

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

including **BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

DETECTIVE STORIES

THE MAN IN THE EMPTY CHAIR	<i>Agatha Christie</i>	3
TO THE MAN ON TRAIL	<i>Jack London</i>	34
THE TELEPHONE FISHERMAN	<i>T. S. Stripling</i>	41
THE RETURN OF PRINCE ZALESKI	<i>M. P. Shiel</i>	81
REHEARSAL FOR MURDER	<i>Ben Hecht</i>	134

DETECTIVE NOVELETTE

IF I SHOULD DIE	<i>Hugh Pentecost</i>	96
-----------------	-----------------------	----

BLACK MASK MAGAZINE

THE TOUGHER THEY COME	<i>Ben Ray Redman</i>	21
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CRIME STORIES

A SUDDEN DREAD OF . . . NOTHING	<i>A. H. Z. Carr</i>	65
EXHIBIT A	<i>William O'Farrell</i>	128

CHRISTMAS STORY

NOEL, NOEL	<i>Barry Peroune</i>	89
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EQMM "FIRST"

PROBATION	<i>Marian Lloyd Dix</i>	57
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DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

<i>Robert P. Mills</i>	126
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The best of the new and the best of the old

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PRIZE-WINNING STORY

William O'Farrell has had a dozen books published, under his own name and under the rather whimsical pseudonym of "William Grew." His short stories have appeared in "Collier's," "Good Housekeeping," "Cosmopolitan," and other national magazines, and in years past he has labored in the vineyards of Hollywood — at MGM, RKO, and Columbia. He has a wife named Page (which is unusual) and he admits that without her he would never get any work done (which, for writers, is usual, though seldom confessed); his dog is named Peanut (which is unusual) and has been described euphemistically as a cross-bred terrier (which is usual — that is, the cross-breeding); the O'Farrell family likes to travel (which is usual) and they really do (which, even for writers, is unusual — it is surprising what stay-at-homes most writers are!).

Mr. O'Farrell's story — to continue the pattern — is unusual. It is about a man with a hobby — which is usual. But this particular man found the answers to his frustrations and ambitions in his hobby: it might even be said that through his hobby this man found a way of life (which is usual) — and a way of death (which is unusual).

EXHIBIT A

by WILLIAM O'FARRELL

YOU'LL BE NICE TO JOE HALLER, won't you?" I asked Felicity. "It's only for one evening. He's leaving for California tomorrow."

My wife pretended to yawn. "I always am, aren't I?"

"Aren't you what, dear?"

"Nice to these characters you bring home from your trips."

That requires an explanation. I'm an art dealer; my business takes me to the Coast a couple of times a year and to Europe only a little less often. It's true that I sometimes run into

people who might be described as "characters," and that I occasionally invite one to drop in at our apartment in New York. Felicity gives them drinks and her attention, and usually discovers in them the same traits which I had previously found and liked. Under her pose of aloofness my wife is as interested in people as I am, and I was curious to see how she'd react to Joe.

He was different, unlike any of his predecessors. For the last five days, coming across from England, he had

shared my table in the dining room, and I still wasn't sure whether I liked him or not. I only knew that he fascinated me, but the exact nature of this fascination was more than I could figure out.

"He'll probably bring his camera," I told Felicity. "He has some money and a beautiful camera, and he won't be here five minutes before he starts showing you photographs of himself. You'll find them interesting. Joe's photographs have to be seen to be disbelieved."

"Disbelieved?"

"I use the word advisedly," I said.

The doorbell rang. "Five minutes," I reminded her, getting up.

Joe beat my estimated time by four minutes and fifteen seconds. He started his monologue precisely three-quarters of a minute after he arrived — he was a plumpish young man with a round face and the innocent blue eyes of a startled baby. I clocked him while he shook hands with Felicity, explaining shyly why he'd brought his camera — he'd been buying some new lighting equipment, and there to prove it were the lights. He then sat down in a chair and, pulling out his handkerchief, just happened to dislodge a pack of photographs.

I think it was less the implausibility of his snapshots that interested me than the effect they seemed to have on him. He'd come out with a picture of himself wearing a hooded parka, for instance, and tell you that it was snapped in a concentration camp

near Murmansk. When you said, "Really?" — as invariably you did — he would add that the blurred figure in the background was his fellow prisoner, a White Russian ex-prince and counter-revolutionist who had been shot the same afternoon the picture was taken. At this point his round blue eyes would watch you keenly, and if you appeared to believe him — as, of course, you tried to do — a small contented smile would start to spread across his face. Then Joe Haller, the essentially timid Joe, would disappear. The man of action, hero of a hundred romantic adventures around the world, would take his place.

Joe in the uniform of a Central American republic's army. Joe in India sighting a rifle while riding an elephant. Joe in a Venetian gondola with a beautiful woman who, according to him, was an Italian movie star whose uncle was a count. All of Joe's women were either actresses or related to nobility, or both. When he asked me to snap him with Felicity, I said I didn't want her getting ideas above her station. I said a number of other things, but Felicity shushed me with a look. She had been hooked in the same manner I had been. People did not steal money from blind men, or kick small dogs — or hurt Joe Haller's feelings. It wouldn't have been fair.

"Tell you what," Joe compromised. "We'll take all three of us together. I can do it with this camera. See this?" He pointed to a little gadget.

I saw. His camera was equipped with one of those timing devices, the photographic fanatic's delight. He posed us on a couch; then, when everything was set, he pressed a gadget and hurried over to squeeze between us. It was not until ten whirling seconds later that the camera clicked. When that happened I was watching Joe. On his face was the same smile that he had worn in all the other pictures. It was an I-told-you-so smile that almost bordered on gloating, and it worried me.

I continued to worry after he had gone. "It's all right as far as you're concerned," I told Felicity. "You'll be exhibited as the beautiful *première danseuse* he once knew in Egypt, the one who turned out to be related to a King. But what's he going to make of me?"

"What's the difference? It's just a game he's playing. And I think it's a shame."

"What is?"

"That any man's life should be so empty that he has to escape that far from it," she said.

Anyway, Joe left, and I didn't think of him or of the photograph again until one morning months later when Felicity looked up from her newspaper. "Remember Joe Haller? Didn't you give him letters of introduction to some people on the Coast?"

I said I had, and asked her why.

"He's married an old friend of yours, Martha Maynard."

"I didn't give him a letter to

Martha. I wouldn't have done a dirty trick like that to Joe," I said.

Everyone over a certain age remembers Martha Maynard as a picture star, and everyone under that age has at least read about her in the papers. When she was twenty her lovely face was on the cover of every other movie magazine; and twenty years later she still rated a paragraph whenever she got married, and half a column whenever she got divorced. Her divorces rated more space because they were more sensational. A quotation from Martha, the middle-aged bride, that "This one is for good" was an old story, but it was always fun a few years later to read an interview with the ex-groom. Morbid, of course, but fun.

It isn't often that peoples' lives recross each other often enough for one person to keep track of another person, and add up a series of facts and impressions into a complete and rounded history. But it does happen occasionally. It was in the cards that I would encounter Joe twice more.

The first time was about two years later. Felicity and I were aboard a ship that had just left Le Havre for New York. We were having dinner when Felicity whispered, "Martha Maynard's with us. Martha and what is left of your old pal."

I saw what she meant. Their table was only twenty feet away. Except for certain natural ravages, Martha hadn't changed much from the scornful Roman debutante who, back in the old super-colossals, had sat in

Caesar's Colosseum box and egged on the lions to eat their dinner. Joe had the resigned look of a Christian martyr who has been tentatively nibbled at and knows what's coming next. I took one hasty glance at him and turned away.

They had to pass our table when they left. I spotted their approach by watching Felicity. At the critical moment, just before she would either have to speak or develop a sudden interest elsewhere, I got up. "Hello," I said. "Nice to see both of you again."

Joe stopped dead. He started to speak, but Martha beat him to it. "Hello," she said in the rasping voice which had ended her career in pictures. "How are you, Felicity?" She turned back to me without waiting for an answer. "That's right. You used to know my husband, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. "We're old friends, aren't we, Joe?"

Martha answered for him. "So he tells me. Well, nice to have seen you. Come along, Joseph."

Joe managed a weak smile before he followed her. "We'll get together later on," he said.

We did get together, but not until the last night of the voyage. Occasionally, before then, I'd catch him watching us from the far table to which Martha had removed him after that first meal. He had a strange expression. As Felicity said, with feminine disregard for the mechanics of men's clothing, he looked as

though he were loaded down with brand-new photographs but all the zippers on his pockets had got stuck.

On that last night, however, when he slipped away to join us in the smoking room, he produced no pictures. I don't know why that saddened me, but somehow it did. Joe's life as a man of action may have been based on fiction, but in the old days he had at least been fictionally alive.

The funereal atmosphere affected Felicity as it did me. She tried at last to rouse him with a question. "Do you still have that lovely camera, Joe?"

He looked up quickly. His hand darted toward his pocket but he caught it just in time. "It's in my cabin. I don't use it much these days."

But I had seen that eager, darting gesture. "Let's see some of your latest photographs," I said.

"No." He stared down at his still untasted drink. "I haven't taken a picture since my marriage. Honest, that's the truth."

Then it happened. A rasping voice said, "Show them the old ones, then," and Martha suddenly appeared behind Joe's chair. "Give them to me," she went on, sitting down beside him. "You mustn't be so modest, dear."

"Really, Martha—" Joe was a little wild-eyed. "Really, I'd rather not."

"Give me the pictures. I'll do it for you," Martha said.

So we were treated to Joe's adventures, after all; and I'll say this much

for Martha — she put them over with a bang. She had his whole routine down pat, and she delivered it with interpolations of her own. She'd gone to a lot of trouble to learn the inside history of those photographs, and when she had finished with Joe's highly colored versions, she would rip each one to pieces. It wasn't hard. Just a few caustic words telling how much he'd paid to rent his Central American uniform, for instance, did the trick. It was easy to show him up as a cheap pretender, more at home with a trick camera than a gun. Anyone could have done it. Anyone with a taste for torturing small children, that is.

That's what Joe looked like when she finally stopped — like a small boy who has been badly beaten up. He didn't say anything; he just kept staring at the table. I didn't say anything, either. Martha was too tough for me.

She was too tough for Felicity too, but that didn't stop my brave spouse from trying. "That performance rates about C-minus, Martha. Satirical comedy requires a lighter touch," she said.

Martha smiled nastily. "Perhaps. But when I want dramatic criticism I won't come to the daughter of a South American dictator who only learned to speak English after she was twenty-five." She flipped another snapshot on the table, one we hadn't seen before.

Felicity and I examined it together. I'd always wanted to know what Joe

had made of the photograph he'd taken in our apartment, and it was an interesting job. He had blocked out our sober domestic background and replaced it with a suggestion of a gaudy palace. Joe sat on a marble veranda between Felicity and myself, and by my side was a tall, expensive-looking drink.

"By the way," Martha said, and I realized uneasily that she was now addressing me, "after the revolution when Felicity's father was deposed and Joseph saved your life and then lent you money to get married and buy a business, did you ever pay him back? Don't bother answering," she added, rising and giving Joe a sharp nudge on the shoulder. "Joseph, say good night to your friends."

Joe's face was scarlet. He got up and followed Martha, but he didn't say good night. I kept my eyes on him and, just before he left the room, he looked back once.

Felicity, who was facing the other way, said sadly, "Martha really meant it when she told the reporters that *this* marriage was for good. She's found the perfect whipping boy. We've seen the last of Joe."

"I'm not so sure," I told her. Across the smoke-filled room I'd had a good look at his face.

We didn't meet him in the morning; they took him off before the other passengers were allowed to disembark. We didn't see him again until Felicity and I were called as witnesses at his trial. We did our best, but there was never any doubt about

the outcome. They convicted him, all right.

The funny thing is, Joe didn't seem unhappy. In fact, at the crucial moment when the district attorney handed *Exhibit A* to the jury, he leaned forward eagerly. He watched

the jury examine the self-taken photograph which showed him in the very act of strangling his wife; and, as one by one each juror looked up from the picture to stare at him incredulously, a small contented smile spread across his lips.
