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ALIVE?

by

WILLY LEY

•

THE
UNDETECTED

by

GEORGE
O. SMITH

•

BLACKWORD

by

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And Other Stories



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The Undetected

By GEORGE O. SMITH

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***Nothing can possibly be more baffling than
a crime in a sealed room ... but what if the
investigator happens to have an open mind?***

I

I took a quick look around the apartment, even though I already knew what I had to know.

Gordon Andrews had been slain in his sleep by the quick thrust of some rapierlike instrument. There was no sign of any struggle. The wall safe stood with its door open and its contents missing. Every door and window was closed, locked, burglar-bugged, and non-openable from the inside; the front door had been forced by the police. Furthermore, it had been raining in wind-whipped torrents for hours, yet there was no trace of moisture on any of the floors.

Of course no one had heard a sound, and naturally there were no fingerprints.

Police Chief Weston spied me and snapped, "What do you make of it, Schnell?"

I shrugged and said, "Completely sealed room."

"Got any ideas?" he demanded.

I had a lot of ideas, but I was not going to express myself without a lot of stark evidence. I do not yearn to have the prefix "ex-" installed in front of my title of Captain of Detectives. I'm much too young to be retired. So instead of trying to explain, I said, "The *modus operandi* is—"

Chief Weston snorted, "Schnell, there isn't a clue in the whole damned building, and yet you stand there and yap about *modus operandi*?"

"That's the point, Chief. The cluelessness is itself the *modus operandi* that points to—"

"You talk as if we had a whole file of unsolved, clueless, sealed-room homicides!"

"Chief," I said, "a true 'perfect crime' would be one in which no clue existed, including the fact of the crime itself—except those clues that were deliberately planned by the perpetrator for some purpose of his own."



He glowered at me. "What are you driving at, Schnell?"

"I'm trying to convince you that we are faced with a very clever criminal mind," I said. "A man with a fine talent. One who plans his crimes so well that they aren't even recognized as criminal."

"Nonsense. You can't conceal any crime forever."

"Forever isn't necessary, Chief. Just long enough to cover up completely, to remove all connection. We don't know how many bank tellers have been running on reduced salary because they somehow paid out a hundred in cashing a ten-dollar check. We couldn't demand an audit of all the big financial accounts in town, to know the why and wherefore of the transfer of any sum of money larger than the limit of petty larceny."

"But now you are talking about a sly, clever operator, Schnell. This is a plain case of homicide and burglary."

Plain? Was he kidding himself?

I smiled crookedly. "Chief, there is no doubt in my mind that our crook intended to clean out Gordon Andrews' safe without disturbing a soul. But the imminent awakening of Andrews presented a physical threat that had to be silenced immediately."

"So that is the work of your sly thief?"

"Chief, just remember that Gordon Andrews was an eccentric old sourpuss who hated to do business with bankers. Now let's suppose that Andrews had awakened in the morning to find his safe cleaned out. He screeches for the cops. We come a-roaring in with the fingerprint detail and the safe specialists and the break-in experts. We find," I said with a wave of my hand, "everything just as we found it here and now. So we look Gordon Andrews in the eye and tell him that no one *could* get in, no one *had* gotten in, and that we suspect him of cleaning

out his own safe and yelling 'Copper' to make trouble for the Mayor and the Commissioner, who refused to appoint him a special detail of city employees for bodyguards last year."

"Go on, Schnell," said Chief Weston with deadly patience.

"The homicide was a spur-of-the-moment necessity. Had it been planned, the crook would have plugged Andrews with the old man's personal Banker's Special, which he kept on the bedside table, and made it look like suicide."

"Know a lot about Andrews, don't you, Schnell?"

"What do you mean, Chief?"

"About the Banker's Special."

"I have an excellent memory," I said. "Andrews had a license for the thing. The serial number is 233,467,819 and the gun and license were acquired on August seventh, 1951."



The Chief sarcastically grunted, "Has it been fired since?"

"It was fired six times at the date of delivery by the police laboratory for the land-mark records," I said.

"Let's not try being funny, Schnell. This is a serious business. Andrews was an eccentric old curmudgeon, but he was also a philanthropist, and the papers will be after our throats if we don't come up with this super-criminal."

"He's going to be damned tough, Chief."

"Okay, this is your project. Nothing else matters until he's caught and convicted—of homicide committed during the course of grand robbery, meaning automatic hot seat."

I nodded slowly.

"Just remember, Schnell—the whole department's behind you," Chief Weston assured me.

I continued to nod, but his assurance didn't reassure me in the least. With about ninety-eight per cent of the general public still not quite willing to accept rockets, missiles and space travel, I had a fat chance of convincing anybody that

a telepath had kept guard over the slumbering mind of Gordon Andrews, while a perceptive solved the combination to the wall safe, so that a kinematic could twirl the dial; that the imminent awakening of Gordon Andrews had indeed been an imminent physical threat to a delicate extra-sensory undertaking, and that therefore he had been silenced by the kinematic, with a weapon located by the perceptive, after warning from the telepath; after which the crime had continued, with the loot being floated by a levitator along a freeway explored by the perceptive and scouted by the telepath and cleared of barriers by the kinematic who opened and debugged them as he went along—and that the real topper for this whopper was that this operation was not the integrated effort of a clever gang of extra-sensory specialists, but rather the single-handed accomplishment of one highly talented Psi-man!

A Psi-man ruthless enough to kill before he would permit his victim to watch the turning dial, the floating loot, the opening portal, simply because there stood a probability that one of the two billion persons on Earth might suspect the phenomena as parapsychical activity, instead of the hallucinatory ravings of a rich old eccentric who hated the incumbent political party!

How best to keep a secret?

Let no one suspect that any secret exists!

II

The rain was still coming down in wind-whipped torrents that slatted along the avenue in drenching sheets. Huddled in the scant cover of the apartment door was a girl of about eighteen. The raincoat she wore was no protection; the wind drove the rain up under it. Womanlike, she was struggling with the ruins of a fashionable little umbrella instead of abandoning it for the tangled mess that it was.

She looked at me as I opened the door. She was without guile. She was wet and miserable and determined to take whatever help was proffered, and hope afterward that no unfair advantage would be taken of the situation.

I showed her my I.D. card and she read: "Howard Schnell, Captain, Special Detail." Her face changed from cautious immobility to a sort of wet animation, and she added as if it were important under the circumstances to be completely

open, "I'm Florence Wood."

I took the ruined umbrella from her unresisting hand and stood it in the foyer for the janitor to dispose of, and pointed out across the rain-ponded sidewalk to the police car. It was almost high noon, but the rain was so heavy that the identity of the car was by no means conspicuous from the apartment door. Florence Wood nodded as she caught sight of it.

I said, "Now, I'll make a run for it and open the door, and get in first so that I'll be on the driver's side. As soon as I'm out of your way, just dive in and don't worry about closing the door until you're out of this rain. Catch?"

She nodded.

"I'd play Sir Galahad and give you my foul-weather gear to wear," I said, "but you're already so wet that it wouldn't do more than keep the water *in*."

She smiled at me understandingly.

Then she looked at me with curiosity because I was standing there waiting instead of making my dash immediately. I thought of how my Psi-man could have floated the loot out of an open window and kept the rain from soaking the floor at the same time.

So, to make conversation, I said, "I'm waiting until my will power builds up enough to overcome the forces of gravity, barometric pressure, and the rest of whatever goes into the making of a howling downpour like this. Considering that nature is dissipating energy equal to a couple of hundred atom bombs per second, it takes a bit of time to collect the necessary amount of mental power."

Florence Wood laughed. In mere instants she'd changed from weather-drenched misery to a cheerful sort of discomfort no worse than many a human has endured for hours at a football game. She said with amusement, "Captain Schnell, why don't you start the car and drive it over here? Seems to me it would take less power than stopping this storm."

"The law says that it is considered unlawful to operate a motor vehicle from any position other than the driver's seat," I replied.



When the slack in the storm I'd been anticipating finally arrived, I took advantage of it to make my run across the sidewalk. Miss Wood followed: her

timing was perfect. Everything happened in a continuous sequence without a stoppage at any point. The door opened and I went in, landing hard and bouncing deliberately on the seat springs to hunch myself over; Miss Wood landed and whirled in a flurry of wet skirt and clammy raincoat, hauling one rain-booted ankle out of the way as the door swung closed with a solid and satisfying *thunk*.

I started the car and let the engine idle to warm it up and dry it off. Then I said, "Part of my duty to the citizen includes protection of his health and comfort as well as protection from unlawful behavior. So, where do you wish to be taken?"

She regarded me out of clear gray eyes. "Don't you know?" she asked with a quirk at the corner of her mouth.

"Do I look like a mind reader?"

"Well, you did slow down the storm."

I laughed. "Miss Wood, King Canute would have been a hero instead of a bum if he'd waited until high water before he told the tide to stop. Now, what gave you any reason to suppose that I am endowed with special talents?"

"Well," she said, fumbling through her handbag for the comb, which naturally was at the bottom, "you did come along when I needed help, and you did identify yourself when I so much wanted to know—"

"And since I also remembered that storms as violent as this always have lulls, you put two and two together? Well, it doesn't require telepathy to conclude that you are soaked to the skin, that you need and want help, and that you'd prefer to know just whom you are driving off in a car with. Any other ideas about my talents?"

"Well, I should think—"

"Address first, Miss Wood."

She gave me an address in a residential district that was the maximum distance one could get from City Hall and still enjoy the privilege of paying city taxes. I started the car and headed in that direction. Then I said, "Now, Miss Wood, let's go on with your little fancy."

"Fancy?"

"You've been moonbeaming about a little courtroom drama where twelve good telepaths and true are reading the mental testimony of a witness who had located some vital bit of evidence by perception and brought it to light by kinematic

power."

"Well, it does seem that any truly gifted person would work for the good of humanity."

"I doubt that being gifted with a sense of perception would automatically endow a man with a sense of honor."

"But doesn't it seem just *awful* to think of anything as miraculous as telepathy being used for—for—"

She was trying to avoid the word "immoral" because she was of an age and experience that felt sensitive about its use. Unfortunately the only substitute was the word "sin."

I came to her rescue. "It's deplorable but true that nothing was ever developed for the benefit of mankind without a few sharpshooters quickly figuring out some way to make it pay them a dishonest buck."

"But it would be frightfully hard to bamboozle a telepathic policeman, wouldn't it?" she asked hopefully.



I thought of my PSI-man, whose only mistake in the sealed room murder of Gordon Andrews had been in being so good that he'd actually disclosed the existence of a criminal who employed Psi faculties.

"Wouldn't that depend upon whether the policeman or the criminal was the more talented?" I parried. "But that supposes that the police force would have a corps of Psi policemen."

"Wouldn't they?"

"Honey-chile," I said, "at the first thin hint that the Commissioner was even interested in the possibility of hiring someone who knew what the term 'parapsychic phenomena' really meant, there would be a universal howl against 'Thought Police' so loud that it would shatter the polar icecaps."

"But why?" she asked, bewildered.

"They'd start screaming about 'invasion of privacy,' and cite the Bill of Rights, and that would be that."

"You mean that the law has laws against telepathy?"

"No, it doesn't say anything about telepathy," I admitted, knowing what was to come next.

"Well, then?"

"Don't sound so superior, Miss Wood. At the first attempt, the law would discover that it had a hell of a lot to say about telepathy and perception, since they'd definitely affect the interpretation of the Fourth and Fifth Amendments."

"I know the Fifth," she said, "but how about the Fourth?"

"Unreasonable and unwarranted search," I told her.

"But isn't a man guilty when he's guilty?"

"I wish it were as simple as that."

"But why isn't it?"

"Little Miss Wood, you are now asking me to solve an ethical question that's been unanswered for more than ten thousand years." I smiled wistfully. "I am not—repeat not—big enough to answer the following question: 'Shall a killer in the confessional, who has been given absolution by his God, subsequently be punished by his fellow man?'"

"But what has that to do with it?"

"Let's have *you* answer one: 'Could you truly bare your secret soul to God if you suspected that some prying human being was taking it all down on a tape recorder?'"

"No, I suppose not."

"Then our 'Thought Police' would be standing as a human barrier between any man and his God."

"I suppose so—but couldn't I *tell*?"

"Tell?"

"Tell whether someone was listening to my thoughts?"

That was another stumper. Does the sign wear out any faster if it's read? Can the radio transmitter be measured to tell whether the broadcast has any audience? Does the tree that falls in the forest barren of animal life generate the same wave-motion as it would if all the leaves were replaced by active eardrums? There are lots of analogs, but are any of them valid?

I said, "If I cry out, how can I know whether I am being heard?"

And in my mind I made my own reply. I thought in deep concentration: "*How do you read me, Psi-man?*"

The response was zero-zero. And it meant—nothing. My Psi-man could have been following my every thought from the moment that my ringing telephone summoned me to Gordon Andrews' apartment to the present instant, so far as I could tell. There was no feeling of intrusion, no feeling of *presence*.

III

Florence Wood giggled. "Going to stop the rain again, Captain Schnell?"

The storm was still howling. In the near suburbs, the rain came in more gracefully draped sheets and the wind was not whirlpooled by the fluelike canyons between the buildings, but residential rainwater is just as wet per cubic centimeter as the metropolitan variety.

"Maybe I should drive up over the lawn," I suggested.

"Daddy would blow a fuse."

"We might wait for it to let up."

"I'd rather not," she said soberly. "It's one thing to be driven home in a strange car during a cloudburst, but it's something else to sit out here making it look as if I were paying off by making out."

It came as a pleasant surprise that she did not consider me a superannuated gaffer, and it was her youth that allowed her to discuss parapsychic phenomena without the tongue-in-cheek attitude of the older know-it-alls. I considered Florence Wood and realized that she was at least old enough so that I wouldn't be juggled for cradle-robbing so long as I had a parental acceptance. And I did want someone to talk out the business of psionics without having someone wind me in a sheet and ship me to a shrinker.

And so I said, "If it will smooth things a bit, I'll umbrella you to the door and make official explanation to the stern and anxious parent."

"That we'll enjoy," she giggled. "Daddy always says that he doesn't have to be a mind reader to advise against what my boy friends have in mind. It'll be fun to

face him with a—policeman."

Darkly, I said, "Most folks don't look upon me as the fun-loving type. Policemen aren't always welcome, you know."

"Oh, Daddy will enjoy it. He writes a bit. He'll never be another Ellery Queen, but he will enjoy talking to a real live captain of detectives."

At this point a lot of favorable things took place at once, such as the arrival of another convenient letup in the storm, the mad rush and the ringing of the doorbell, the opening of the door and some gasped introductions as we stood in a little hallway dripping puddles of rainwater on a small rug.

"Police Captain—?"

"Howard Schnell."

"But Florence isn't—?"

I laughed at Mrs. Wood. "Not at all. This is just the rescue of a very wet maiden in distress. When we're not shooting bank robbers, we also help little old ladies—and lovely young girls—across streets. All in the day's work, you know."

Mrs. Wood hauled Florence off, saying something about hot showers and dry clothing, while Mr. Wood regarded me with interest.



He beat all the way around the bush, trying to ascertain without actually asking pointblank whether I could spend a few moments, and, if so, would I like a drink.

One must not anticipate, so I waited until he'd made his meaning clear. Then I accepted his offer of some bourbon, refused his offer of a cigar and settled myself into the chair he waved at.

I tasted the highball, smiled in approval, and opened the conversation by saying, "Your daughter tells me that you write, Mr. Wood."

He smiled wistfully. "Well, I'm not at the stage where the mere announcement that I am working on a novel causes an immediate pre-publication sale of seventy thousand copies. You see, I'm still trying to work out a good association gimmick."

"A what?"

"An association gimmick. The name Erle Stanley Gardner, for instance, always means a story about Perry Mason and the inevitable courtroom scene full of legal fireworks. Rex Stout has his Nero Wolf, the fabulous detective who lets his secretary do all the work."

"And," I added, "John Dickson Carr writes about Gideon Fell, who is an expert at solving sealed-room mysteries."

"Exactly!" he said. "I've a series of gimmicks all planned, but I really need a strong, out-of-the-ordinary character to go along with them. You see, I propose to write a series of stories about 'perfect crimes.'"

"I'm not smart," I said. "I've always assumed that the so-called 'perfect crime' would be one in which the criminal walks off scot-free with the loot under one arm and the girl on the other."

He said, "From your point of view, a true 'perfect crime' would be one in which no clue existed, including the fact of the crime itself—except those clues that were deliberately planned by the perpetrator for some purpose of his own. That is your own angle, isn't it?"

I nodded. Indeed it was, and it had been expressed in precisely the same words that I had used in speaking to Chief Weston.

"However," he went on blandly, "you'll agree that a clue is usually the result of a mistake, or failure to plan completely, or the result of some accidental circumstance."

"Right."

"But in a 'perfect crime' there would be no error, no mistake."

"Yes, but aren't you backing yourself into a hole that you've lined with fish hooks yourself?"

"Not at all," he replied. "Clues must be cleverly contrived, created, and established in such a way that the episode is ultimately known to be crime and not labeled misadventure, suicide, or the like. Otherwise," he said with a genial smile, "we're writing about a 'perfectly justifiable homicide' instead of a 'perfect crime.'"

I nodded again.

"And, of course," he finished, "these clues must also provide precisely the correct amount of information so that the motive of the criminal is not only

fulfilled, but exposed—if not to one of the characters in the book, at least to the reader."

Mr. Wood relaxed and sipped his own drink. From somewhere aloft, a number of individually insignificant traces added up to fairly reliable evidence that Florence and Mrs. Wood were about to return. I gathered that the cross-questioning had allayed any parental suspicion.

I said, "One thing you haven't mentioned," and paused for effect. "To the Hindu, 'perfection' means the inclusion of an almost imperceptible flaw so that its maker cannot be accused of presuming to be as good as God. Is your 'perfect crime' to be perfect in the eyes of the criminal, or in the eyes of the police?"

He said, "Ah, Captain Schnell, that is indeed one of my bothersome problems."

Mrs. Wood came into the room, followed by Florence. The girl had lost the soaked-gamin look. She was transformed by modern alchemy into a poised young woman who forced me to revise my estimated eighteen several years upward. She nodded affably at her father, smiled at me and then came over because she noticed that my highball glass was empty.

I thanked her, and she smiled wide and bright as she asked, "Has Daddy been giving you the details of his impossible bandit?"

"Well, in a way."

Mr. Wood said, "I'm sort of like the standard television father—incapable of adding two and two without the close supervision of the female members of my family."

"I—that is, we—keep telling Daddy he should hire Superman for a hero."

"You've changed," chuckled Mr. Wood.

"Changed?"

"Yesterday you advocated that I hire a detective with telepathy and a sense of perception."

"We discussed it on the way home," said Florence.

"Superman?" I asked.

"No, this extra-sensory business," said Florence.

Mr. Wood inquired, "Are you interested in parapsychology, Captain Schnell?"

"I've been interested in the subject for a good many years," I answered.

"Would the public accept it, I wonder," he mused.

Mrs. Wood said, "A lot of people read psychic books."

Mr. Wood said plaintively, "I don't want to write psychic books. I want to write whodunits. But it would solve my problem, wouldn't it? My series would consist of crimes that would be perfect, except for the introduction of a Master of Psionics who tells the story in the first person singular, and who solves the crime by parapsychic power."

"It might read better if you made your extra-sensory character the criminal," I suggested.

He shook his head. "Wouldn't do at all. A criminal with extra-sensory talent would always win out over the police. There have been only a very few successful stories written in which the criminal got away."

"Maybe he wouldn't," I said.

"But how could he possibly fail?"

"He might get sloppy."

"Sloppy! Mind reading every anticipated move?"

"Or bored."

"Bored!"

"One often leads to the other," I told him with a smile. "Which is just my policeman's way of thinking. From the policeman's point of view, you're overlooking one rather important angle."

"Indeed? Well, you must tell me all about it."



"Okay," I said. "My point is that you should not view this as a single incident in the life of an extra-sensory who has turned his talent to crime, but rather take the overall view. For instance, we can write the life history of our Psi-man in broad

terms. As a schoolboy, he was considered extraordinarily lucky at games of chance and skilled in games of manual dexterity; he stood high in schoolwork and at the same time managed to do it without working very hard. By the time he enters high school, he realizes that his success is due to some sort of 'sensing' of when things will be right. This increases the efficiency of his talent and he surges forward and would have become top-of-class if he hadn't discovered that brilliance in recitation made up for a lack of handed-in homework.

"In other words, nothing stands as a real challenge to him. His talents surmount the obstacles that confront his fellow man. He could collect corporations or be a labor leader, President or bum. Anything he wants can be gotten without much fuss. Our Psi-man is primarily interested in a statistical income sufficient to support him to the dictates of his ambition. The trick is to achieve, say, twenty grand per annum, in such a way that the manipulation is never discovered.

"At first our Psi-man plans meticulously. But soon this process seems unnecessary because the poor ignorant homo saps don't even know they're being conned. He has no hard surface against which to whet his nervous edge, and so he begins to play games. He leaves clues, at first to ascertain the true level of his fellow man's intelligence and ability. Next he leaves conflicting clues to see which way the poor dopes will jump. In a world that scoffs at parapsychic phenomena, he leaves clues to support the theory that only an extra-sensory criminal could have done the dastardly deed. Will one of the ignorant apes recognize the truth? If he does, will he be in a high position, or will he be one of the diligent ones who fetch coffee for the guy in the upper office? If the work of a Psi-man is recognized, how will our bright policeman go about it, and what will he do with the evidence after it's been shown to him?

"And so, Mr. Wood, our Psi-man criminal has become bored because there is no one in the world to challenge him, and he gets sloppy through his growing contempt for the antlike activities of his fellow creatures. At last he shows himself, deliberately taunting them to take action against him. And that," I concluded, with a nod at him, "might be the 'perfect crime' in which your extra-sensory criminal finally exposes himself."

"But why," Mrs. Wood asked in perplexity, "would such a talented person turn to crime—or do you think that all extra-sensory people—"

I turned to smile at her. "Mrs. Wood, I was not speaking of extra-sensory people as a statistical body. I was referring to one particular character."

"I find him hard to believe in."

"On the contrary, my dear," said Mr. Wood, "Captain Schnell has drawn an amazingly accurate thumbnail sketch of our Psi-man, and I daresay that he could go on and on, filling in more minute details."

"Oh, yes, indeed," I said. "But I must leave it up to the professional writer to tell what the brilliant policeman does when he recognizes the work as that of an extra-sensory. For instance, does he become bold enough to mention it to Chief Weston, or to Commissioner Stone? Or will he confine his discussion to the company of a rain-soaked young woman so circumstantially available and coincidentally willing to discuss Psionics?"

"Captain Schnell," breathed Florence Wood, "what on Earth are you talking about?"

"Your father," I said.

Mr. Wood stepped into the breach. "Captain Schnell was dramatizing for your benefit, I'm sure. Because Captain Schnell knows very well how impossible it is to surprise a telepath into revealing himself."

Florence Wood's expression changed to a mildly bothered smile. "It certainly sounded as if he were accusing you of something."

"You mean—like—*mind reading*?" he asked with a big belly laugh that closed the subject.

IV

By most of the rules of society, both Mr. Wood and I were guilty of gross gentility. He greeted me overtly as the welcome guest and needled me with a show of patronizing tolerance as he implied that my basic interest was in Florence.

To match him, I accepted his hospitality and made use of the proximity to spy on him and his family.

There are ways and means of making a pretended deaf-mute reveal himself—the human being does not live who will not leap halfway out of his skin at the shock of an unexpected revolver shot, no matter how well trained he is at feigning deafness.

As for surprising a telepath, I knew it wouldn't work, but I had to try it anyway. I put both Mrs. Wood and Florence through a number of mental hurdles. To this, Mr. Wood took a quietly tolerant attitude. He understood and was prepared to accept as healthily normal a certain amount of lust and carnal conjecture in the minds of males who were interested in his daughter. He forgave me for mentally insulting his wife because he knew that my mental peregrinations were only aimed at determining whether his wife was telepathic. Finally he came out flatly and told me to stop wasting my effort, because neither Florence nor Mrs. Wood had a trace of extra-sensory power. Their lack of shocked or outraged response was not a case of the well-trained telepath divining my intention and planning a blank response.

Furthermore, Mr. Wood asserted that neither of them knew of his extra-sensory faculty, that he fully intended to keep it that way, and that I should know damned well that such stunts wouldn't work in the first place.

And so I continued to enjoy a dinner now and then, and occasionally the company of Florence.

Ultimately the lack of progress brought Chief Weston's nervous system to the blowup point. He called me in and I went, knowing that trouble cannot always be avoided, and when it can't, it's just plain sense to kick out the props and have done with it.

He plowed right in: "And what in hell have you been doing?"

"Chief, I've been—"

"You put a make-team on some half-baked writer named Wood."

"Edward Hazlett—"

"Because," he yelled, "the first person you saw when you stuck your nose outside of Gordon Andrews' apartment was Florence Wood!"

"Well, Chief, you see—"

"You perhaps suspected that she'd just walked through the wall of that apartment? And naturally you pulled out your hip-pocket crime laboratory and checked that umbrella tip for bloodstains before you threw it aside."

"Well, you see—"

"Schnell, would you have been so damned gallant if she'd been an ugly old hag in a ratty dress carrying a dead halibut wrapped in an old newspaper?"

"But you see—"

"So you leap into gallant action, and after you've rescued the fair maiden from her watery grave, you suddenly find it desirable to use a department automobile to deliver the damsel home."

"But—"

"Schnell, I'll bet that Wood girl wasn't any wetter than you were. And that's how you put the long arm of coincidence to work?"

It was more than coincidence. Florence Wood had been in that soaking rain and whipping wind for more than an hour. Any housewife would have corroborated my statement that only a prolonged soaking can achieve a truly wet-through-the-seams condition. Oh, Daddy Wood was just the guy to think of a stunt like saturating the seams and fibers of his daughter's clothing by agitating the water supersonically at high amplitude, but, let's face it, that would have beaten hell out of her soft white skin.

As for the umbrella, the wound could indeed have been made by a rapierlike thrust. But a comparison between the depth of the wound and the length of the tip showed that the bottom of the wound could not have been reached without forcing part of the umbrella itself into the victim's body. The face of the wound showed no such outsize penetration, hence the umbrella was not the sought-for weapon.

At this point, Chief Weston's telephone interrupted him and he snatched it up, bellowed his name, and then listened. Finally he snarled that it was for me and fairly hurled the handset at me.

I caught it at the end of its cord and said: "Captain Schnell, Special Detail—"

"Oh, I know it is you, Captain Schnell," said the suave voice of Edward Hazlett Wood. "I just wanted to tell you that your analysis of the umbrella's uselessness as evidence was quite brilliant. Also your logic in the matter of my daughter's rain-soaked clothing was clever. I really don't regret the chewing out you are getting. You deserve it. I was hoping to find you bright enough to avoid it. Anyway, can we expect you for dinner this evening?"

"Yes," I snapped, and hung up, thinking a few things that would have called for a

terse reprimand about foul and abusive language if telepathy were administered by the Federal Communications Commission.

"Wood?" snapped Chief Weston.

"Yes."

"Date?" he snarled.

I groaned. Wood did have the nasty telepath's ability to maneuver me into a situation that I could not conveniently avoid.

"When they start calling the office to pester you for dates—"

"I know what I'm doing!"

"So do I!" he yelled. "You're doing nothing!"

"Listen, Chief, I'll admit the long arm of coincidence, but you'll have to admit that when there's trouble, I'm usually the first one to smell it."

"So how do you connect them up?"

"Chief, I walk out of that apartment with your own words ringing in my ears. 'Looks like the classical setup for a "perfect crime,"' you said. And then I meet this girl who just happens to have a father who writes whodunits and is planning a series of books based upon the 'perfect crime.'"

"Maybe," sneered Chief Weston, "the guy is a mind reader."

"I've given even that some consideration."

"So I hear tell."

"Any objections?" I asked.



"Objections? I've got a lot of objections!" he howled. "This is a police department, not a soothsayers' convention! We're subject to enough criticism as it is. You needn't have added the act that makes us look like a bunch of damned fools."

"But, Chief, I—"

"So what do I hear tell?" He hauled the tray drawer of his desk open and pulled out one of the tabloids, opened to one of its hate-everything columnists. "Listen!

In recent years the legality of the famous witchcraft trials of the past has been subject to debate, with the result that these past convictions have now been declared "miscarriages of justice." Posthumously, I must unhappily add. However, there has been little or no amendment to the laws against witchcraft, wizardry, charms, amulets and spells.

"But brace yourselves, citizens. One of our younger and more brilliant captains of detectives has shown an interest recently in parapsychics and may be training to track down criminals by the application of extra-sensory detection. If this be true, the laws will have to be ruptured to permit him to secure evidence, since it is a tenet of the law that evidence must be secured through legal methods and processes.

"Fortune Tellers of the World, Arise! You have nothing to lose but your crystal balls!"

Chief Weston slapped the paper down. "What do you think of that?"

I said, "He's just making noise. Telepathy has nothing in common with—"

"I wish I could stop you from even *thinking* about telepathy!"

"If you could," I said calmly, "you'd have to be telepathic to determine when I had violated your dictum—and if you were telepathic, Chief, you'd have been on my side from the beginning."

He merely glared at me. At this moment I should have been expecting the worst, and prepared to meet it. But please remember that there's always that mental block against prying, especially when the United States mail is concerned. But now Edward Hazlett Wood was about to show me how a real extra-sensory sharpshooter clobbers his enemies.



Weston's secretary entered, carrying a package.

I saw it, knew at once what it was, and groaned with despair. The only chance I saw of getting out of this was the forlorn hope that Weston would believe the package was a dig, probably mailed by the sniping columnist.

It was cleverly contrived. The addressee's name had been blurred and half-obliterated so that it couldn't have been quietly dropped on my desk where I could have disposed of its damning contents quietly. It had, of course, come

special delivery, urgent, immediate handling. If I were a believer in amulets, witches and spells, I'd have been of the opinion that an *aura* of urgency had been created about the box.

Chief Weston's secretary handed it to him with a mumbled suggestion that it seemed to be important, and perhaps it should be opened in hopes that the contents would convey information as to the identity of the owner.

I said nothing.



Inside the package was a fine crystal ball, a set of tarot cards with a thick book of explanations, and a second deck of cards the like of which most people have heard but few have actually seen. These were the square, circle, wiggly line cards used in parapsychic research.



There was the damning evidence of a packing slip with my name clearly printed on it, and a rubber stamp notation that the merchandise order had been accompanied by a prepaid postal note.

The timing was perfect. The problem of keeping that package on schedule all the way from its point of origin to its devastating delivery must have taxed Wood's faculties, but he'd done it.

Chief Weston's choler rose visibly, and in a voice loud enough to be heard in Asbury Park, he yelled: "Schnell, did you—buy—this?"

I was trapped. No matter what I said, it was calculated to get me into trouble. For in the petty cash box in the secretary's desk was a petty cash slip made out in the amount of thirty-nine dollars and seventeen cents for a postal money order payable to the Aladdin Novelty Company of Bayonne, New Jersey. The signature was good enough for me to accept it myself. All along the line it had been nicely legal—or would have been if I'd really signed that petty cash slip.

If it came to an argument, I'd have to perform miracles to prove my innocence.

"Schnell," said Weston in a cold, level voice, "you'll get me a lead on the Gordon Andrews murder by tomorrow night or hand me your badge."

I fumed in silence because there was nothing to say.

"Get out!"

As I closed the door behind me, I heard the crash of the crystal ball hitting the wall. Luckily he hadn't hurled it at the glass panel in his office door.

My own phone was ringing as I approached my desk. I picked it up wearily and said, "Very clever, Mr. Wood. Very damned clever."

He said, "Your basic difficulty, Captain Schnell, is that you have sworn to uphold the law and are compelled to employ legal methods. You must always work within the framework of the law. You would not think of tampering with the United States mails, even to save yourself from an unjust charge."

"Wood, if I make a single move outside of the law, you'll use it against me, won't you?"

"I'm afraid that's the way it has to be. You play according to your rules and I'll play according to mine."

"Well, now, Mr. Wood, in our philosophy there may be strength. Remember, upon the day that the forces of law and order must violate their own concepts in order to effect their own ends, on that day law and order ceases to be the goal of honest men."

"Spoken like an idealist!"

Hanging up a telephone is not polite, but in this case hanging up did not snap the link of communication.

V

An angry man is a poor fighter. I sat shuffling papers on my desk, half of my intellect raging helplessly. Finally I forced myself to sit and read the papers on the desk, even though I knew every word on every one of them.

One reported that Wood had been one of the less conspicuous partners in a very successful personnel-placement agency. I could have added a penciled note that

a telepath should make a very successful personnel manager.

Another said that Florence Wood was employed as a safety deposit vault clerk in the Third National Bank. This didn't bother me. What the standard human gets out of staring at a solid phalanx of safety deposit boxes is a headache, not perceptive-gained information.

There was a medical report that Wood had undergone a mild coronary occlusion some months ago which had hastened his retirement. I wondered whether his retirement had been hastened by a real coronary occlusion or whether he'd used his extra-sensory power to fake the symptoms and control the doctor's instruments.

Among the papers was a complete dissertation on the stab-wound in Gordon Andrews' chest. There was no trace of any foreign body; the wound did not go all the way through the chest cavity. It was not clean cut, as if made by a sharpened weapon, but more like the semi-rounded end of an umbrella or a blunt, heavy spike. In the opinion of the medical examiner, the wound had been made with a rapid thrust, but it looked as if there had been no withdrawal. An inspection of the wound for traces of excess water (icicles) or carbon dioxide (dry ice) had failed to disclose any plausible weapon or projectile that could have evaporated or sublimed out of existence.

I longed to suggest that a test be made for air. If a kinematic can create pyrotic effects by agitation of the molecules in something to be ignited, a good kinematic could make Maxwell's Demon go to work for him. Like compressing a volume of air into a .38 slug and projecting it at revolver velocity.

And in the end I was not leafing the reports or reading them. I was really staring at the wall. Specifically, I was staring at the calendar without paying much attention to it, and as I came out of my reverie I realized that I'd been absorbed in a little red smudge on one of the dates.

Association is a funny process. The combination of calendar and red blob stared at hazily had finally brought my mind around to thinking of February the fourteenth, which honors a patron saint who has absolutely nothing to do with Jimmy Valentine, who was reputed to have been a very fast man with the combination of a safe, especially the type of safe that Gordon Andrews kept his money in because he did not trust banks, which may have been a good idea considering that Florence Wood worked in a bank vault, and her father...

I jumped out of my office chair just as it tilted over backward. If I hadn't jumped, I'd have split my skull on the radiator under the window behind me.

A heavy brass-edged ruler came up from the desk and swung in a whistling saber swipe at my face. I ducked in time to let the cut pass over my head; it clipped a few upstanding hairs. When it reached the end of its stroke, I wrested it out of Wood's control just to prove that an alert local force could exert more power than a distant kinematic force. Naturally I could. Leverage, of course.



Next came a metal-to-metal clicking sound; it was the police positive in the upper left-hand corner of my desk. I thought strongly, "Psi-man, you lift that gun and fire it at me through the desk drawer, and the angle and everything will be enough evidence to change Weston's opinion from angry rejection of all Psionics to a cold, calculated, vengeful agreement with everything I've suggested."

The clicking stopped coming from the desk drawer and resumed in smaller kind from the little desk lock in the tray drawer of the desk.

These desk locks can be picked with a bent hairpin, but picking takes time. Everything takes *time*. At any rate, it did indeed take Edward Hazlett Wood a finite time to juggle the little brass tumblers, turn the main cylinder, retract the sliding bolt, withdraw the desk tray to unlatch the side drawers, pull open the upper left-hand drawer and extract my police positive from its holster with its mechanism entering the firing cycle—which itself takes *time*.

By which time I'd vacated my office and was starting across the outer office floor in the brisk, stiff-legged walk of a man in a hurry to go a long way fast.

Wood was stalled. I thought: "Make like a poltergeist, Psi-man—and convince everybody that you exist!"

The outer office was a bustle of the usual police activity. But Wood did not have the ability to invade another mind and take over. At least, not one of the men in the office suddenly had a fit of homicidal mania with Captain Schnell listed as the first victim.

And so I made Weston's office and shoved my head in through the outer door and yelled: "Weston—Third National Bank—and make it fast!"

I turned and headed outside as Weston started the usual top-brass routine of wanting to know all of the infinitely variable reasons why he should leave his office at all, let alone right now. With no one to fire delaying questions at, and with a growing realization that he was not going to learn a thing by sitting there

in fulmination, he followed.

I paid no more attention to him once I knew he was on his way.

I had my own hands full.



Considering the general reliability of the average internal combustion engine in the face of neglect, abuse and the natural ravages of weather, the automobile engine is a brute-force mechanism completely unable to support a psychosis. I was, however, appalled to discover just how many little thumb-valves, levers, wires, doo-dads, cams, gizmos and kadodies there are, each of which must be adjusted within ridiculously narrow limits before the so-called brute-force mechanism will deign to turn a gear. But again, and luckily, making adjustments and maladjustments takes time. And by the logical rules of classical mechanics, the simple maladjusting turn of a screw valve takes no longer to return to adjustment provided the restorer is as bright and as quick as the wrecker.

We worked our way through it like a pair of fencers or ju jitsu professionals going through the formal ritual of opening their engagement.

He fastened on the starting system, but I licked him cold on that one because the ignition key controls the starter relay switch and I could handle both with one hand.

He tried to block the starting relay, but the armature had started before he arrived with his kinematic barrier and the solid mechanico-electrical power carried the armature home.

He made a futile attempt to flummox up the laws of Mr. Ohm, but he did not have the power to prevent amperes from flowing from the battery into the starting motor. By the time he thought of gumming up the bendix, the gear had meshed against the flywheel and the engine was turning over.

He tried to flood the engine, but I held the choke valve just as I wanted it. He fiddled with the breaker-points and I blocked that until one of the cylinders fired. That kicked the whole engine into life and made the engine far too rapid to control, moving member by moving member. This caused his attention to turn to the needle valves, but as fast as he turned them out, I turned them back in again. He hit the choke again and I parried his thrust.

The engine kicked over, caught, spluttered and backfired, and then went into an erratic running that smoothed out slightly as it warmed. I wasted no time; I kicked her into gear and took off in a jack-rabbit start with my siren wailing.

Exultantly, I thought: "Can you hit a moving target, Psi-man?"

Yes, you can stop an internal combustion engine turning at three thousand revolutions per minute by yanking off the ignition system. But not when your opponent is doing everything in his power to prevent you, and not when both of you are traveling at sixty or more miles per hour and you have a rougher driving course than he.



My own siren was clearing my way, driving motorists to the shelter of the side streets and parking places, and causing my fellow policemen to take charge blocks ahead to clear the path for the vehicle that had the right to exceed the city speed limit. My worthy opponent drove at sixty miles per hour at his own risk, trying to race me to the Third National Bank.

Wood's extra-sensory driving was no better than mine. The traffic pattern was clear to both of us. But who should know better than a policeman what the average motorist will do in the face of an emergency?

He took the time now and then to hurl something at me, but this was not very effective. If you think not, figure how many things you can see and use as weapons while driving at sixty.

And, too, he was also fighting the unfavorable end of a missile-problem called "terminal control," which simply states that any guided missile approaching its target is subject to greater and greater interference by the enemy as it gets closer. Wood's near-misses I ignored with a disdain calculated to make him furious, and his near-hits I blocked with an ease that proved my ability to outguess and outmaneuver him.

I chuckled to myself, for Edward Hazlett Wood had been played off-balance. He'd committed the hysterical mistake of fighting me on my ground instead of his. He had thrust and I'd parried and advanced, forcing him to thrust again before he could recover. He'd been fighting in the very odd position of conducting a vigorous offensive while back-stepping in inexorable retreat. He should have run and run until he was clear enough to prepare a single telling

blow.

And so ultimately I came to the front of the Third National Bank in a screeching halt. I stepped under a falling cornice, neatly avoided a revolving door that tried to slice me, and side-stepped the bronze bust of Salmon P. Chase that toppled from its niche of honor above the door. I evaded the erratic rolling of a pencil, and I trod with unerring step on a circular patch of invisible stuff that was as slippery as the proverbial frictionless lubricant. The slick flowed forward and down over the stairs as I hurried below; I held myself erect above it by sheer will power.

As I strode toward the safe-deposit vault, I thought exultantly: "You're outpointed, Psi-man!"

VI

Florence Wood looked up from her little desk and cried, "Why, Captain Schnell! How nice to see you!"

"Hello," I said with a smile. "I hope you won't mind my company for a while."

"I'm not likely to go for a stroll in—Captain Schnell! Don't—"

Seven and one-half tons of finely wrought and polished tool-steel alloy swung on delicately balanced hinges, coming to rest with the metal-to-metal sound of machined surfaces sliding into a perfect fit with its precision-matched receptacle. Its piston-fit made a pressure on our eardrums. Then the automatic switches took over and motors whirred in solid muffled harmony as the massive bars slid out of their nests into the polished slots.

The ponderous operation that sealed the two of us off from the outside world behind a barrier of drill-proof and burglar-proof and blast-proof solidity concluded not with the mechanical fanfare it deserved, but with a gentle little *click* that was as final as the Word of God.

"—do that!" gasped Florence Wood, weakly finishing her admonition.

She stared at me.

The knowledge that this bank vault door was equipped with a time-lock that would not permit it to be opened except in the interval between nine-fifteen and

nine-thirty in the morning of any working weekday ceased to be mere information and became vitally important to Florence Wood.

So did the secondary knowledge that the bank vault was also contrived in available volume to limit the breathable air. There was not enough to support the average human adult overnight until opening time tomorrow morning. Now there were two of them entombed in it—and *she was one of them!*

"We'll die!" she screamed.

"Trust me, Florence?"

She looked dubious. She was not at all willing to regard anyone as competent who was so foolish as to lock himself into a bank vault—and her with him.

Florence was still struggling through her sea of mixed thoughts when the telephone rang. It was Chief Weston and he bellowed almost loud enough to hear through the yards of concrete and steel that separated us.

"Schnell—what in the bloody hell have you done?"

"I've shut the vault," I said.

"You'll die!"

"I doubt it."

"How do you propose to get out?" he demanded with heavy sarcasm.

"Just ask Edward Hazlett Wood—the Psi-man in our midst."

"Schnell, if you get out of there alive, I'm going to ask for your resig—"

"If I get out of here alive, you'll need every faculty I have to keep our Psi-man juggled for good."

"You and your extra-sensory—"

"Chief, get it through your thick skull that I am so convinced I'm right that I am betting my life on it!"

"And can you tell me why he is going to give himself away to rescue you?"

"Because I have his daughter right here beside me."

"Schnell—"

"Stop yacking, Chief. Call me when Wood arrives. I have an emotional problem on my hands down here."

"How do you know Wood's coming?"

"He's been following my every move by telepathy," I said. "And he's been trying to block me all the way. Oh, he knows all right."

Then I hung up to stop a lot of senseless gab. I turned to Florence, who was just beginning to understand what I had said and what it meant to both her and her father. She stood there with shocked eyes regarding me, and with one hand pressed back against her teeth. She said, "I don't believe it," in a barely audible voice.

"It's true, and I'm sorry it's true," I told her.

"It can't be true."

"That's what you'd like to believe," I said softly. "But the fact remains that your father is a killer."

"I'd rather die."

"Florence, the choice between death and dishonor is not yours to make. Whether you live or die is up to your father, who is guilty of placing you in this awkward position by turning his talents to evil."

She stared at me. "But—how could you—?"

"There was no other way but to bait this trap emotionally."

"So cold and cruel—"

I nodded. "So were the pioneers who saved one last bullet for their wives."

How could I tell this hurt girl that I had looked time and again into the minds of killers and found them far worse than the deeds they committed? When the official record states that upon such and such a date, so and so was punished for his crime, how is he punished for the harm he did to those who placed their trust in him? I hate them because they force me to reveal them for what they are, making me an agent of their betrayal.

The phone rang again. "Yeah, Chief?"

"Schnell, Wood's just arrived. What shall I tell him?"

"Don't bother. He knows it all."

"Schnell, granting that you are right, why should he show his hand when he knows—or could easily find out—that the time-lock setting mechanism is on your side of that vault door?"

"Sure it is," I replied. "But it's covered by a sheet of five-ply safety glass."

"Use your revolver!"

"Chief, reprimand me for a violation of regulations if you must, but let me point out that only an idiot would wear a gun when he's pitting himself against a Psi-man."

"Got everything figured out, haven't you, Schnell?"

"Chief," I said, "this affair started in a sealed room, and now it's going to end in one."

I yanked on the telephone and pulled it out of its connection block, snapping that link of communication. Then, to satisfy Edward Hazlett Wood, I hurled the instrument as hard as I could against the safety glass. The telephone bounced as if I had thrown it against six solid feet of battleship plate armor.



I thought: *"Psi-man, you are trapped!"*

He thought: *"I've killed before, Schnell. Why shouldn't I profess helplessness and innocence, and accuse you and the whole Police Department of the stupid and wanton death of my beloved daughter?"*

"Because you've erred, Psi-man Wood."

"Ah, now I have proof! You're a Psi-man, too!"

"Who—me?" I thought without a visible change in my expression for Florence Wood to see. *"You're the one who erred, Wood. You neglected the rules."*

"Bah—the law! Stupid law—"

"Not so stupid, Wood. The law is really very sensible. It's strong, Wood, and it fosters the strength that comes of following it. So you see, Psi-man Wood, by never, never making any overt use of my talent, by never admitting that I know more than any clever man can see and deduce from what he knows—it has now become quite obvious to Chief Weston that if any such shenanigans as extra-sensory manipulation of this bank-vault door take place—you're the only one

suspected of parapsychic power!"

And then the time-lock setting dials clicked around, their tiny noise muted by the glass door. They came around until they pointed to the present time. Then came the louder manipulation of outside dial lock, the heavy click of massive tumblers, and then the solid turning sound of wheel and mighty lever. The vault door swung open.



Outside, a pale and speechless man faced me, looking at his daughter. Weston was shaking his head, but the confusion was clearing. Weston was a good man, quite willing to operate without a full explanation, so long as there was a reasonable probability that some reasonable explanation would come later. The president and four vice-presidents of the bank stared at their vault door in dismay, wondering how anyone could from now on rely on any protection if the best of the vault-maker's art could be opened with such ease.

And Florence. She started forward with a glad cry, but stopped in mid-stride as she realized the full truth. In those fractions of a second, she became the full, mature adult who had been hurt, and who knew that hurt and pain are not the end.

She stopped a full yard from him and whispered, "Daddy—you did—it!"

He looked at her out of frantic eyes. "I didn't! I didn't!"

Chief Weston took a pair of handcuffs from one of the uniformed cops and held them up in front of Edward Hazlett Wood's eyes. "Coming quietly, Wood, or must I weld them on you?"

Stunned, knowing that any move he made I would block, the murderer turned to go.

I was going to have quite an interesting intellectual problem to solve. I was going to have to testify that I was clever enough to trap an extra-sensory criminal without displaying my own extra-sensory talent. It wasn't just a matter of putting a possible ending to my official usefulness to the forces of law and order if the facts became known. One word of suspicion against Captain Howard Schnell and some clever defense attorney would raise a wholly reasonable doubt as to which Psi-man opened that vault door.

And being sworn to uphold the law, and enforce the law within the framework of the law itself, I'd have to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God!

But, according to the same sensible law, not unless I was specifically asked.

And to answer Edward Hazlett Wood's question: The perfect answer to the perfect crime committed by the perfect criminal is *a perfect retribution*.

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