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EQMM SPECIAL

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PUBLISHER: *Laurence E. Spivak*

EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Best "First Story" in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest

Last year's contest produced the largest number of publishable "first stories" in the history of EQMM's annual criminological clambakes. No less than thirteen "first stories" made the grade — no, we are not superstitious; in this respect, thirteen is a very lucky number! But seriously, the finding of thirteen new talents in a single year is breath-taking news. It augurs well for the future of the detective-crime short story. There is new blood in the field — good, rich, red blood — and, hallelujah, the young men and women are a-comin'!

It was not easy to select the best "first story" from among the thirteen winners. But finally we decided that the honor — and the check for \$500 — should go to E. C. Witham for his story, "The Silver Spurs." This story is remarkably well written for a first-published tale; its characters are firm and clear and three-dimensional; and its plot builds up a tension that you will feel not only in your mind but in the physical nerves of your body. We'll all be hearing more of Mr. Witham . . .

Before we tell you a few details about the author — our usual informal introduction of new writers — we would like to call your attention to the fact that EQMM's Ninth Annual Contest is now officially on; and again we are offering a special award of \$500 to the best "first story" submitted between now and October 20, 1953. So, if you have had the urge in the past to try your hand at a detective or crime or mystery short story — even as short as 1500 words — why, obey that impulse. If your story is good enough, it may win one of the regular prizes, including the \$2000 First Prize, or it may win the special \$500 prize, or it may be purchased at our regular space rates for "first stories." In any event, its publication will bring you honor as well as cash, and we promise it will appear in the very best company in the world.

Now, back to Mr. Witham: He worked his way through junior and senior high school by peddling baked goods; did sports for his high-school paper; was permitted to hang around the office of the local newspaper in his spare time, "snuffing up crumbs and ghosting parts of the sports editor's column." All this, you understand, out of the goodness of his soul — no pay. Eventually, Mr. Witham became assistant sports editor on a much

bigger newspaper halfway across the country — thus is virtue rewarded.

So, we see, Mr. Witham is (in his own words) "a victim of virulent inkitis."

At odd times he has also been a salesman, combat infantryman in the Pacific, trouble-shooter for a politician, personnel consultant, private detective, and special agent for counter-intelligence in Europe.

His ambition? "Plenty of it and all in one direction: success as a writer — and a cabin near some beach . . ."

Mr. Witham has the three essentials: the background, the will, and the talent . . .

THE SILVER SPURS

by E. C. WITHAM

I CAN TELL YOU NOW," SAID MISS Harriwell sourly. "Mr. Holden won't sign anything today! He's been playing around the island all day!"

It may as well be understood that I don't like Miss Harriwell, nor do I like any of the Harriwells the world over. This particular member of the sorority joined our service nineteen years ago in pursuit of romantic travel and a husband. Now she plays the spinster role in my outer office.

"He's helping that Wheeling woman buy native lace," she persisted against my silence. "You know, Mr. Merrill, her husband should be with her. I suppose *he* was too drunk by lunch to know lace from wire fencing!"

I shuffled the papers I'd been initialing, found one I'd missed, and tried to keep my attention on it. With Miss Harriwell, it wouldn't do to let her feel I gave even casual thought to gossip about the grotesque alliance

between such extreme opposites as Robert Holden and Catherine Wheeling.

It was from Holden, a man I thoroughly respected, that I learned so much during the time of ugly tension on Point Dura. When trouble struck our time-lost little island outpost, he kept his balance to the last moment, a moment of terror for which he was never to be blamed. In the process, he proved to me that another influence still lives in this frantic age. A force one might call the sometimes treacherous wisdom of mercy. A stranger to Point Dura.

Life on the Point is a softly inflexible design wrought by the years, a subtle assault on the will to resist that which is easiest and most pleasurable. And through those months following my assignment to Holden's office I had fought, not too successfully, against the other-world atmos-

phere. Living my bachelor existence in Government House Hotel, high in the silent hills above the sea, the villages and the sensuous line of the island beaches did not fully protect me. There was the close daily association with the Wheeling couple (I was Jim Wheeling's immediate superior), and Holden himself, with his white-blond eyebrows in the curiously young brown face, his voice as satiny as the climate or the skin of a native baby. Soon enough I lost my notion that a good government servant never over-identifies with his environment.

And now, with Miss Harriwell standing rigidly before me, all the little sources of dissatisfaction growing into irritation nipped at me. That vaguely moldy odor in the office. Harriwell's poll-parrot voice. Noise along the busy waterfront under the blue monotony of the sky. One courier plane a day. The false escape of liquor. Laughing primitives and bared skin — white or black, your choice, gentlemen. And farewell by this to other fine men — to blank horizons — cursing the cloth stuck to your skin . . .

I scooped together all the papers, evened their edges, and looked up, "Holden can dispose of these in the morning, Miss Harriwell. There's nothing at all urgent."

"Naturally," she grimaced. The nose-glasses on the black cord teetered and nearly tumbled from the bony face. "Mr. Holden knows his duty. I always say, he's the best superior I've ever had. I just wish —"

It slid away in what I suppose she considered a provocative manner; really, it was a spine-prickling nasal rasp. I sat back, folded my hands in my lap, and listened to my heart beating.

Almost convulsively, she clutched the papers close against her table-flat and black-hidden bosom.

"You can't say it's right, Mr. Merrill, and you're a friend of his! Surely he *knows* that woman's reputation! A small-town floozy like her, marrying a nice, loyal man like Mr. Wheeling and just *wrecking* him! Why! She's had *affairs* with every *white* man on the island, and now it's Mr. Holden she's got! And we don't even know about the natives she —"

"You came from a small town, didn't you, Miss Harriwell?"

"Yes!" she flared. "But I didn't *marry* into the service and then make a drunken hulk out of a good, clean boy just because living with him where his duty called wasn't as glamorous as I thought it would be! I didn't taunt him with my *lovers* until —"

I rose abruptly to my feet. "I'm going up to the hotel."

"I have only the best interest of the service —"

"You should know by now, Miss Harriwell, that I'm not a sympathetic audience for information best disseminated on rest-room walls with other four-letter words."

"Mister Merrill!"

I walked past her. "Good night," I said, and I went down to my car.

A shower and a change of linen in the lighter breezes across the evening-shadowed hills near the hotel helped smooth me out a little. So did the regular 7 o'clock highball, cool and good in the almost empty bar, washing some of the powdered-alum taste out of my mouth.

The bar would never be entirely empty so long as Jim Wheeling was on the island. Two early couples sat near the concert grand, their murmuring indistinct beneath the drifting melody caressed from the instrument by the deceptively gentle-looking native at the keys; a table of four was almost silent in the arch to a balcony. Jim Wheeling was completely silent, squatting heavily and alone at a table near the bar. He ignored my entrance and kept his eyes fixed on the lobby arch. In his unshaven face and the soiled wrinkles of the white suit on his massive frame were the unmistakable marks of prolonged drinking.

I rolled the whiskey and crushed ice across my tongue and peered at my own reflection in the back-bar mirror, and I thought: *You'd be a fool, boy, to sign an issue slip for a face like that.* The mirror, like everything else, was old and excessively clean and unchanging. It shimmered with the face I didn't like. I swallowed the mouthful of whiskey and sneered at myself.

"Guru!"

The voice was behind me, a trifle husky, the feminine kind to disturb you and please you and leave you a little uncertain of how anything was meant.

"Robert — it's Guru! Let's be nice and talk to him."

I took another sip and looked up into the mirror. Catherine Wheeling, accompanied by Holden, was sweeping toward me. She moved directly to my side; in not the slightest way did she recognize the presence of her husband. Conversation in the bar paused in mid-phrase, then continued a little self-consciously.

"We've decided to talk to you, Guru." Catherine Wheeling slid a full figure in a neatly tailored white slack suit on the stool beside me and brushed her long fingers slowly down my sleeve.

"Oh, lovely," I said.

"Listen to him," she laughed, turning to Holden. "Now he's going to be sarcastic, Robert. Did you learn that at tea-and-crumpets school, Guru?"

"Don't call him Guru," said Holden quietly. Behind him, Jim Wheeling suddenly lurched to his feet and, swaying, scowled at the three of us.

Catherine ignored her husband, kept her eyes on Holden.

"Please tell me why not?"

"His name is Merrill," said Holden. "Call him Merrill."

"But he's a Guru, darling. He's a spiritual leader for us. Don't you see?"

"I see you're obscene."

The native bartender, Billy X., stood patiently through all this, his dark high-boned face waiting very still over the white mess jacket. But Catherine Wheeling always refused to recognize the possibility that those

she held to be lesser beings, like bartenders and fourth assistants, might have ears and, very often, excellent minds.

"We'll drink with you, Guru Mer-rill — there you see, Robert, I please you with his proper name." Her eyes darkened swiftly, raking Holden's impassive face. "I'm always doing something to please you — you of all men! Isn't that fine?"

Holden did not move or reply. His frosty gray stare settled on Catherine's and so the two of them remained for a moment between the challenge and the most peculiar reaction I've ever witnessed. Suddenly, Catherine's head jerked so sharply one would have thought, from a distance, that she'd been slapped. She whirled toward me, recovering like a champion — which she was not. Unless they're offering different titles this season.

"We'd so very much like to be uplifted, Guru," she smiled. Her own particular smile. "But let's sit at a table. Shall we?"

She turned and gave the order, and Holden said, "You've had enough, haven't you?" She turned back to him; it was a very complete sort of movement, as if her whole body turned on him and came up to point like a good dog when the birds are near. She slowly brushed her palm back over the long and whitely parted hair that looked so darkly alive, and she looked from Holden to me and back to Holden with the green eyes like rain-washed glass.

Then she turned her head, just her head, and said over her shoulder to the bartender: "Make mine a double, Billy X., and send it to the table."

We followed her free, long-legged walk away from the bar. There was nothing else to do without risking an even bigger scene. Holden, short and wiry, paced softly along beside me.

Wheeling had not moved from where he stood by his table, leaning his weight on one fist driven down against the ash-littered top. Now he followed us with his eyes, his body still as a statue. Catherine's choice was a withdrawn corner at the edge of a window opening wide above the lowering hills and beyond the red-roofed administration buildings to the inky convergence of sea and sky. We settled down with every questioning thought in the room slyly probing toward us.

Wheeling moved. His progress across the room was pitiful. Once the hard-bodied university athlete and "bright young man" in the service — before he married Catherine — he stumbled toward us, upsetting a chair and jarring a table. No greetings were exchanged when he fell into a chair in our group.

Holden carefully fitted a cigarette between his lips and offered the case to Catherine. She accepted, lighting with matches from a pocket in the white suit, ignoring Jim Wheeling's fumbling offer of flame from his lighter. The drinks were brought and we lifted our glasses. No one looked openly at Wheeling, and he saw no one but Catherine.

"Let's not say chin-chin or cheers, or anything like that," smiled Catherine, watching me. "Guru wouldn't mean it. Let's just drink."

"Sorry about this afternoon," Holden said to me. "I don't imagine you really needed me. Did you?"

"You're too modest," Catherine said, with that same smile. I did not like that smile at all. Not on anyone, and particularly not on Catherine. It was just a careful application of well-trained muscles around the mouth, "You know Guru worries about you. Robert."

"Robert's quite a big boy now," I said. "When he's more himself, he makes his own reports."

"You think that's biting and cryptic, Guru?"

"Not particularly."

"Yes, you do. But it isn't. Not really. If it weren't for me, your Miss Harriwell would suffer agonies. She'd have no one to talk about — except perhaps those marvelous natives, those cock-fighters."

"She's hardly 'my' Miss Harriwell," I said. "And I'm certain she wouldn't talk if she saw a fight. She'd very likely be little-girl sick."

Catherine laughed. "How poorly you understand! She'd breathe deep and live, really live, for a while."

I said, "Don't tear it apart, Catherine. All right, Harriwell was talking. So is much of the island. Shall we drop it?"

"Dear Guru! The things you do for others! But, yes, let's drop it. Let's talk about our immortal souls. You'll

like that. But I don't know about Robert. Really I don't. Do cock-fighters have souls, Robert?"

She turned to Holden, who sat quite still, not looking at any of us.

"I'm sure you have a soul, Robert. You're so fair about people. And so clean and nice. Oh, I mustn't forget that. Clean. Do you think cock-fighters might be like you, Robert?"

"They're human beings," he said, slowly and very carefully. "I've watched them pray before a silver-spur match."

"Do they? Thank you, Robert. You've been considerate of me again. Such a love."

Catherine turned to me, her eyes sparkling. Jim Wheeling watched her over the top of his glass. Holden crushed his cigarette in his saucer and took up his glass.

"Guru," said Catherine. "Don't be shocked. But I'm going to a silver-spur match tomorrow."

Holden looked up, gray eyes alert under the white brows. "You can't do that. Jim's been barred, if you remember, after that last scrap with a native owner. And you can't go alone, Catherine."

She looked at Wheeling then, for the first time, and it was very unpleasant. There was a silence. Wheeling spoke his first words.

"You mustn't go alone, Catherine," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, I shan't, Jimmy!" She waved long crimson-tipped fingers, watching his face. "Our driver's taking me over. I asked him this morning and

he promised, and you know he's a fine, sweet boy. He keeps his word."

Her lips, wide and red, curled up slightly at the corners. And with this stated defiance of taboo, something rose up between her and the thick-bodied man, spreading out and infecting the four of us. Wheeling stared at his wife and took another drink from his glass, and it was like a mechanical toy that lifts one stiff arm while nothing else moves.

I envied Holden in that moment. I think I envied him a little at all times. His smooth tanned features under the close-cropped blond hair exposed nothing of his mind. You always had a strange feeling, looking at his pleasant lack of expression, that no matter what the circumstance, here was a part of yourself — but not a part you knew very well.

"What would you call my husband?"

Catherine moved her glittering eyes toward Robert Holden, then on to me. No one spoke. She looked past me toward the bar and waved for more drinks, and no one protested.

"You're the big man here," she said to Holden. "What d'you call him? Supernumerary? Or is he too weak even for that?"

"I call him by his name, Catherine."

"His name? Really? I thought perhaps even a dear man like you would whistle."

She turned a shining look on her husband.

"He answers whistles so well. Some-

times you just have to crook your finger. When you leave him, I mean really leave him alone for a while, you can wiggle your finger. You don't have to whistle. Didn't you know that? When he sobers up he cries, and he crawls along on his hands and knees until he gets a drink or you whistle at him. I had to teach him how to drink, you know. After we met. He never drank anything but fraternity beer and I had to show him — make it straight liquor on rocks and he wouldn't get sick. That's tunny, too. Isn't it?"

She reached across and patted Wheeling's cheek, dragging her nails over the skin. Parallel streaks of reddened skin sprang from beneath her claws, the flesh not exposed but responding to the vicious salute of the fingers drawing languidly to a fist. She held the fist against his chin briefly and neither of them stirred so much as a fiber.

"He was such a big man," she muttered; "a big man in our little two-acre town, and it was really fun to marry him. Marry him right out of the hands of that silly soft child he thought he wanted. He was the one way out — weren't you, Jimmy? So cute and stupid. And you get more precious every year, don't you, Jimmy?"

No one attempted to interrupt her. Billy X. brought the fresh drinks himself, but only Wheeling drank. That same toy motion, his stare on Catherine. He started his glass down toward the table and it missed the

edge, falling to the floor with a thundering tinkle of splinters and ice. His face loosened and he wet his lips, his black hair like a wig over the face so quickly fallow under the alcoholic flush, his eyes wild-blue and dilated with sickness.

"Would you mind so much if you couldn't get a drink, Jimmy?"

His mouth opened. "Please," he said. "Please, you can't, Catherine."

She made a very abrupt movement, picking up her glass and draining it. Setting it down, she looked again at Wheeling. Then she got up and walked out of the bar.

Wheeling watched her out of sight. He sat hunched in upon himself. His sick stare came back and moved emptily over us. We said nothing. He sighed lightly then, like a tired child, and rose.

For an instant he looked down at Holden's bowed head. He did not appear to have truly focused on the smaller man, and there was an odd dignity about him. We could hear his breathing in the silence before he moved carefully through the scattered tables toward the exit his wife had taken. He didn't look back.

I lit a cigarette and met Holden's friendly gray eyes.

"My God," I said.

"Yes."

"How does he stand it? How does he sit there and take it?"

"What else can he do?"

"Leave her. She's poison."

Holden shrugged. He turned his cigarette like a burning wand in his

slender fingers, watching ash fall slowly from the tip.

When Holden called me on the inter-office communicator early next afternoon, I had no notion of what he wanted. It had been a routine morning; I had not left my office nor called anyone. I found Holden sitting very erect in his old high-backed chair — a traditional item in the executive office — looking quite young and small behind the naked width of his desk. I accepted the chair he indicated.

"Wheeling hasn't been in yet today," he said icily. "I called the hotel bar. Not there. I sent a runner round to all the joints down here. Not in any one of 'em. Called Wheeling's house. The native girl, between respectful giggles, told me Catherine went across the island to the cock-fights — escorted by the native driver. Half an hour later, Wheeling was after her in a taxi."

"Throwing it in his face," I said. "Obviously."

After a pause, I said as firmly as I could, "He wouldn't be fool enough to make another scene among the natives. Granted he's no longer a first-class intelligence, I don't think —"

"I sent a driver with a car to find him and bring him back to his house under my written order." Holden waved aside the assurances. His voice, as always, was restrained. "You hop up there and meet him. Tell him he's going back home as soon as I can arrange it. In times like these, we can't afford difficulties for any of our men;

the balance everywhere is much too precarious. You tell him that, Merrill. Tell him if he can't control that —" Holden stopped and moved restlessly in his chair, clearing his throat — "if he can't control his family life in the house up there, they'll be asked to come to the hotel. I'll take those quarters right out from under them."

I watched his face and thought of Catherine's words to him the night before. What was it, exactly, that caused this brittleness with overtones of fear in Catherine when she talked to Holden? Her contempt for Wheeling was a much simpler emotion, a feminine reaction that was old when recorded history was new; it was a situation that could be duplicated on any block of any town in our homeland, but at the Point there was no way for Catherine to camouflage herself. In this society and before Holden, she was no mystery. Was that it? — the cause of the peculiar defensiveness displayed with Holden and with no other?

Holden smiled a tired smile. "Come in and see me as soon as you get back."

The drive under close palms, on the coral road to the valley sheltering the Wheeling house, took less than ten minutes. I hurried through the drowsy atmosphere, spun into the arch of the Wheeling driveway, stopped behind the sedan parked there with the driver nowhere in evidence, and climbed out. It was the Wheeling private car, pulled up

primly before the two-story white frame house built in a style favored by homesick colonists of an earlier era.

Standing there in the sun, sorting out what I might say, I heard raging sounds rip the hot, still air from a side of the house giving off on a terrace garden. I walked quickly in that direction and stopped near the open French doors. I stood there, hidden behind a bush bearing a richly-scented, velvety purple bloom.

Fury roughened Catherine Wheeling's voice almost beyond recognition.

"— can't even talk straight, you swollen clown! Look at me! What am I doing in a hole like this with a fool like you? Love you? That's fine — oh, that's good. Even my flesh is sick when you paw at me, you — you —"

Wheeling's muzzy baritone sounded vaguely. Then Catherine shrieked.

"Yes! Yes, I went with him! And he's more of a man than you ever were, you four-bit flop! You *or* your all-seeing, all-knowing, all-wise Robert Holden! Even if he is a native servant, he's more of a man than the two of you together! He doesn't drink himself stupid and he doesn't play with a woman, just to laugh and walk off —"

Again Wheeling rumbled. And Catherine drowned him out.

"Who are you to talk to me about pride? Who are you? What have you ever done for me? Yes! — he put his arm around me and even if he is a native, he didn't reek of whiskey or laugh when I kissed him! And he gave me these — you see them? Can

you see them? Spurs! Silver spurs! And you know what I'm going to do, Jimmy? I'm going to keep them! But first I'm going to make you believe me. With them. I should've done — *this* — a long time ago —"

Wheeling's tortured bellow smothered the last of Catherine's tirade. Simultaneously with that came the bright arc of something soaring from the open doors and through the air, chunking onto the thick grass of the terrace garden. The silver spurs, linked together.

His right hand pressed to his cheek and blood oozing through the fingers from the wound in his flesh, Jim Wheeling staggered into the sunlight. He bent down and snatched up the spurs, staring at them. Then he turned slowly, stuffing them into the pocket of his crumpled white suit coat. Catherine Wheeling moved to the doors behind him.

Her features were soapy-white under the tan. Her hands hung in fists at her thighs. They faced each other in silence and I thought of the way *banderilleros* watch the bull to measure the effect of darts placed in his hide. But they respect the bull. They respect him or perhaps die. There was no respect in Catherine Wheeling's hard green eyes.

"I'm getting away from you," she said. Her voice was flat now, and very quiet. "Clever of you, Jimmy. Knocking his little gift out of my hand. Perhaps I should've used them on your neck, not your face. But I'm leaving you, Jimmy, while I still have

something to give. While I can still dance to a good orchestra and a man doesn't look through me when I walk past his table — while most of them still want to touch me. Until I get out of here, Jimmy, I'll be at the hotel — but I don't want to see you. Understand? I don't want you near me!"

She whirled and disappeared. Wheeling stood on the sun-drenched grass, his black hair tumbled, his eyes leveled at the spot where his wife had been standing. He didn't move, didn't seem to be breathing.

I got away from there and back in the car, and down the half-moon of the driveway as quietly as I could. I pressed the gas pedal to the floor and concentrated on driving, gripping the wheel and sweating.

I headed toward the beach. If I'd thought of it, I might have prayed that no native cart would creak out into the road ahead of me.

Holden looked up when I threw open the door of his office. He lifted his colorless brows at my expression and turned his wrist over to check his watch.

"That was quick," he said. "Didn't you find him?"

"I found him — and Catherine," I said. "Holden, it's a good thing I've a strong stomach. This — this is the —"

I stopped and sat down quickly. Holden folded his arms on the edge of his desk and looked at me with calm gray eyes.

"Tell me what happened."

I went over it, missing nothing. Holden listened, turning in his fingers a native knife he uses as a letter opener, pressing the needle-like point against his thumb. When I finished, he dropped the knife and sighed.

He rested his head against his hand in a manner which made a visor of his fingers, hiding his eyes. With his free hand, he stroked the clean-looking length of the native knife. "Merrill, I've come to know you pretty well. I'd like to think that we're friends?"

I said, "Of course."

"All right. We can't, at this time, risk having one of our men — however much of a broken stick he may have become — get in over his head through difficulties which he may not fully deserve."

I remained silent.

"I must say — it's obvious to you, of course — that I know Catherine. Pretty well. It's not being a laundered little gentleman to say so, Merrill, but she isn't worth it. Depending on what kind of man you are, you may or may not see that in time with someone like her. She married Wheeling only because of some exaggerated idea of the glories and prestige attaching to the service. It's been my privilege to sit by and watch him falling apart under the humiliation of his wife's behavior."

Holden straightened up and aimed his gray stare at me.

"I know what you're thinking, Merrill. You're wondering how I can talk in this fashion about someone you suspect me of having loved. Some day

I may tell you whether or not your suspicions are justified. In the meantime, it's none of your affair — if only to spare you further confusion. I'll tell you this: I'm sorry I ever so much as had a drink with that woman.

"I hope, my friend, that she really has gone to the hotel. While you were in the valley, I put through a cable recommending administrative recall for Wheeling. That sends him back with a clean nose. Once that couple gets home, whatever happens can be more easily dealt with or hushed up — and that's what counts. That's all that counts."

I stood up and shook my trousers down over the damp skin of my legs. My breath came freely again. I met his gaze.

He smiled at me and patted his palms soundlessly against the top of his desk. He said, "Thanks, Merrill."

I moved to the door and paused to look back. Holden had stopped smiling and it was as if he had never smiled.

"See you in the bar at 7," he said.

Tension nagged me through the rest of the day, but in fresh clothing after a long shower and with my highball before me in the hotel bar I felt slightly more relaxed. I checked my face in the aged mirror behind the bar and the face hadn't really changed any more than the mirror itself. I drained my glass, ordered another, and looked up to see Holden's trim outline in the reflection.

He rested a small-boned hand on

my shoulder and lifted a finger to Billy X. His eyes looked sunken under the white brows. I think he may have had something he wanted to say, but immediately he sat down there was a stir rising above the idle talk in the room behind us and Wheeling burst through the lobby arch. He skidded to a halt and stood swinging his head from side to side in a queerly heavy motion. A snowy surgical bandage covered his right cheek, clean against the black of his hair and the flush of his face. He charged the bar like an enraged water buffalo, belowed for whiskey, and tossed it off.

He glared along the bar at us. "Calls me names — names like a dog you don't own. In front of everybody — walks off — and tells me I'm not as much of a man as my servant. Took the spurs he gave her — and she cut — I'm —"

His voice strangled in his throat. He pulled himself up, gripping the edge of the teakwood bar to stay erect. A leer stained his face.

"This time, Holden — she — included you. Didn't guess she'd ever do that, did you? Did somethin' to her, Holden — you must have done somethin'. This time — she's — gonna kill herself. She says. I believe her. One damn fight after another — it's awful. I do believe her — can't stop her." He stared at us out of blood-laced blue eyes, lifting his hand in a childlike gesture toward the bandage on his cheek. "She cut my face."

Holden and I exchanged glances as Wheeling slipped and caught himself

up again on the bar, coming around between us to grip my shoulder.

"Won't you do something, Merrill? Please won't you stop her? Left me, Merrill — came down here and up in her room waving my old Army — pistol — radio turned up and the lights out. Drinking and won't lemme in. I tried, Merrill. Won't lemme see her. Crazy, I tell you. Please. Please — help —"

Holden turned full on Wheeling while I gingerly removed myself from the big man's grasp.

"Stop blubbering," said Holden. "What in God's name do you think we can do, Jim? House phone over there on the bar. Call her. Talk to her."

Wheeling showed his teeth again.

"Suits you — fine — doesn't it?"

"Shut up, Jim."

"Sure. Shut — up. Big boss — gets — off easy."

"You're making it worse."

"I'll shut — up. So'll — Catherine."

"Good. You're going home. Both of you."

"Yeah. Home."

"You'll both be happier."

Wheeling scowled bleakly down at him while Holden, poised but taut as a drumhead, took his cigarette case from his jacket pocket. The smooth metal slipped from his fingers. Wheeling scooped the case up in mid-air before it could strike the floor, silently handing it back to Holden after only a moment's hesitation. An odd sound came up from the throat

of the bulky-shouldered man and he stumbled to the telephone sitting on the end of the bar. His broad back toward us, the instrument cuddled against his chest as he crouched over it, he commenced talking after a bit, purring into the receiver, then almost shouting, then pleading, then threatening, then purring again. It was an awful din.

Holden took my arm. "Come along," he said softly.

We got through the arch, past the curious eyes, and into the high-beamed lobby. Holden halted there at the foot of the wide staircase. He said, "Wait here," and walked swiftly to the registry desk. I watched him and Wheeling. Wheeling went on talking.

Holden spoke to the slender and dignified old native presiding over both the desk and the telephone switchboard. The native nodded, then shook his head. And Holden came back across the lobby. He glanced briefly at Wheeling still bent over the bar phone.

"Let's go see Catherine," he said.

We climbed the steps two at a time, passing at a trot the broad intermediate landing between the interior staircase and the old stone balcony and stairs outside the hotel to seaward. A radio blared continental dance music from the far end of the spacious but shadowed and empty second-floor hall. Moving toward the sound, we came face to face with a lumpy female in bent hair curlers and a vicious pink robe

who yanked open her door, tracked us with a pair of eyes as friendly as two gas-tank caps, threw a look toward the music, and slammed the door. Holden ignored her.

Stopping before Catherine Wheeling's door, he looked up at me and took hold of the knob. It turned easily. He glanced down the hall, then threw the door wide. A blast from the radio hit us and we went in almost shoulder to shoulder. Light was fading in the room and had that peculiar blue tinge you find for a few moments each evening in the tropics. The doors to the tiny balcony were open to the sky and a last bit of twilight touched the figure of Catherine Wheeling. She was sprawled in the depths of a wicker chair, an overturned highball glass on the floor at her feet.

Holden shook his head when I moved to turn off the radio. He stepped back, closed the door and threw the heavy brass bolt, and walked toward Catherine Wheeling. Standing with his thumbs looped in his jacket pockets, making no attempt to touch her, he waited until I joined him. Then he dipped his head and, above the radio's racket, said: "Look."

She lay with that fine head turned to the left and against the back of the chair. A small hole with a faintly seared lip broke the smooth plane of her right temple. And a dark stain spread out under the thick black hair, down over the shoulder of her favorite white slack suit. Her right hand

lay between her thighs, the long fingers loosely grasping a regulation pistol.

Holden leaned across the body and snapped on a lamp recessed in the wall. He touched the stain on the white shoulder and the skin over a cheekbone with his forefinger. Then he walked slowly around the room, examining without touching everything within the four walls. He stopped at the dressing table. Catherine's purse was there.

Beside it lay a pair of silver gamecock spurs.

Holden slowly turned his head in my direction. I didn't speak, didn't move. He carefully placed the immaculate little punishers in his pocket, took another long tour of the room with his eyes, pausing at the body with a total lack of expression, and walked out onto the balcony.

I followed gratefully, away from the presence of death and the irreverent blatting of the radio, and filled my lungs with the clean air of evening. But Holden prowled. He stopped, grunting lightly, and reached into the soil filling the flower boxes which rimmed the balcony. He probed in the dirt and came up with a cigarette butt. He checked over the entire balcony again, then came back to me, holding the butt in his palm.

"Merrill," he said softly. "Look here what the fool did."

He held the warped stub toward me. "It hasn't been in the soil of that box long enough to even begin to soak or stain," he said. "And you see

there's no lipstick on it. She didn't smoke it."

He turned the remains of the cigarette over with an exploratory finger, closed his fist around it, and looked out toward the dying light over the hills. Almost reluctantly, his attention came back to me.

"We have a problem," he murmured, watching me carefully from under the white brows.

There was no answer to that.

Holden dipped his head again. "I suppose this last playful maneuver of hers was just enough to push him over the edge. If—and here's a sweet little technicality in the moral principle for you to kick around some sleepless night—if he'd pulled the trigger when she went after him with the spurs, it could reasonably be represented as self-defense." He made an impatient gesture with the hand holding the dead cigarette and his tone took an edge. "But why couldn't he just let her go?"

"Didn't he?" I said.

Holden paid no heed to me. "It's not at all in character for people like Catherine Wheeling to destroy themselves. Certainly she was unhappy—she would always be unhappy in whatever situation. But she'd never destroy herself because of it. She'd destroy others and delight in it.

"And the rest of this! He didn't ring this room when he tumbled into that phone trick in the bar. He must have held the circuit-breaker down—the desk man told me she checked in here in the middle of the afternoon

and there've been no calls for her at any time. You saw him talking away into the phone at the very moment I was with the man who would've plugged through any such connection. The fellow told me Wheeling inquired at 5 o'clock if his wife had registered, then went upstairs. There have been two subsequent complaints about the radio. If there was another, the management would be regretfully forced to speak to 'the good lady'!"

Holden's nostrils spread with disgust as he repeated the accepted native phrase used in referring to white women. His stare cut through the haze of twilight toward me.

"And Wheeling was not drunk, Merrill. Not in the sense that real drinkers get stiff. Witness the lightning athlete's reflex to the cigarette case I let fall in the bar.

"He said she wouldn't let him in — yet he described how she was carrying on and the door was not locked. The blood from the wound is partially dry. You can be sure the radio muffled the sound of the shot for those few persons in residence here. The gift spurs you saw him pocket were with her purse, though that in itself isn't important. She could've repossessed them at the house.

"Then this cigarette. He stood out here and smoked, probably timing his entrance into the bar with the regular 7 o'clock crowd. Sure to find us then. If he smoked *before* the showdown came and he dealt with her, the butts are over the balcony rail. Where this should be!"

Holden crushed the stub between his palms and rolled it until only a mass of tobacco and paper remained. This he threw over the side and walked stiff-legged back into the room. He carefully smudged without wiping clean every likely interior surface, including the surfaces of the pistol and the glass. Smearing the light switch and its panel, he left the light burning.

Out on the balcony once more, he patted his palms together very lightly and looked about, finally directing his stare at me. Silence. Then —

"Say it!"

His voice lashed at me, and I stiffened.

"I'm wondering," I told him, "why Wheeling would kill, then attempt to shape it as a suicide — when there were so many likely candidates for the role of murderer."

"You mean me, of course."

"You're the most recent. And Catherine's reaction to you was the most positive any man ever provoked."

Holden studied me briefly, then laughed softly. "Why do you suppose she hated you and feared me? Because neither of us could be added to her leash, you because you instinctively dislike the predatory type of woman, and me . . . well, I enjoyed watching her parade her cheap tricks and felt that some sort of unrecorded justice was being done when I humiliated her as she had humiliated other men."

"Specifically Jim Wheeling?"

"Yes."

"That's a streak in you I never suspected."

He shrugged. "Call it cruel — if it suits you. Call it foolish. Whatever you call it, understand one thing. Told myself I'd never discuss it — even with you — but you should understand that I never loved Catherine. I'm not sorry she's dead. But I had nothing to do with her death."

"Except the suspicion in her husband's mind."

Holden moved to the balcony rail. "There's that, of course," he said, peering over the side, indrawn again.

The top of an ancient papaw tree just reached the overhanging scroll of the balcony and its flower boxes, near the darkened and seldom-used ballroom. Holden really smiled at me for the first time that evening.

"Have to risk it my friend," he said. "Messy — but necessary. Damn the architects who go arty with individual balconies! I'll go first."

He hopped to the rail, balanced, cleared the flowering boxes, and dropped away into the darkness. I watched him hook a branch with one hand and another with his dark-trousered knee. And he was quickly down, his face and blond hair a lighter patch turned up to me in the gathering murk at the roots of the tree. I followed, not quite so gracefully but just as quickly.

"Suppose we take a blow near the old outside stairs," said Holden wryly. We rounded the corner of the building and came out on the side nearest the sea. "Anyone happens to ask awk-

ward questions about how we got down after we went up — here we are."

He sat down on a weather-worn bench and lit a cigarette, offering me the case. We smoked without talking and the night closed in with the hushed speed of all such nights in this part of the world.

Holden stirred after several silent minutes. He flipped his cigarette away into the darkness.

"I don't suppose," he sighed, "anyone topside would touch us with a barge pole after this. But they really needn't know, Merrill. These island police will never embarrass us with inspired bursts of energy. Occasionally takes something better than cocky-caps, shiny boots, and the authority of a gun to punish murder."

He stood up then, pressing his fists into the muscles at the base of his spine, wearily arching his back. Below us, the foaming white fingers of the sea breaking over the coral reefs was a distant and rhythmical force barely seen and scarcely heard. Holden brushed his handkerchief at a tree-bark smudge on his jacket and wiped tiredly at his hands and face.

"Well," he said. "Let's go in and give our man his spurs."

Eight days after Holden's stage-setting the police were, as predicted, relapsing into contentment. Catherine was prepared for her last journey. Everything moved along almost precisely, like a polite puppet show, until Jim Wheeling gave force and

meaning to Holden's words on the forfeit for killers not government-approved.

Wheeling was to escort his wife's body home, of course, and the intimate pressures of guilt and remorse, compounded by Harriwell-type yattering over Catherine's past and her violent end, caused him to drink almost incessantly for the several days preceding his final scene in Robert Holden's office.

When the unshaven big man burst in upon him in the oppressive heat of late afternoon, Holden had the quick mind to open my switch on the inter-office communicator. I caught the sound of breathing near the instrument, the quick silence, and Wheeling's slurred voice accusing Holden of being Catherine's most cherished companion, the ultimate cause of her disaffection for him. And as I started to move out for the executive office, there was Holden's sharp: "Jim! Don't be an idiot!"

The outer office was mercifully empty, Harriwell having enjoyed an attack of lingering vapors after being shyly questioned two days earlier by a routine group of sleepy police. Holden's door was standing open. A glance was sufficient to justify quickly entering and closing it.

Leaping across the desk, Wheeling had got by the throat the man who had sought to protect him. Holden was being bent cruelly back and over the arm of the old leather chair, his body writhing beneath the weight of the big man. At the instant I closed in to save him, Holden, not seeing me through eyes already glazing under the strangling grip, managed to twist obliquely toward the desk and reach the native knife he favored as a letter opener.

Down on one knee, with a strangely diminished motion like a death reflex, Holden struck the long bright blade once, twice, three times upward into Wheeling's abdomen.