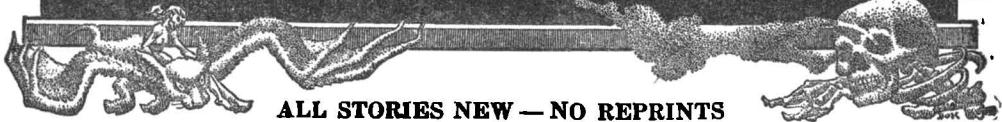


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

November, 1943

Cover by A. R. Tilburne

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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They just weren't the sort of people you'd invite to a respectable dinner party—even if they'd been alive!



Heading by JOHN GIUNTA

Speed the Parting Ghost

WHEN Mother screamed I was sitting before the fire thinking how nice it was to sit before the fire. Besides that I was waiting for Betty. Mother was giving a dinner to celebrate my engagement to Betty and tonight was the night.

Mother had fussed a lot with this dinner on account of Mrs. Vandergood, Betty's mother. Betty is fine: a lady, but not too much of a lady when it isn't politic to be too much of a lady. But her mother! Well, I'm doomed to be her son-in-law so I guess I ought to be glad that she's a step, as the saying goes, above me. Frankly, I'm content to let her stay on that top step without intruding. She's very society and stern, with a rock-ribbed forehead and a neck like a ship's mast. And she drinks tea as if she liked it. When Mother and I drink tea we look around for a chaser.

Mother and I are plain folks. Plain to some anyway: fancy to others. It depends on how you live. Mother has had three husbands, all dead now. But don't get the idea that is anything more than coincidence. There was never a question about the death of any one of them except perhaps the first, my father. And that was silly. He died simply and honorably from falling backwards down the cellar stairs while he was yelling at Mother. She didn't even give him a little push. But you know how suspicious the police are, especially of the beneficiary of the deceased's insurance. So when someone gets three batches of husbands' insurance you can be sure everything is open and above-board. Anyway, that's what Mother said.

So we were having this dinner to celebrate my engagement to Betty and I was thinking how nice it was to have money enough to do the thing up brown, thanks to the kind offices of my three fathers in dying, when Mother screamed.

Betty and Mrs. Vandergood were due any minute. Mother had gone in to take a last look at the table, to see whether the silver gleamed and the damask shone enough to knock Mrs. Vandergood for a loop, and to check on whether cook or the butler had been at the sherry yet, when, as I said before, she screamed.

"Alan," she yelled. "ALAN!"

I rushed valiantly to her rescue. I leaped from my chair and made the dining room in two jumps and a slide. I almost slid back when I reached the door and looked in.

The table, which had been spruce and shiny and neat before, was a shambles. The salted nuts were demolished; the olives were hacked and torn; pickles were rolling over the carpet and some of them squooshed under my feet as I entered. There were pools of liquor in the plates. The candles were burning crookedly and dripping grease in big green gobs onto the tablecloth. But worst were the two characters leaning elbow to chin on the table and yelling at Mother. They were the two most disreputable characters I have ever seen. No, not the *most* disreputable, for I had seen these two characters when they were alive—and alive or dead there wasn't a hair's difference in the degree of their disreputability.

They were my defunct Uncle Salty and Aunt Olive, Mother's brother and sister, respectively, who had been suffocated by smoke in a prison fire two years ago. I knew because I had seen and identified the bodies.

Mother was crying and screaming and switching her eyes from Aunt Olive's stringy red hair and hawklike face to Uncle Salty's filthy beard which he was combing nervously with the hook he wore instead of a right hand. Once he'd been a seaman and he'd lost that hand to a shark many years before he died.

"Shhhh, Mame," he was shouting.
"SHUSH!"

"Mattie, to you!" Mother screamed.

Yes, they were dead—both of them.

I'd always thought ghosts were all gassy ectoplasm and fog, but these creatures looked to be constructed as solidly as a barn door. True, their eyes were a bit cavernous and their skin was a cadaverous green, but they were *there* materially. If you put out your hand you could feel them—if you wanted to, which I didn't.

THREE was too much of a racket at the moment for much more to be clear. Mother was yelling soprano and Aunt Olive was yelling whiskey contralto and Uncle Salty was booming basso profundo. So, just to round out the quartette I wheezed in with a gaspy tenor. I was seeing not only red but fireworks as I looked around at the mess they had made of the dinner table.

Things didn't quiet down much until after cook and the butler quit. They came in to see why the house was shaking, took one long look at Aunt Olive who was drowning hair and all in the sherry, one short look at Uncle Salty who had gotten his hook entangled in the Philadelphia glass chandelier and was swinging at it with his left as if it were a punching bag, one look of tacit understanding at each other, and their nostrils tightened in unison as if they didn't want to get too much of the bad smell in them. They straightened and the butler said simply and sincerely, Madam, we are leaving.

"Leaving," Mother yelled. "You ingrates!"

"We have our pride, Madam, our reputations, our honor—"

"Keep them," Mother said, "if you haven't lost them up to now."

"You've never had guests up to now," the butler said succinctly.

"But the Vandergoods," Mother began.

Cook leered. "From the looks of these characters I wouldn't care to wait for the rest."

They relieved us of their wages and left. Mother looked helpless and beaten. "Company for dinner," she cried, "and it's Alan's engagement party and there's a turkey in the oven. . . . What'll I do with it?" She all but tore her hair, adding in one last wail as if it were the crowning blow of all, "And the potatoes have to be baked with marshmallows!"

"Aw, quit it, Mame," Salty said. "I remember when you rustled stew for twelve people at the boarding house and thought nothing of it."

Mother turned on him like a raging lioness. Upset by the loss of the domestic staff on which she had leaned in the hope that it would raise our stock in Mrs. Vandergood's estimation, she had almost forgotten the two ghostly roots from which her troubles sprang.

"You get out!" she shrilled. "Both of you. Go to—to—Hell! That's probably where you came from anyway. And *don't* call me Mame."

She stopped suddenly as if, for the first time, she remembered that the souls, if any, of Salty and Olive two years ago had departed this earthly sphere.

"Good Lord," she said weakly, cowering from them, "You're *dead!* How did you get back?"

"Like this," Salty said, fastening his sunken eyes on the swinging door which led to the kitchen.

We gazed, flabbergasted, as it opened for no visible reason. Through it we could see the china cabinets over the sink. They looked real and unspooky until suddenly their doors opened too. A glass rose from the shelf and floated out through the air, through the open door and settled itself on the dining-room table.

Salty lowered his eyes and the kitchen door swung closed. "That's how," he said,

"only vice versa, of course. Instead of bringing things *to* us, we sent ourselves *away* from where we were. It's a sort of mental Jiu Jitsu. It's the art," he recited mechanically, "of so applying the mental forces that the slightest expenditure of force will overcome the greatest possible resistance. I probably shouldn't mention Jiu Jitsu at this crisis in your National affairs, but out there," he waved vaguely, "where we are, everyone is the same. Nobody is anything: Japs, French, Americans, Germans—they're all just people."

"Dead people," Mother breathed. "Why did you come back?"

I'd never seen Mother so scared before. She was panting and there were beads of perspiration on her forehead. My own hands were pretty clammy, I'll admit.

"Don't you know what night this is?" Olive asked.

Still too frightened to speak, Mother shook her head.

"Well, it's All Saints' Eve," Olive said, "the night set apart for com—commemoration of the faithful departed." She hiccuped and took another swig of sherry. "We thought you knew. But anyway you did the thing up brown. You did just what you were supposed to: got a lot of swell food and drinks and put as many chairs as there are dead in the family and turned out the lights and waited for us to arrive." She rose, swaying drunkenly, one string of strawy red hair dangling over her nose. "As the faithful departed," she waved her glass, slopping more wine on the tablecloth, "we wanna thank you—"

"Faithful departed!" Mother spat. She was getting more used to the idea of hobnobbing with ghosts, and now that she was sure they meant no harm her anger returned. "Thieves! Scoundrels! Shoplifters! Murderers! Get out!"

"That ain't fair, Mame," Salty said, combing his beard with his hook. "I ain't a murderer. That guy I killed—it was

right after I lost me hand." Under stress of emotion Salty had always lapsed into dialect. "He got me mad so I clipped him and me hook caught his neck." He paused for a moment, licking his lips reminiscently. "Right in the juglar, it got him. Gord, what a bloody mess! But, honest, I didn't mean to do it. I forgot about me hand being a hook until it caught and I couldn't get it loose. That ain't murder, it's forgetfulness. Fawny puttin' a man in the clink for *that*!" He rose to strut about the room in a seedy, desiccated, revolting caricature of an English fop.

"And I'm no thief," Olive put in. "They jugged me on false charges." She rose too, swinging her wine glass in a wide circle. "They murdered me, that's what they did. If I hadn't been in prison when the fire started I wouldn't have been suffocated by smoke and I wouldn't be dead now." Two tears welled from her sunken eyes. "They planted that bracelet on me and murdered me, that's what they did. Murrerrd!"

On the last, frenzied screech Mother edged nearer. "Where did you get your emerald brooch then?" she asked accusingly. "You were a pickpocket and a shoplifter and a thief, and you know it!"

RIGHT here was where I thought I ought to break in. If Mother was going to rake up all of Olive's and Salty's old crimes she wouldn't be through until doomsday. The main thing was to get those—those two *bodies* out, get the table cleaned up and try to serve Mrs. Vandergood and Betty their dinner as best we could.

"Let's let bygones be bygones," I said brightly. "You're here and of course we're glad to see you, but we're having guests for dinner—my fiancee and her mother. We'd like to have things nice for them."

"They're socialites," Mother put in proudly.

"Really?" For the first time a gleam of

life shone in Aunt Olive's cavernous eye. "Rich, eh? Do they wear lots of jewels?" One of her clawlike hands clutched convulsively.

I seized Mother's dress as she sprang. "Control yourself," I hissed. "We've got to get them out. Let me handle it." I turned to Salty with a smile so toothy and ingratiating and artificial that I know I must have looked nauseating.

"I suppose you're tired after your long—er—journey. Wouldn't you like to go into the bedroom and rest for awhile?"

My defunct uncle leered. "No, thanks. We've only got until midnight here and we're not wasting any time in sleeping. We get plenty of that where we came from. I'm disappointed in you, trying to get rid of me that way. After all I did for you too. Leaving you that money in my will, and my binoculars and—and—that due bill at the hotel."

"That money," I said thickly, "was in your will, but no place else. The prison authorities said you didn't have a dime to bury you. And the binoculars had one lens cracked, and when I tried to live out your due bill at the hotel so many creditors haunted—er—dunned me and so many obscene characters tried to put the bite on me that I was forced to move."

Salty's face fell. "Well anyway," he said softly, "I *did* leave you all my clothes, didn't I? I mean, after I had my accident and had no use for them."

"You mean after you were jugged," Olive said.

"That striped tie," Salty said reminiscently. "I always did like that striped tie. What ever did you do with it, Alan?"

"You were buried in it," I snapped.

"Was I? By George!" He lifted up his long, ragged beard. The remnants of a decayed, dirty string hung disconsolately around his neck.

This was getting us nowhere. "Look Uncle and Aunt," I said, trying to put

a respect I did not feel in my voice, "can't you go around and do your haunting elsewhere—just for tonight? Come back tomorrow. We'll be alone then, just Mother and me, and we'll fix you a feed that will make you die—er—swoon with joy."

Olive waggled her stringy head. "It's no use, dear. We're like Cinderella. We've only 'till twelve, only tonight. Think what it means to us—only one night a year when we can eat and drink. The rest of the time. . . ." Her voice trailed off disconsolately. She roused herself and took another swig of sherry. "I'm sorry to spoil your party—and yours too, Matt. (Not that we ever got along too well—you were always putting on the dog. Not that you had any right to—you did a good bit of thieving too in a high-grade way. You milked your three husbands dry.) Still, I'll tell you what we'll do. As long as Salty and I are responsible for the help leaving we'll volunteer to serve as butler and maid. Only until twelve though—"

"Over my dead body!" Mother screamed. "Maid and butler. Why you—you corpses!"

SALTY wagged his hook in sharp re-proof. "Careful, Mame. We're not corpses by choice, you know." He winked slyly at Olive and said, "By the way, we see a lot of your three husbands where we are. There's not one of them's too pleased with you. A word from us and you might be in for some triple haunting. You'd better do as Olive says and let us stay. You know," he crossed one leg and swung it idly, "it was mighty strange the way they all died. Mighty strange. . . ."

"You mean," Mother said hoarsely, "that they've gotten together—they *know* each other?"

Salty nodded. "It's mighty interesting the different ideas each one has about you."

"Lord," Mother groaned. "I promised every one of them I'd never marry again."

"They're mad about that," Olive said succinctly, "all but Jerry. He kind of lords it over the others because he's the last," she paused, "so far."

Mother swallowed hard. I broke in before she got her gorge settled.

"Look," I said, "let's be reasonable." I vacillated between them, wondering which would be more amenable to reason and settled on Salty. To my knowledge he had been jailed only once and, while that once was a life sentence for murder, the murder just *might*, as he claimed, have been an accident. But one doesn't accidentally shop-lift or pick pockets and Olive had been in and out of so many jails that I had used up the O page in two address books trying to keep track of her. She had had only two passions in life—jewels and chocolate candy. It was a simple equation: her passion for jewels got her in jail; her passion for chocolate candy made the stay there more pleasant. I sent her what I could.

I turned placatingly to Salty. "You two can't serve as butler and maid. You've had no experience. Besides," I added in what was meant to be an offhand manner, "you're dead. Dead people don't go around doubling for domestics. Where are your—your—uniforms?"

"You'd turn people's stomachs with those smoke-drenched shrouds," Mother remarked. Then, with peculiarly feminine curiosity, she asked, "Is that what you wore when you died, Olive?"

Olive rose and began doing a ghastly caricature of a minuet around the table, the rags of her garment fluttering and emitting a faint, mouldy smell as she bobbed and dipped.

"It is," she sang, "and I'll wear it to Alan's engagement dinner. A funeral, a marriage: Life is funny!" She stopped suddenly. "I should have said 'Death is funny,' shouldn't I? Both those things took place after I died. But Death *isn't* funny." Her face hardened into a bleak, desiccated de-

termination. "That's why you've *got* to let us stay, Matt. We'll be dead forever, but we're only alive until twelve tonight. We're *going* to stay whether you want us or not, but if you're nasty about it we'll tell Alan's future mother-in-law and his la-de-da fiancee the way you ham-strung his three fathers. That ought to—"

At that moment the bell rang. It sounded like the crack of doom, Judgment Day, the beginning of the end. It was, in fine, Betty and Mrs. Vandergood. Little imps of thought turned somersaults in my mind. *If we could lock the dining-room door . . . but there was no key. . . . If, in two seconds, we could quietly murder Olive and Salty and dispose of the bodies . . . but Olive and Salty were already dead and trying to dispose of their bodies was just what was causing all the confusion. . . . If we—could pass them off as alive. . . .* That was it! If we could pass them off as alive! It just went to show the degree of madness I had attained. Suddenly it seemed much less unrespectable to have two disreputable characters like Olive and Salty alive than it was to have them dead. There was something so—so low-grade about corpses.

"Never mind going to the door," Olive said, "I'll open it—from here."

"No," I shouted. "No mental Jiu Jitsu! Remember, if we let you stay, *carry* things in your hands."

"Go on, Alan," Mother said resignedly, "I'll take care of them. Keep Betty and her mother occupied for awhile."

I reeled to the door and pulled it open just as another raucous blast of the bell tortured my eardrums. Betty stood there looking so petite and beautiful and completely normal and alive that I began to believe the specters in the dining room must be the product of my mad brain. What is that school of philosophy which teaches that when you leave a room the furniture and rugs and even the room itself completely disappear—that they are only there because

you are there and when you leave they cease to exist? Well, anyway, I was trying hard to believe in that philosophy, struggling to grasp it as if it were a raft in a bounding ocean.

THEN I saw Mrs. Vandergood. Did I say her neck was like a ship's mast? It wasn't. It was like a staff of molded cement—just as rough and unyielding—and around it was hung the most beautiful string of emeralds I have ever seen. When I looked at Mrs. Vandergood's neck and at those emeralds I knew instinctively that Salty and Olive, alive or dead, wouldn't pass muster.

I gave Betty a good, long kiss. I'd never gone quite that far under the gimlet eyes of her mother before—a peck on the cheek was just about all she'd countenance. But I figured this was the end of everything anyway and I might just as well have something to remember on long winter evenings when I sat before the fire in single blessedness.

"Why, Alan," Betty said. She was pleased, I could tell it. I began to feel like a matador, like a swashbuckling sort of Jesse James. I was pretty proud that I'd been brave enough to defy Mrs. Vandergood's ramroddy ideas about how a gentleman ought to act before he is married.

"Come into the living room," I said. Thank goodness that was in order. Olive and Salty had stuck close to where the food and liquor was. Then, in line with my fatalistic feeling that this was the end and I might as well make it a good one, I added with new bravado, "Have a drink." Mrs. Vandergood didn't approve of hard liquor and I knew it.

I sidled them carefully to the davenport, keeping between them and the dining-room door.

It was pretty quiet in there and I wondered what was happening. Oh, well, maybe Mother had worked something out.

After all, Olive and Salty had been her blood kin.

I got Mrs. Vandergood and Betty perched on the davenport before the fire with their backs to the dining room and took a deep breath. Inasmuch as I hadn't expected to defy Mrs. Vandergood's temperance there weren't any cocktails mixed, so I just grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet and a couple of glasses. They might as well take it straight. They'd probably need more of the same, later.

I didn't wait to be polite but downed a straight shot on the way over. Mrs. V. glared. "No, thanks," she said icily as I dropped the wherewithal before her, "I don't drink. Neither does my daugh—"

But something had gotten into Betty. Maybe it was the way I had kissed her—or maybe I flatter myself. Anyway, she grabbed the bottle neck like a veteran and poured herself a slug. I grinned a little weakly because I still hadn't forgotten about Olive and Salty in the dining room and I was still wondering what Mother was doing about making them and the room presentable. Even the new look in Betty's eyes, which made me tingle and feel swashbuckling again and very virile, didn't banish my certainty that once she saw my dead relatives I'd be half of a broken engagement. Betty was a good sport and I believed she loved me, but it would take a lot more than good sportsmanship and just plain *human* love to overlook those two characters from the great beyond. To forgive them, one would have to be almost Godly.

Betty smiled at me just then and I was certain she *was* Godly. Angelic anyway.

"Well, here's to the future," she said, and downed the drink.

I downed another. I knew I had no future.

Suddenly remembering my duties as host, I got the mad idea of bringing Betty's mother into the conversation. I

turned to her with what was meant to be a smile, but came out all wrong. "What have you been doing lately, Mrs. Vandergood?" I asked.

The ramrod she called her neck rotated vaguely in my direction; her little, black, close-set eyes looked off into space. "How psychic of you to ask, Alan." Her words fell like little granules of ice into the Siberian wastes of my heart. (I was worrying now about the strange silence from the dining room and wondering whether Mother had succeeded in laying the ghosts of Olive and Salty or whether the procedure had been vice versa.)

"I have been occupying my time in a very interesting manner," she continued. "I've been studying steganography."

"Stegan-what?" For a fleeting moment I thought she was referring to those queer little hooks and curves queer little office girls write in queer little notebooks, but then I looked at her neck and I was sure she wasn't.

She waved my bewilderment aside with a scrawny, bejeweled hand. "Steganography," she said coldly. "It's a way of writing—in cipher. I correspond with the spirits of the departed. They're lovely, just lovely!"

WAIT until she saw Salty and Olive! I wondered whether she had ever corresponded with them in their eternal home, or with any one of my three fathers. I wondered whether she knew about mental Jiu Jitsu. I wondered if she knew how those lovely spirits *looked* when they came back. I gulped and said weakly, "I see. Sort of ghost-writing, eh? I've heard of it."

Her little, thin lips closed in tight disapproval of the joke. Before she could put me in my place, Mother reeled in.

Mother looked pale and a little frowzled, and there was a spot in the folds of her dress, but she was fighting valiantly to hold

the shreds of convention about her and act as if nothing had happened. She apologized to Mrs. Vandergood and Betty for not being there to receive them, muttering something vague about servants nowadays. She hoped they'd forgive anything a little out of the ordinary that might happen—this was a new cook and butler and they weren't very good—but would we all please come into the dining room now because dinner was ready.

I gave Betty my arm. I thought I'd better be there for support against her first glimpse of Olive and Salty. I hoped Mrs. Vandergood *would* fall down and pass out. I didn't feel capable of coping with her disillusionment when she saw some *real* spirits. Besides, I was sure my late relatives didn't have a glimmer of knowledge about steganography.

The dining room was empty when we reached it. The tablecloth had been changed and the glasses washed. There weren't any nuts or sherry or pickles on the table—I guess our dear departed had eliminated them all—but a pickle oozed under my foot and soggied into the rug as I entered, gooey reminder that once there had been meant to be a formal dinner party.

We got seated without event. I held my breath as Mother stepped on the electric bell under the table. The kitchen door swung slowly open—via mental Jiu Jitsu, but luckily Betty and Mrs. Vandergood weren't looking that way. I didn't know which I most hoped wouldn't come in first, but it was Salty. Mother had found an old tail coat which had belonged to one of her husbands—the last, I think—and Salty had squeezed his ectoplasmic body into it and was bursting at the seams. It was kind of green and the moths had been at it and either it or Salty gave off a musty odor. He clumped over to the table carrying one of those sandwich plates with a raffia handle hooked over his hook. On the

plate, stretched out like green corpses, lay four (count 'em) four warty-looking pickles.

He plopped the plate on the table and released his hook.

Mrs. Vandergood gasped. Betty's eyes widened for a moment before she dropped them to her plate.

"Pass 'em," Mother hissed.

"Oke, Mame," he said.

Well, at least Mame might pass for Ma'am. I hoped.

He caught the plate on his hook again and, with his left hand, carefully lifted one pickle from the plate and dropped it in front of Mrs. Vandergood. He paused, looked at her leathery neck for a moment, and asked, "Say, you're sure you're not dead too, aren't you?"

"Too," she breathed. "What do you mean, *too*?"

"Salty," Mother said commandingly, "please pass the pickles."

He shrugged, walked around to Betty, dropped one pickle on her plate and, in passing, gave her a slight, appreciative nudge. She jumped, looked at me with stark amazement in her eyes and melted back into her chair. What hopes I had left melted too. Salty dropped a pickle at each place and then, swinging the plate over his head and down again like a playful milkmaid, disappeared into the kitchen.

"Odd service," Mrs. Vandergood commented icily.

Mother shrank. Betty looked at me and I could see our marriage soaring on wings into never-never land. Mrs. Vandergood did not deign to eat her pickle. I munched noisily on mine and wished I had had the foresight to bring the bottle of liquor to the table.

MOTHER took a deep breath and stepped on the bell again. The door swung open and Olive entered, wearing a green smock over her carcass which, if pos-

sible, made her look even deader than before. She was carrying four plates of soup, one in each hand and one on each wrist in the manner of the best hasheries. How she got them there, I'll never know. "Oh, yes, of course, and let the left wrist one slide. It might have landed upright, but it didn't. I didn't get my napkin there in time either. But then one napkin would never have been enough to sop up all that soup anyway. Even Mrs. Vandergood's dress wasn't enough. The soup dripped off her lap onto the rug.

"Sorry," Olive said. "I'll get you a spoon. Maybe you can catch some."

Mrs. Vandergood rose—majestically, titanically, like avenging death.

"Please," Mother said, dabbing futilely at the soup with a soaking napkin. "Please, Mrs. Vandergood, I promise it won't happen again."

"Again!" Mrs. Vandergood screamed, for once forgetting her cushioned voice. "It shouldn't happen once. To a dog! My daughter shall never marry into *this* family!" With that she collapsed on the chair, fumbled at the neck of her dress and produced a handkerchief which she waved weakly before her face.

"Mother," Betty said quietly, "it wasn't their fault. It's the servant problem. Everyone has trouble nowadays."

My Mother caught on quick as a whip. "It's the administration. Just let the Republicans get in and you'll see a change."

That was the right approach. Mrs. Vandergood's face hardened and you could just see hate of the administration doing it. Betty subsided in her chair, just the faintest crinkle of a smile at the corners of her eyes. At that moment, I *really* loved her.

Olive took off the soup plates and brought in the turkey without very much happening except that she stacked the soup plates while they were full and they dripped all the way out to the kitchen and a strand of her red hair kept tickling the

turkey all the way in. She put the turkey down and after awhile weaved her way back to the kitchen. Salty's voice boomed out in a pirate song as the door swung open.

I looked at Mrs. Vandergood to see how angry she was now. She was plenty angry, so I dropped my eyes to her neck. Her neck had always intrigued me. I had never seen a neck quite like it—not that I ever wanted to—but now somehow it looked strange, different—sort of naked and indecent.

Suddenly I realized what was wrong. The emeralds were missing. Subconsciously, from the moment Mrs. V. entered, I had known those emeralds were going to prove too much of a temptation for Olive, though what good they would do Olive in her present state of decomposition—what good they would do her where she was going when the clock struck twelve, I couldn't figure. I suppose I knew the joy of the chase, the feeling of a thing well done, the satisfaction of accomplishment would outweigh utilitarian reasons with Olive.

I stretched my foot over, colliding with Mother's on the way, and pressed the electric bell on the floor. Hard. And twice.

AS BEFORE the door swung open without any visible physical presence to activate it, and stood swaying on its hinges a full ten seconds before anyone appeared. This time, however, both Betty and Mrs. Vandergood were watching. They had seen me press the bell and were curiously awaiting developments. When they saw the door, hanging as it were on a thread of thought, they gasped stutters of gasps, a sort of Morse Code of breathing.

"We've an electric eye on that door," I said.

Everybody looked relieved.

Then, *both* Olive and Salty entered.

"Olive," I said, fastening my eye on her

with gimlet intensity, "put back the—er—ice. Immediately!"

Everyone, including Mother, stared. We had no water, let alone any ice.

Olive shrugged, sauntered over to Mrs. Vandergood and leaned over her carelessly. Now, I thought angrily, is when she *should* use mental Jiu Jitsu. However, the result was the same. Mrs. Vandergood gave a slight start, a shiver, and reached down the front of her dress with a convulsive gesture. A moment later her hand emerged into the open with the emerald necklace.

"Heavens," she said, "the clasp must have broken."

Salty tittered. Mother's face got dangerously red, Betty looked confused and I tried to control a grin at the corner of my mouth. Olive, however, was staring intently at Mrs. Vandergood. Finally, she walked around the table to get a better view.

Mrs. Vandergood muttered, "Well, really," and started to rise, when suddenly Olive shouted, "I've got it now. Pearl!"

Mrs. Vandergood sank back weakly. "You've mistaken. My name's Jane."

"Yeah," Olive said, "Pearl Jane Beggs, moll of Bill Beggs the Bear Baron. Well, waddaya know!" She shook her head in amazement, her scraggly hair bobbing with each motion. "I knew I'd seen that puss somewhere before. One of my trials came right after Bill's once. I saw you in court. Remember? You slipped me a pack of cigs."

Mrs. Vandergood really rose this time. "No, I do not remember."

"You don't have to, toots," Salty said. "We do. I remember Bill Beggs' frail very well, and you're it. Maybe a little more leathery than you were in them days but—"

"Glory be!" Mother said. "Pearl Jane Beggs. I saw your picture in the papers." She shot out of her chair and into the living room, returning with a bottle of liquor clutched ecstatically to her bosom. "Pearl

Jane Beggs," she repeated, slapping the bottle on the table. "Well, I'll be! Come on, folks. Now let's have some fun!"

Olive and Salty waited no second invitation. They drew up chairs and, without anyone's leaving the table, glasses appeared from somewhere. Mental Jiu Jitsu again, I guess. Anyway, nobody said anything. Mrs. V. took a big gulp of liquor and Betty took one and Mother took one and Olive and Salty and I took one each and then I went into the living room to get another bottle because that one was empty.

When I got back I noticed the atmosphere had kind of changed. Betty looked scared. Mrs. V.'s hair had straggled and her little black eyes were wide-open and popping. And Salty was saying, "Relax, Pearl. We won't hurt you. All that bunkem about ghosts is bunkem."

So then I knew the worst was out about Olive and Salty. Probably Betty and Mrs. V. not only knew they were dead but that they were related to me too. I didn't know which was worse.

Finally Mrs. V. found her voice and asked exactly what I knew she was going to ask: whether any of the—er—people where Olive and Salty came from communicated with the living in steganography.

"Never heard of it," Olive said.

Mrs. V. explained that it was a way of writing in cipher.

"Why should they," Olive asked, "if they can speak English and the people who are taking it down can read it?"

That stumped Mrs. V.

I kept looking at Betty to see how she was taking all that about her mother's past and the skeletons, to be almost literal, in *our* closet, but I couldn't tell anything from her face. Salty started to sing and everyone seemed to be having a good time. Except me. Then Olive asked Mrs. V. about Bill Beggs and Mrs. V. lost her icy accent and broke down and admitted every-

thing and said Bill was still in stir. After another drink she said he had left her very well fixed financially and that she would always be grateful to him. With that she sneaked a side glance at Betty. "Your Daddy's very fond of you," she said.

"My Daddy!" Betty looked up suddenly, her eyes widening. "You mean Bill Beggs is my *Daddy*? That I'm not Betty Vander-good at *all*?"

Mrs. V. nodded sadly.

"Why, Mother," Betty said delightedly. "I always thought I came from such dull people. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I wanted to spare you, my child," Mrs. Va—or I guess I can call her Mrs. Beggs now—said tearfully.

"Alan!" Betty shouted all in one breath. "My Daddy's buccaneer Bill Beggs the Beer Baron and I can go to see him in Sing Sing!" She rushed around the table and threw her arms around my neck.

IN SPITE of what I had thought her mother was, I had always known Betty was my type. I pulled her head down and gave her a slightly drunken kiss. Both our Mammas beamed.

Just then the clock struck. Immediately, though I hadn't been thinking about it at all, I knew what it meant. I looked at Olive and Salty. They were sitting in pathetic stillness, their cavernous eyes caught midway in a smile.

"Twelve o'clock," Salty said. "Olive—"

"Time for one drink!" She gulped hurriedly and rose, linking her arm in Salty's good left.

They looked down at us for a moment, as if to stamp the picture of Life and what Life meant—our firm, blood-filled bodies; the table laden with food and drink—'till the end of time on their dead retinas.

Slowly Salty raised his hook in salute. "Well, good-by folks. Thanks for everything. Luck to you all. . . .

"See you next year," I said. I tried to

sound cheerful, but somehow there was a lump in my throat. At the beginning of the evening I'd have given anything to be rid of them, but now—

"Maybe . . ."

They turned slowly and walked toward the wall against which the buffet stood. There was no door there, no window. They just kept walking, into the buffet, into the wall, into nothing.

For a long moment we were silent. I could still see their pathetic, ragged figures

strolling reluctantly arm in arm into that void. I looked down. There was a moth-eaten full dress coat and a green smock crumpled on the floor at my feet.

I looked up quickly and swallowed hard. "That way lies heaven—or hell." I raised my glass. "Here's to them," I said.

"Here's to you," Pearl Jane Beggs said softly. "May you be as happy as Bill and I were."

Mother just kept staring at the wall where the buffet stood.