most, be tried for conspiring, one-on-one with

Jack, to cause physical injury to Estelle - although they didn't specifically know it was Jack. It's doubtful if any one of them will receive a sentence of more than three to four years, and will more than likely be out on parole in less than two. Jack, you of course will probably do a longer stretch - ten to twenty - out in six to eight if you're a good boy."

"But why go to all the trouble of setting up Mary and Eddy and Katy, if you thought you could get away with it and not have them convicted in the first place?" Keppy asked Jack.

"That was the second possible conclusion Jack had to plan for," Masters said. "Why don't you explain that part, Jack?"

"I'm told," Jack began, "that for those of you who possess a conscience - something I've never had to deal with, personally - the worst punishment you can receive is to have to live with unresolvable guilt. It seemed like a beautifully ironic twist to have Estelle succumb to an obvious and blatant murder, and yet have the guilt-ridden contributors to her death, have to go unpunished for it - in a legal sense, that is. At least on this one occasion then, Estelle would have no victory, and Mary, Katy and Eddy would punish themselves for the rest of their lives. With either conclusion, you see, my murderers would be punished.

"And either way, Bayer got it, too. I knew once the police began snooping around his store, the drugs would turn up. So, as a minimum he would be caught on drug dealing charges, but my hope was, of course, that he would be the one tried for Estelle's murder."

Jack broke into his broad, beautiful, boyish smile, saying:

"Now that it seems I'll be having some time on hands, I think I'll write a book about all this. I already have the perfect title for my story about this perfect murder - The Murder No One Committed."

There was one final question Masters just had to ask.

"Any regrets, Jack?"

Jack turned toward Masters in a slow, mechanical, yet thoughtful manner. He sat silently for a long moment, as if carefully formulating his response. The dispirited expression, which gradually overcame his face, was one of anger,

tempered by feelings of isolation and deep disappointment.

"You have to care to have regrets, Sir. No one ever took the time to teach me how to care."

The end