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*Cover by Harold Bruder*

*Can this keep up? We fervently hope so! Five "first stories" in five consecutive issues of EQMM! Beginners everywhere, hear the call: if you think you have writing talent, we want to encourage you to channel it into the field of the mystery-crime-detective short story. Keep knocking at our editorial door—it is never locked to a newcomer—never!*

*Tom Robertson was born in Arizona and grew up there. He served in the U.S. Army for two years, most of the time in Italy. His "first story" is lean and muscular, befitting its background of a golf course. It is also a story so fair to the reader that if you have any doubts on finishing it, we suggest that you read it again and be convinced.*

## TEE SHOT

by TOM ROBERTSON

GRAYBOW SANK HIS PUTT FOR A bogey, stooped, and got his golf ball out of the cup. Then he shouldered his clubs and we walked down off the green. We stopped in the shade and leaned our matching golf bags against the soft-drink machine and Graybow dropped two coins into the slot.

It was stifling. As I wiped my face and neck with an already soggy handkerchief, I could feel Graybow looking at me and getting ready to say something, and I got that chilled feeling of dread, just as I'd had every time he'd opened his mouth for the past two weeks.

I emptied the Coca Cola bottle and looked past the next tee at the long fairway that curved up to the right at the end of a grove of oak trees. There wasn't anyone else in

sight. I could still feel Graybow's eyes on me. I knew it was coming, this time.

"Harry," he said, and his voice sounded strange to me.

I coughed.

"Harry," Graybow said again. "We've been playing golf together for a long time . . ."

I slid the empty bottle into the rack by the vending machine. "That's right," I said without looking at him. "Almost twelve years."

"And we've been partners for half that time."

"I guess about that long," I said.

"And there's something funny, Harry—look at me, Harry."

I looked up at his sweating face, with the thin, slightly puckering scar that went from the corner of his right eye halfway down the cheek. His pale eyes had deep lines

around them from squinting against the sun on construction jobs and golf courses. I tried to stare directly into the eyes, then gave up and looked at a spot between them.

"Sure, 'Bow," I said. "What is it?"

"Embezzlement," he said, and stopped. "Embezzlement is a nasty word. Especially when it concerns a partner."

So there it was. But it had jolted me, even though I had felt it coming, and I could tell by watching him that the jolt showed in my face.

"Lorene says there's either a hell of a shortage or a hell of an error in her books." The pale eyes looked at me steadily. Very slowly I reached into my pocket, got out a cigarette, and lit it.

"When we get back downtown I'm going to call Abe Joseph in to start an audit."

"Okay, 'Bow," I said. My voice sounded as if it belonged to somebody else. "Whatever you say."

"And I want both of us to be there all the time he's working on it. If there's nothing to it, fine, we can forget it. But it's got to be looked into." He shoved his coke bottle into the rack. "So let's finish the game and then get on back."

He pulled the driver out of his bag and walked out onto the tee. I looked at his big back. There was a dark streak down the middle of his shirt where the perspira-

tion had soaked through. He bent down to tee up the ball.

Three more days, I thought, feeling choked with rage and fear. Three more stinking days and I'd have cleaned out the other account, the big one with the highway money in it, and been on the plane. Lorene. Good old dumb efficient Lorene. Damn her!

There wasn't going to be any Rio now. And there wasn't going to be any \$7800 to cover the check that Johnny Taliferro had in the safe in the back of the liquor store where he made book. "Just write the check, for insurance, Mr. Jackson," he'd said. "And try not to make us do anything unpleasant." No, there wasn't going to be any way out for me—not if Abe Joseph got into the books and began calling the banks.

I looked at Graybow's back again. He rested his clubhead on the ground and turned his body around a quarter turn, from the hips, looking down the fairway, just as I had seen him do so many hundred times before. Only now every move he made to finish this game took me that much nearer to disaster.

He turned back to the golf ball and shifted his feet a little, setting himself.

*You've got to do something now, I told myself, now or never.*

I turned toward the vending machine quickly and pulled out a Number Two wood and stepped

out onto the tee. Accidents are not too uncommon on golf courses. I had seen them myself. I had seen a man nearly killed when he stepped into the back swing of a short iron. Who was going to say how this accident had happened—who besides me? You can't prove anything from a score card or the fingerprints on a golf club. And by the time the shortage came out, the inquest would be over and I'd be gone—gone to Rio.

I moved up behind Graybow. He bent his knees a little and dropped his shoulders into the slightly hunched, familiar posture.

I looked down at the club I was holding. It looked strange to me, as though I were gripping it wrong. I aimed at the base of his skull and swung as hard as I could.

Graybow didn't even grunt. He went down to his knees, let go of his club, then pitched forward across it with his face in the dirt, and the blood was already pouring out of his ears when he hit the ground.

My throat hurt and I felt as if I were going to be sick.

I dropped the club and picked up the golf ball that was between Graybow's knees. Then I began to run toward the clubhouse.

I ran down the fairway and then cut into the trees and came out on the next fairway. I splashed through a water trap and started up through another grove of trees.

Running, I thought of what I

was going to say. *Keep it simple*, I told myself. Two sentences: "I really don't know what happened. He was taking some practice swings, I guess, and he backed into my club." That was all. Two sentences.

I tripped and fell in the leaves and scrambled up again. My chest hurt and I could hear myself making a choking sound as I fought for more breath.

As I came out of the trees forty yards behind the big white clubhouse, two college kids in bright shorts and caps were coming down the steps with their golf bags on their shoulders, and I shouted, "Ambulance! Call an ambulance!"

One of them dropped his bag and went back inside and I sat down heavily on the grass and held my throbbing temples.

The other boy trotted out from the clubhouse and kneeled in front of me.

"What happened, man?"

"I really don't—"

But I couldn't finish even the first sentence, because I was looking at the heads of his left-handed golf clubs jutting out from the rim of his bag. And I was remembering the matching golf bags—Graybow's and mine—and those two left-handed woods of Graybow's, one of them beneath his body and the other lying next to him, with bits of his hair and scalp clinging to it—the one I had taken from the wrong bag . . .