

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. Stribling</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
-----------------------	-----------------------	----

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
------------	----------------------	----

EQMM "FIRST"

PROBATION	<i>Marian Lloyd Dix</i>	57
-----------	-------------------------	----

DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

<i>Robert P. Mills</i>	126
------------------------	-----

The best of the new and the best of the old

PUBLISHER: *Joseph W. Ferman*

EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 25, No. 1, Whole No. 234, Jan., 1955. Published monthly by Mercury Publications, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription \$4.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, Canada and the Pan American Union; \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 471 Park Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Concord, N. H. under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1954, by Mercury Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in U.S.A.

ROBERT P. MILLS, Managing Editor
CHARLES ANGOFF, Associate Editor
GLORIA LEVITAS, Assistant Editor

GEORGE SALTER, Art Director
HOWARD K. PRUYN, Production Manager
CONSTANCE DI RIUNZO, Editorial Secretary

Cover painting by GEORGE SALTER (Murder in a Diving Bell)

In QUEEN'S QUORUM (of beloved memory) we said that Ben Hecht can write a blue streak—tough or sentimental, lusty or romantic, always with sharp, shrewd irony, and often with brimstone brilliance. Well, you will find the whole paradoxical mixture in this hair-raising adventure in criminal psychology. Ben Hecht has long had a fondness for impaling doctors and psychoanalysts—did it grow out of his earlier fondness for dissecting newspapermen? Perhaps there is no connection, but here is the story of a typical Hechtian character—a rococo sage and bantam braggart adept in Freudian froth and psychiatric abracadabra (we're quoting, so help us!). Yes, Ben Hecht can write a blue streak—and it reads even faster. It's atomic lightning!

REHEARSAL FOR MURDER

by BEN HECHT

MY ACQUAINTANCESHIP WITH DR. Charles Skyro began with the case of the trick throat, or "Laryngeus Legerdemain," as he dubbed it in the private journal wherein the torments of his patients were sometimes whimsically catalogued.

I had heard of Skyro before that time as one of the more rococo sages of psychoanalysis. He seemed to have a double standing in the medical gossip—one, as a rattlebrained charlatan who should be jugged for malpractice; two, as one of the most brilliant minds ever devoted to the Freudian froth.

Accompanying my disturbed friend and attorney, Mark Cantwell, on his first fateful trip to Skyro's office, I was struck to find that the source of all this controversy was a dehydrated little man past 60 who looked like a

dead locust. Bulbous-eyed, glossy-skinned, wire-necked, and with a tubercular curve to his 110 pounds, Skyro reminded me of the interstellar characters who people the comic strips.

He greeted us from his desk without rising, peered at us for a moment through glasses as thick as paperweights, and then started an hour's monologue that permitted no interruption. I have never heard a man boast more shamelessly.

I had come merely as social ballast for the disturbed Cantwell, intending to vanish as soon as he was firmly docked alongside the analyst. But after Skyro had finished his discourse he turned his attention to me.

I was, he began, an oral sadist with a suicide complex, as anyone could tell by merely glancing through my books.

"I'm not here for treatment," I

Copyright, 1951, by McCall Corporation; originally titled "Guilty!"

said coldly, convinced by this time we had wandered into the lair of a Coney Island weight-guesser. "Mr. Cantwell is your customer."

"What's the matter with Mr. Cantwell?" Skyro looked at him irritably.

"He'll tell you," I said, "if you'll give him a chance to get a word in edgeways."

"I seldom take patients," Dr. Skyro said. "I find them too boring. Mania is a cliché to me, and the disarrangements of the human psyche are too obvious for an intellect like mine. I am a man of great energy, physical as well as mental. I punch a bag every morning for five rounds. And I read a major work of philosophy and walk five miles every night, rain or snow, before going to bed. I never wear a hat or overcoat. Physicians are always astounded by my physique. Every organ perfect. Tissues those of a boy."

I finally managed to silence the bantam braggart by standing up as if to leave. Skyro then turned to Cantwell.

"What did you say was bothering you?" he inquired fretfully.

"I'll be going," I said.

"No, you remain," Skyro said. "Cantwell doesn't like me. He'll talk more easily in front of you."

"How do you know he doesn't like you?" I asked. "You haven't given him a chance to say a word."

"He's said plenty," Skyro beamed.

"I wasn't aware I had spoken," Cantwell frowned.

"Your stomach has been speaking for you," Skyro said. "Stomach rum-

blings are an important form of speech — to the trained ear."

"What's it said?" I asked.

"Chiefly that it hates me," Skyro beamed, "and that its owner is afraid of me — desperately afraid. I've seldom heard such low-toned rumblings of terror. What's your profession, Cantwell?"

"I'm a lawyer."

"And what do you think is the matter with you?"

"Well," Cantwell said, "I've been very nervous of late."

"Come, come!" Skyro cried. "You haven't sought me out because you bite your fingernails. Nobody comes to a doctor with so horrible a reputation as mine unless he is practically *in extremis*. You, my friend, are in just that — in horrible trouble. I've been aware of it for an hour. Most analysts like to spend a year examining their patients. I don't. I haven't the time. I'm sixty-four. I'll undoubtedly live to be a hundred. But I still haven't the time. You tell me frankly what's the matter with you. And I'll be equally frank. I'll tell you whether I can cure you. Either I cure you in a few days and make a sane man out of you — or I do not undertake the task at all. I work in this fashion because —"

"Give him a chance to speak, for God's sake!" I interrupted.

"Oral sadism, highly developed." Skyro glared at me.

"My chief trouble is my throat," Cantwell said. "My voice disappears — at intervals."

"How old are you?" Skyro asked.

"Thirty-five." Cantwell said.

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Happily?"

"Oh, yes, very."

"You're a liar," Skyro said, "as the two extra words in your answer prove. Go on. Your voice disappears. On what sort of occasion?"

"It happens usually in the courtroom," said Cantwell.

"When you rise to address the judge or jury, I suppose," Skyro said.

"That's right."

"Guilt," Skyro beamed. "Obviously you are guilty of something. And when you appear in court as a lawyer, your subconscious fancies you are there as a criminal and you are stricken dumb with fear."

"I've committed no crime."

"Not yet," Skyro said, "but you are in rehearsal. The criminal act itself — the performance for the world — is a brief gesture for which we often rehearse a lifetime. The subconscious makes no distinction between rehearsal and performance — as you can determine by consulting the Bible: As a man thinks, so is he. To the soul, a thought is a deed — a desire is a fact."

The bloodless Dr. Skyro looked intently at Cantwell and added quietly: "You're guilty as hell, Cantwell, and very likely of a murder you've been committing in the recesses of your psyche."

"A murder!" Cantwell mopped his dark face. "That's absurd."

"Is it?" Skyro mused. "Is it, really?" He chuckled, winked at me, and went on, "Notice the enlargement of your friend's eye pupils. And the contraction of his vocal cords, resulting in hoarsened, difficult speech. In a few minutes I could knock his voice out entirely, if I wanted to. Notice also the perspiring palms. From here you can see that his pulse has jumped to at least a hundred. All those are symptoms of guilt. An accomplished murderer with a genuine corpse on his hands suffers less than your friend does in his phantom abattoir. For which statement we move from the Bible to Shakespeare: Present fears are less than horrible imaginings. Are you dining at home tonight?" he asked Cantwell suddenly.

Mark nodded.

"I'd like to be your guest." Skyro beamed and, turning to me, added, "You're invited."

The Cantwells live in a house beyond New York in one of those suburbs to which all the virtues and lawn mowers seem to have retired. There were three Cantwells — Mark; his soft-spoken and pretty wife, Ruth; and his calliope of a mother, Margot. They lived in a colonial house full of old mahogany furniture, old Oriental rugs, old books, and old anecdotes — all the property of Madam Margot. For that shapely, black-satinéd beldam not only lived in the house, she flooded it from cellar to attic with her personality. She was that most triumphant of females, the wife-obliterating

mother. For her part, Ruth bore up silently and sweetly, winning my own sympathy at all times, although I did yearn for the day when she would assert herself in some way.

The prospect of Dr. Skyro turned loose in such a bed of psychological catnip almost kept me from dinner. I dreaded his effect upon the mild-mannered Ruth, but I was curious to witness Madam Margot's response to our little know-it-all. She was a woman of powerful aversions. The evening, I felt certain, would be one of those social blitzes in which cannons roar and homes are wrecked. Yet it turned out to be nothing of the sort. Our browbeating savant struck his colors on arrival and sat smirking at his case-history hostess without firing a diagnosis.

And I had never seen the queen-mother gayer or heard her more sprightly. She owned a stilted sort of wit, full of heavy cuteness. Aware that the wispy fellow at her right was somehow investigating Mark's inner life, she offered numerous anecdotes about her son in which he starred always as an incompetent hero guided by a whimsical and doting mama. It was all rather nauseating — but enduring in the absence of counterblasts.

Ruth, as was her way, deferred in everything to the terrifying dowager, and for her pains was awarded the negligence and disregard of one and all. Cantwell seemed scarcely aware of her presence.

After dinner Madam Margot was persuaded by the conquered Skyro to

show off the rooms which she had recently redecored. And here, for the first time, I sensed that our sage was mysteriously at work behind his sycophantic front. He pranced along beside the mother, cooing over her achievements and throwing chummy little queries at her. But his manner had become as alert as that of a burglar "casing" a house.

"And this is Mark's room." Madam Margot stopped in front of a door. "It hasn't been remodeled yet."

"I'd love to see it," Skyro purred. "Just to see what the house looked like before you took it in hand."

Mark opened the door for us. It opened slowly, brushing over the carpet with difficulty. We looked into a skimpily furnished bedroom. While it was clearly a refuge which he shared with Ruth, I noticed that it was called "Mark's room" and that no one else even seemed conscious of the reference.

"I suppose you're going to change this fireplace, too," Skyro pointed at a gas-log grate. "It's rather out of place in such a palace of antiques as your home really is."

"I've insisted for months on turning that into a real, cozy fireplace," Madam Margot sighed with a pout at her son. "I think gas logs are utterly without mood."

"But Mark likes it," Skyro said, "and, of course, a man is always boss in his own bedroom." Looking down, he added tenderly, "May I ask who bought this rug? It doesn't seem your taste at all, Mrs. Cantwell."

"Another of poor Mark's efforts at

decoration," his mother answered. "It's an awful thing, isn't it? The auctioneer's delight, I call it. Much too thick a pile, and *such* a bilious color!"

"I like it," Mark said.

His wife Ruth smiled loyally. "It makes the room look very manly," she said.

"Dear little Mark." Madam Margot slid her arm under her son's. "He was always an unmanageable brat. But I always forgave him — everything. Horrid rugs, wrong fireplaces and all."

And she kissed her frowning son tenderly.

Dr. Skyro greeted me the next day with a limp but friendly handshake.

"I sent for you," he said, "because we are approaching the third step in your friend's cure."

"I was unaware of *any* progress," I said.

Skyro rolled his beetle eyes behind the thick lenses. He was being rollicking.

"There will be five steps in all," he said. "You witnessed step number one last night. I doubt, however, if you were aware of it."

I shook my head.

"The gas log," Skyro beamed.

"What about the gas log?"

"The gas log is responsible for Mark's loss of voice," Skyro said. "I knew your friend was guilty of plotting a murder, as I told you yesterday. And that this inner guilt deprived him of his voice in the courtroom. But I saw last night that Mark has

not only dreamed subconsciously of murdering his wife; he has —"

"His *wifel*!" I interrupted. "You must mean his mother!"

"But no. Your tormented friend feels he must murder his wife as a love sacrifice to his goddess-mother; he has also rigged up the mechanics of that phantom crime. And the mechanics are by no means phantomish. He has refused to have his gas log turned into a genuine and cozy fireplace, *because the gas log is the murder weapon*. And he has insured the efficiency of his weapon by laying down that hideous carpet. You see, when he finally decides to murder Ruth and when he turns on the gas and leaves it escaping, there will be no chance of the gas leaking out through any cracks under the door."

"I don't believe a word of it," I said. "Mark is incapable of plotting so ugly and stupid a business as all that."

"Go on," Skyro beamed.

"He would obviously not have come to you for help," I continued, "if he knew he were at work on a crime. A criminal doesn't call on the police to advertise the crime he's going to commit."

"A crude analogy," Skyro said. "Mark is not a criminal. He is only a half-criminal. His personality is split. What says the Bible — about the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing? Mark's left hand is his subconscious. It is very busy buying rugs, rigging up gas logs, and preparing a crime. His right hand knows nothing

of these activities. Hence his recourse to the police, as you call me."

"I've always found it hard to believe in the Jekyll-Hyde idea," I said. "But granting that a man may be blind to the things he is doing, your deductions still seem a bit arbitrary. How do you know it's the gas log?"

"Mark's throat trouble tells me," Skyro said. "You see, it is not only guilt that closes his throat. He suffers also from gas-asphyxiation symptoms. When he is in the courtroom he becomes in his own mind a murderer instead of a lawyer. And, having become the murderer, he has a desire to atone; to punish himself for the crime of which he feels guilty. He does this by participating in his wife's death. He also inhales the gas fumes — and starts choking along with her. Thus he murders and then atones for the crime by committing suicide — all on an unconscious level."

Skyro's glib conclusions were irritating, and I indicated as much.

"Don't argue with me," the little doctor smiled. "We are well past the discursive stage in the case. Step three has already been taken."

"In what direction?" I asked.

"I have cast Madam Cantwell out of the house."

"Mark's *mother!*" I stared at the happy sage. "Impossible!"

"To the contrary — very simple," Skyro said. "I spent less than an hour with her. She's moving all her things to the Winden Hotel this afternoon."

I inquired how this miracle had been accomplished.

"By humoring the psychotic dreams of that wretched woman." Skyro said. "I've assured her that the only way to wreck her son's marriage is to leave the house. He will suffer so from need of her that he will quarrel with his wife, abandon her, and come to Madam Margot as her adoring son and slave."

"She wants the marriage wrecked? I mean, she wants it that openly?" I asked.

"The old one loathes Ruth," Skyro said. "She dreams only of winning her son to her side. It is a type of reverse motherhood that's very common. The mother has a curious and impractical desire to recall her child."

"What," I interrupted him, "is your purpose in ousting Madam Margot?"

"That is step number four — and must remain vested," Skyro said, "for the time."

I was alarmed. The little man's machinations seemed to me suddenly more than an adventure in psychology.

"If you're even remotely right in your analysis," I said, "and Mark has really been plotting his wife's death — then good God — what are you up to?"

Skyro nodded. "Your fears are very flattering," he said. "They show that you believe in me."

"They show nothing of the sort," I said. "I'm going to call on Mark and pull him out of this."

"You'll do nothing." Skyro glared at me. "His life is in my hands. So is his wife's. I hold them — like this."

He lifted both palms. "If you want your friend saved leave him here. There is no other haven for him."

I was silent for several minutes.

"Luckily I believe in none of your abracadabra," I said at length, "so I will not interfere with your little Halloween games."

I stayed away from both Mark and Skyro for two days. On the third day Ruth telephoned me. She spoke in a spent voice.

"I'd like to see you," she said.

I said I was busy.

"It's about Mark," she went on dully. "He's drinking. And he's beside himself. I have to do something. He blames me for his mother's leaving us. I didn't ask her to go. I didn't want her to. But he won't believe me. I don't know what to do."

"I don't, either," I said, "but I'll talk to Dr. Skyro."

"That horrible man!" Ruth began weeping. "He's responsible for every thing. I know he is. He's in a plot against me."

"I'll talk to him," I repeated firmly. "And see you tomorrow."

I was wakened by the telephone at 6 the next morning. It was Skyro.

"Come to the Winden Hotel at once," he said in a queer voice. "Suite seven hundred five. I'll be there. Please hurry."

"What's happened?" I asked.

"I can't discuss it over the phone," the breathless voice answered. "Get dressed and hurry."

Skyro arrived at the Winden a few minutes before me. He was standing in the hall talking to Mark's mother when I opened the door. Mark, glowing and disheveled, was sitting hunched on the couch.

"The police should be here in a half hour," Skyro was saying. "We have very little time to prepare ourselves. Very little time."

"The police will be here for what?" I asked.

"For Mark." Skyro stared at the collapsed lawyer.

Mark's eyes were red. His attention was elsewhere. He seemingly had failed to recognize me. His mother, voluptuous in a cream-colored satin negligee, hovered over him like a Valkyrie.

"I was called at 5:30 this morning," Skyro went on. "The facts are simple and complete. There is no chance of our altering them."

"What are they?" I asked.

"Mark arrived at home around midnight last night," said Skyro. "He was under the influence of alcohol. He quarreled with Ruth and then induced her to take two sleeping pills. His fingerprints are on the box of pills. They are also on the jet of the gas log. He turned the gas on around 2 A.M. Ruth was sound asleep, drugged. He shut off the damper in the fireplace. His fingerprints are also on the damper-iron. Then he left the bedroom, closing and locking the door behind him, and arrived at this apartment around 3:30 A.M. The clerk downstairs has the record of his

arrival. The police have already traced his trip from Long Island to this hotel."

Madam Margot smiled.

"That is no evidence," she said. "Any good lawyer will be able to free Mark. He has done nothing wrong."

A groan came from the couch.

"Have you, Mark?"

"Your son is unable to speak," Skyro said quickly. "He is suffering from gas-poisoning symptoms, in an effort to atone for what he has done."

"Nonsense." Madam Margot raised her own uninhibited voice. "I won't listen to such talk against Mark."

"Your attitude isn't going to help him," Skyro said. "The police will consider it maternal bias."

"That stupid, horrible misfit of a Ruth!" Madam Margot cried suddenly. "I'm *glad* she's dead. For his sake. The woman drove him to it. She was a human botch. No jury will convict Mark for getting rid of her. If ever homicide was justifiable it's this one."

"Did you hate her as much as that?" Skyro asked unexpectedly.

"Hate her!" Madam Margot snorted. "I despised her! From the very first day Mark brought her home. I hated her every hour of their marriage. My God, they can't touch Mark for ridding himself of such a foul incubus. She belongs where she is now!"

Mark stood up and stared at his mother. She held her arms out to him. He knocked them down.

"I thought you loved me," he said, and Skyro beamed at the sound of his voice. "But that's not true. You were only interesting in destroying *her*."

"Darling, darling!" Madam Margot cried. "You mustn't worry. I'll stand by you. We have money."

"I came home last night" — Mark stared at her — "to kill her. I gave her the sleeping pills. I turned on the gas. Now I know what I've been dreaming about. Her death. Her killing."

"You mustn't say that!" Madam Margot cried. "Darling, sit down. Let me take care of you."

"You gloating, evil creature." Mark's eyes were still on her. "It was your hatred that worked in me. It made me crazy. And I thought *you* were the sweet one, the tender one! I thought it was you who loved me. I've been mad! You loved no one — you had only hate. And I killed with your hate!" Mark's voice rose to a raging pitch.

"Get out!" he cried. "I never want to see you again — or hear your voice. Gloat all you want, and keep on gloating! After I'm executed you'll know your hatred won."

"They won't touch you!" Madam Margot cried. "Because you're mad! Every word you're saying is mad."

"I'm sane," Mark answered quietly. "My horror of you proves it — if nothing else does." He turned to Skyro and added, "Where are the police?"

"We can forget about them," the

little sage beamed. "I'm more interested in the fact that you seem to be cured of your laryngeus legerdemain. Also of your mother fixation, which was the cause of it."

"Good God!" I exploded. "What good is a cure going to do him *now!*" I was glaring murderously into the beetle eyes. "You're an accessory to this crime," I cried. "You *knew* it would happen. You engineered its happening. You egged Mark on to it."

"True, true," Skyro smiled, "but I'm a very brilliant accessory. I'm accessory to a crime *that never happened* — to a phantom murder."

"Ruth, Ruth," Mark moaned, covering his eyes.

"You can go back to her," Skyro said. "She's sleeping off the drug you gave her."

"But the gas," Mark whispered. "I turned it on."

"True enough," Skyro nodded, "but I took the liberty of disconnecting the gas log when I dined at your home. You turned it on — but no gas came out."

"I smelled it," Mark whispered.

"A natural part of your delusions," Skyro beamed.

Mark swayed.

"You've saved her life — and mine," he said.

"I prefer to consider that I've merely cured a throat affliction," said Skyro.

I looked at Madam Margot. Her face was bloodless. Her body seemed

to have aged as if under some more of Skyro's necromancy.

"Aren't you going to kiss me good-bye?" she wailed as Mark started out of the door.

"Neither goodbye nor hello," said Mark. And was gone.

"I had the case planned the moment I saw the gas log," Skyro beamed across a lunch table. "I needed only one bit of luck to cure our friend of his ugly dreams. That was a blurt of truth from his mother. Madam Margot really cured her son, not I. As I will assure her when I take her under my wing tonight. A fascinating woman. Maternal cannibalism is a rare thing. As is her other trouble — a need to destroy her own mother — for having held the love of her father. You see, this all began when Margot herself was a child —"

"Please," I interrupted, "I have little interest and less belief in your theories of psychoanalysis. And I'm averse to looking miracles in the mouth. You've reconciled a husband and wife, prevented a murder, solved a crime, given an evil woman her comeuppance — why not rest on these obvious laurels?"

Dr. Skyro shook his head sadly.

"To a man of my genius," he said, "This thing you call a miracle is hardly more than the working out of a childish crossword puzzle. Call on me tomorrow — and I'll tell you the tale of a real miracle!"