



FREDRIC BROWN

THE COLLECTION

Tales of crime, mystery and science fiction

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Fredric Brown

Witness in the dark

I

Even reading about it in the papers gave me a mild case of the willies. For some reason I had a hunch, right off, that I was going to be put on the case and that I wasn't going to like it. Of course they might have it cleaned up by the time I got back; it was the evening of the second to last day of my vacation. But I didn't think so.

I put down the paper and tried to forget what I'd read by looking at Marge. Even after four years of being married, I like to look at Marge.

But this time it didn't drive what I'd been reading out of my head. By a roundabout way, it brought me back to it. I got to thinking how bad it would be to be blind and never be able to see Marge again. The story in the paper had been about a blind man—a blind man who was the only witness to a murder.

Marge happened to look up; she asked me what I was thinking about and I told her. She was interested, so I told her the details, what there was of them in the paper:

"The blind man's name is Max Easter. Until three days ago he was the bookkeeper at the Springfield Chemical Works. Until three days ago he wasn't blind—and they're not sure now whether his blindness is permanent; it's from an industrial accident at the plant. Some acid splashed in his face while he was collecting time slips out in the plant. They think he'll recover, but right now he's completely blind, and with his eyes bandaged.

"So yesterday evening he was in his bedroom — he's still in bed—talking to a friend of his named Armin Robinson, who'd dropped in to see him. Their wives—Easter's and Robinson's — had gone to a movie together downtown. The two men were alone in the house — except for the killer.

"Armin Robinson was sitting in a chair near the bed, and the bedroom door was ajar. Max Easter was sitting up in bed and the two of them were talking. Then Easter heard the door squeak and someone step into the room. He heard Robinson move and thinks he may have stood up, but nothing was said. Then all of a sudden there was a shot and the sound of a fall, from Robinson's direction. And then the footsteps came farther into the room and Easter sat there in bed, waiting to be shot too."

Marge said, "How awful."

I said, "Then comes the odd part. Instead of being shot, Max Easter felt something land on the bed, on the mattress. He groped for it, and he had a gun in his hand, a revolver. Then he heard the killer move and pointed the gun in that direction and pulled the trigger—"

"You mean the killer gave him the gun? Tossed it on his bed, I mean? Wouldn't he have known a blind man can shoot at a sound?"

I said, "All I know is what's in the papers, Marge. That's the way they tell Easter's story. But it could be. Probably the killer didn't realize that the bounce of the mattress would tell Easter where the gun landed and that he'd get it in his hand that quickly, the first grab. Probably he thought he could be out of the room before Easter would find the gun."

"But why give it to him at all?"

"I don't know. But to go on with Easter's story: as he swung the gun around to aim at the sound, he heard a noise like a man's knee hitting the floor and he figured the killer had dropped down to be under the shot if he fired. So Easter lowered the gun to aim a couple of feet above the floor and pulled the trigger. Just once.

"And then, suddenly, he says, he got scareder of what he was *doing* than of what might happen to him, and he dropped the gun. He was shooting in the dark — literally. If he'd misjudged what had

happened, he might be shooting at Armin Robinson — at anybody. He didn't even know for sure that there'd been a murder, or *what* had happened.

"So, anyway, he dropped the gun and it at the edge of the bed and clunked onto the floor. So he couldn't get it back even if he changed his mind. And he just sat there sweating while whoever it was moved around the room awhile and then went out."

Marge looked thoughtful. "Moved around the room doing what, George?"

"How would Easter know? But Armin Robinson's wallet was gone, so taking it was probably one thing. And Easter's own wallet and watch were gone off the dresser, where his wife said later they'd been lying. And a small suitcase was gone."

"A suitcase? Why would he take a suitcase?"

"To put the silverware in. That was gone from downstairs and a few other small articles a burglar might take along. Easter says the man moved around his room for what seemed a long time, but was probably only a minute or two. Then he heard him walk down the stairs and move around a while down there, and then the back door opened and closed."

"He hadn't dared get up until he heard the killer leave the house and then he got up and groped his way to Robinson and found he was dead. So he felt his way down the stairs to the telephone and called police. Period. End of story."

"But that's horrible," Marge said. "I mean, it leaves so many loose ends, so many things you can wonder about."

"Which is just what I've been doing. Particularly, I get the picture of that blind man shooting in the dark and then getting scared because he didn't know what he was shooting at."

"George, don't blind people get special senses? I mean, so they can tell who a person is by the way he walks — things like that?"

Very patiently I said, "Max Easter had been blind all of three days. He might have been able to tell a man's walk from a woman's — if the woman wore high heels."

"I guess you're right. Even if he'd known the man—"

I said, "Even if it had been a friend of his, he wouldn't have known. At night, all cats are gray."

"All cats *be* gray."

"You're goofy," I said.

"Look it up in Bartlett's *Quotations*."

Marge and I are always quibbling over things like that. I got Bartlett's out of the bookcase and looked it up and this time she was right. I'd been wrong on the "at night" part, too; it read "When all candles be out, all cats be gray." When I'd admitted to Marge that she was right — for a change — and we'd batted that around for a while, her mind went back to the murder again. She said, "What about the gun he left, George? Can they trace him from it? The serial number, or something?"

I said, "It was Max Easter's own gun. It was in the drawer of a desk downstairs. I forgot to mention that. The killer must have rifled that desk before he came upstairs."

"Do you think, George, that it was just a burglar?"

"No," I told her.

"Neither do I. There's something about it—a false note."

"More than a false note. A whole damn discord. But I can't guess what it is."

She said, "This Max Easter. Maybe he isn't blind at all."

I snorted at that. "Woman's intuition! A guess like that is as silly — unless you've got a reason for saying it—as saying that what he shot at was a gray cat, just because I happened to mention the proverb about one."

"Maybe he did," Marge said.

That wasn't even worth answering. I picked up the paper again and turned to the sports section.

The Sunday papers, the next day, had a lot on the case, but none of it was new. No arrests had been made, and apparently no one was even under suspicion. I hoped I wouldn't get put on it. I don't know why, exactly. I just hoped so.

II

I was on it almost before I got inside the door. Before I got my raincoat off, I was told Captain Eberhart wanted me in his office, and I went in.

"Have a good vacation, George?" he asked me, but he didn't wait for my answer; he went on, "I'm putting you on that Armin Robinson murder. Have you read about it in the papers?"

"Sure," I said.

"Then you know as much about it as anybody else, except one thing. I'll tell you that, but outside of that, I want you to go on it cold, without any preconceived ideas. We haven't got anywhere and you just might hit something we missed. It's worth a try."

I nodded. "But how about lab reports, ballistics? I can tackle the people cold, but I'd like to have the physical facts."

"Okay. The coroner's report is that Robinson died instantaneously from a bullet through his head. The bullet was in the wall about three feet behind where he'd been sitting and about five and a half feet up from the floor. Went into the wall almost straight. It all checks if he stood up when the killer came through the door and if the killer stood in the doorway or just inside to fire the shot and held the gun at eye level."

"Bullet matches the gun?"

"Yes, and so does the other bullet, the one Max Easter fired. And there were two empty shells in the gun. No prints on the gun besides Easter's; the killer must have worn gloves. And Mrs. Easter says a pair of white cotton work gloves is missing from the kitchen."

"Any way Max Easter could have fired both shots instead of just one?"

"Absolutely not, George. He *is* blind—at least temporarily. The doctor treating him guarantees that; there are tests—reaction of pupils to sudden light, things like that. The only way a blind man could hit someone dead center in the forehead would be to hold the gun against him—and there weren't any powder burns. No, Max Easter's story sounds screwy, but all the facts fit it. Even the timing. Some neighbors heard the shots. Thought it was backfires and didn't investigate, but they noticed the time; they were listening to the radio and it was at the eight o'clock change of programs—two shots about five seconds apart. And Easter's phone call to us was at twelve minutes after eight by our own records. Twelve minutes just about fits what he says went on between the shooting and his getting to the phone."

"How about the alibis of the two wives?"

"Good as gold. They were together in a movie at the time of the murder. Eight o'clock was just about the time they were going in, in fact, and they saw friends in the lobby, so it's not only their own word. You can take the alibi as okay."

"All right," I said, "and what's the one thing that didn't get in the papers?"

"Lab report on the other bullet, the one Easter fired at the murderer, shows traces of organic matter."

I whistled. "Then the killer was wounded?" That ought to make it a lot easier.

Cap Eberhart said, "Maybe." He sighed. "I almost hate to tell you this, George, but if he was, he was a rooster wearing silk pajamas."

"That's fine," I told him. "My wife says Easter was shooting at a gray cat, and my wife is mostly right. About everything. But now would you mind talking sense?"

"If you can make sense out of it, swell. We dug the second bullet out of the wall near the door, about a foot and a half up. The microscopist who examined it says there are minute traces of three kinds of organic matter on it. Infinitesimal quantities; he can identify them only up to a point and he's not sure that far. But he thinks they're blood, silk and feathers. A chicken wearing silk pajamas would be one answer."

"What kind of blood?" I asked. "What kind of feathers?"

"No dice. They're minute traces, and he won't stick his neck out any farther than that, even on a guess. What's this business about a gray cat?"

I told him about our argument over the quotation and Marge's kidding remark. I said, "Seriously, Cap, it does sound as though the killer was wounded. Just a scrape, probably, since he went about his business afterwards. That takes care of the blood on the bullet, and the silk isn't too hard. Silk shirt, silk shorts, silk tie — anything. But the feathers are harder to figure. Only place a man's likely to wear a feather is in the band of a new hat."

Eberhart nodded. "Pajama-wearing roosters aside, that's the best suggestion we've had to date. Could be like this — the killer sees the gun swinging toward him and drops down low, throwing up his hand toward the gun. Hands don't stop bullets, but people often do that when they're going to be shot at. The bullet grazes his hatband, which is silk and has a feather in it — but not hard enough to crease him or stun him — and goes in the wall. Then the killer wraps a handkerchief around his hand and goes about his business, after Easter drops the gun off the bed and he sees he's safe."

"It could be," I said. "Anybody connected with the case wounded?"

"Not where it shows. And we haven't got enough on anybody to drag them in and strip them. In fact, dammit, we haven't even found anybody with a motive. Screwy as it seems, George, we've almost decided that it really was a plain and simple robbery. Well, that's all I'm going to tell you. Go at it cold and maybe you'll get something we missed."

I put my raincoat back on and went out.

III

The first thing to do was the thing I hated worst—talk to the widow of the murdered man. I hoped, for both our sakes, that she'd be over the worst part of the shock and grief.

I didn't enjoy it, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. Mrs. Armin Robinson was quiet and reserved, but she was willing to talk, and able to talk unemotionally. The emotion was there, but it was two layers down; it wasn't going to come to the surface in hysteria.

I got the matter of her alibi over first. Yes, she and Mrs. Max Easter, the blinded man's wife, had met at eight o'clock in the theater lobby. She was sure it was eight exactly, because both she and Louise Easter had commented on the fact that they were both exactly on time; Louise had been there first, but had said she'd been waiting less than a minute. Louise had been talking to two friends of theirs whom she'd met — accidentally, not by appointment — in the lobby. The four women had gone in together and had stayed together in the movie. She gave me the names of the two other women, and their addresses. It sounded, as Eberhart had said, as good as gold. The theater they'd gone to was at least twenty minutes' driving time from the Easter residence, where the murder had occurred.

I asked, "Did your husband have any enemies?"

"No, definitely not. Possibly a few people may have disliked him, but no more than that."

I asked gently, "Why would some people have disliked him, Mrs. Robinson? What traits in his nature—?"

"He was pretty much of an extrovert. You know, the life of the party, that sort of thing. When he had a few drinks, he may have grated on some people's nerves. But that didn't happen often. And, too, some people thought him a little too frank. But those were little things."

They certainly didn't sound like something that would lead to premeditated murder. I said, "He was a C.P.A., an auditor. Is that right?"

"Yes, and he operated independently. He was his own boss."

"Any employees?"

"Only a secretary, full time. He had a list of people he sometimes called on for help in an audit that was too big a job for one man."

"How close friends were you and your husband with the Easters?"

"Fairly close. Probably Armin and Max were closer friends than Louise and I are. Frankly, I don't like Louise too well, but I get along with her because of the friendship between my husband and hers. Not that I have anything against Louise — don't misunderstand me — it's just that we're such different types. For that matter, I don't think Armin liked Louise especially either."

"How often did you see them?"

"Sometimes oftener, but at least once a week regularly. We're — we were — members of a bridge club of four couples who took turns meeting at one another's homes."

"Who were the others?"

"The Anthonys and the Eldreds. Bill Anthony is editor of the *Springfield Blade*. He and his wife are away on vacation right now, in Florida. Lloyd Eldred is with the Springfield Chemical Works — the same company Max Easter works for. He's Max's immediate superior there."

"And Max Easter is bookkeeper there?"

"That's right, bookkeeper and paymaster. Lloyd Eldred is the treasurer of the company. That's probably not as much of a difference as it sounds. I think Max probably makes about ten thousand a year and Lloyd about twelve thousand. Springfield Chemical doesn't pay very high salaries to its officers."

"Your husband ever do any auditing for Springfield Chemical?"

"No. Kramer and Wright have done their auditing for years. I think Annin could have had the account if he'd gone after it, but he had all the business he could handle by himself."

"He was doing well, then?"

"Well enough."

"This is an unpleasant question, Mrs. Robinson. But does anyone gain by his death?"

"Not unless you'd consider that I did. There's ten thousand in insurance, and title to this house is clear. But almost no savings; we bought this house a year ago and used our savings to buy it outright. And Armin's business can't be sold—there's nothing to sell. I mean, he just sold his own services as an auditor."

"Then I wouldn't say you gained," I told her. "Ten thousand in insurance doesn't compensate for the loss of ten thousand a year in income."

"Nor for the loss of a husband, Mr. Hearn."

That could have been corny except that it sounded sincere. It made me remember I wanted to get out of there, so I got down to brass tacks by asking her about Friday evening. "Had your husband planned in advance to go to the Easters'?" I asked. "Would anyone know he was going to be there?"

"No, except Louise and myself. And then, only just before he left. Here's what happened: Louise and I had made the movie date before Max's accident at the plant. About half past six that evening, when Armin and I were just starting dinner, Louise phoned. She said she'd better not leave Max home alone, that he was feeling pretty low.

"Armin heard my end of the phone conversation and guessed what it was about. So he came to the phone and talked to Louise and said she should keep her date for the movie, that he'd just as soon go over and sit with Max for the evening."

"When did he leave to go there?"

"About seven, because he was going by bus and wanted to get there by half past seven so Louise would have time to make the date. He told me to take our car and pick him up after the show to bring him back home."

"And he got to the Easters' by half past seven?"

"Yes. That is, Louise said so. She says he went upstairs right away to Max's room, and that she left about ten minutes after that. She drove their car. We had two cars between the two of us, which wasn't very good planning, I guess."

I asked, "Was there anything unusual about the way your husband acted Friday evening, before he left? Or, for that matter, any time lately?"

"He'd been a bit moody and preoccupied for two or three days. I asked him several times if he was worried about something, but he insisted that he wasn't."

I tried prying a little deeper on that, but couldn't find out whether she had any guess as to what he may have been worrying about. She was sure it wasn't financial troubles.

I let it go at that and left her, telling her I might have to come back later to talk to her again. She was pleasant about that and said she understood.

I thought it over after I got in my car. The alibis of both wives sounded solid. Neither of them could have been at the theater at eight and still have killed Armin Robinson. But I didn't want to take anything

for granted, so I drove to the addresses of the two other women who'd seen Louise Easter and Mrs. Robinson in the movie lobby. I talked to both of them and when I left the second, I was sure.

I got back in my car and drove out to the Springfield Chemical Works. I didn't see how Max's accident there — his blinding — could have anything to do with the murder of Robinson, but I wanted to get that angle out of the way before I went to the Easters'.

Springfield Chemical must have had an efficient office system; their office quarters were small for a plant that hired over a hundred men.

I asked the receptionist, who was doubling in brass on a typewriter and had a telephone switchboard in front of her, for Mr. Lloyd Eldred. She made a call and then directed me to his office.

I went in. There were two desks, but only one of them was occupied. A tall, slender, almost effeminate-looking man with rumpled curly black hair looked up from the occupied desk and said "Yes?" in a tone that meant, "I hope this won't take long; I'm awfully busy." And from all the stuff stacked on his desk, he was.

I said, "I'm George Hearn, Mr. Eldred. From Homicide." I took the chair in front of his desk.

He ran his fingers through his hair, thereby explaining why it was so rumpled. He said, "About Armin Robinson again, I suppose," and I admitted the fact.

"Well — I don't know what more I can tell you. But Armin was a friend of mine and if there is anything—"

"He was a close friend of yours?"

"Well, not exactly. We saw each other at least once a week, at a bridge club that met around at our houses. The Easters, the Anthonys, the Robinsons, and my wife and I."

I nodded. "Mrs. Robinson told me about that. Are you going to continue the club?"

"I don't know. Maybe we'll find another couple—but not until after Max Easter's eyes are all right again. Right now we'd be missing two couples — three, until the Anthonys get back from Florida."

"You think Easter's eyes will get all right again?"

"I don't see why not. The doctor says they will—he's a little puzzled that they've been bad for this long. We gave him a sample of the acid, and he says it definitely should not cause permanent injury to the eyes."

He ran his fingers through his hair again. "I hope — for selfish reasons if no others — that he's back soon. I'm swamped here trying to handle both our jobs."

"Can't your company get another man?"

"They could, I suppose, and would if I wanted them to. We discussed it, in fact. The catch is it would take weeks to break someone in to the point where they'd be a help instead of a hindrance. And the doctor says he thinks Max *should* be back in another week at the outside. Anyway, it won't be so bad after Wednesday, day after tomorrow."

"Why Wednesday?" I asked him.

"Semimonthly payroll. That's Max's main job, keeping payroll and time records. This time I'm having to do them besides my own work, so it'll be tough until the payroll's done. But if Max isn't able to be back by next payroll, we *will* make other arrangements. I can't work twelve hours a day indefinitely."

I nodded. Apparently the guy really was plugging, and I liked the fact that he gave it to me diplomatically instead of telling me to hurry up and get it over with.

So I asked the one routine question I had to ask about Armin Robinson — whether Lloyd Eldred knew any reason anyone would have for wanting Robinson dead — and got a flat, unequivocal no. Also a no as to whether Eldred knew what Robinson might have been worrying about for a few days before his death; Eldred hadn't noticed that he was as of the last time they'd played bridge together and that was the last time he'd seen him.

So I switched to the other matter. "Will you tell me about Max Easter's accident?"

"Max can tell you about it better than anyone else, because he was alone when it happened. All I know is that he was out in the plant—in the plating room — collecting time slips during the men's lunch hour. He takes a later lunch period himself so he can collect slips while they're off. He can go through the whole plant in an hour that way; it'd take twice as long when there's work going on."

I asked, "But didn't he tell you how it happened?"

"Oh, sure. He went in one of the little vat rooms off the plating room to get a slip off a shelf there, where the man who works that vat always leaves it. When he took down the slip pad he knocked down

a jug from the shelf into the vat below it. It's a bad arrangement, having to reach across the vat to get something on the shelf, especially as that shelf is slightly above eye level. We changed the arrangement there since then."

I asked, "Was the acid that blinded him in the jug that fell, or in the vat?"

"In the vat. But landing smack in the middle of the vat, the jug splashed acid all over him."

"Any damage except to his eyes?"

"No, unless you count damage to clothes. Probably ruined the suit he was wearing. But the acid wasn't strong enough to hurt the skin."

"Does the company assume responsibility?"

"Of course. At any rate, he's on full salary and we're taking care of medical expenses."

"But if the injury is permanent?"

"It can't be; we have assurance from the doctor who's treating him. In fact, he tends to believe that the blindness may be hysterical. You've heard of hysterical blindness, haven't you?"

I said, "I've heard of it. But for something like that there is supposed to be a deep-rooted psychic cause. Would there be in Max's case?"

I thought he hesitated slightly before he said, "Not that I know of."

I paused, trying to think of further questions, and I couldn't. From the way Lloyd Eldred looked at me, he was wondering why I'd been asking so many questions about Max's accident and about Max. I was wondering that, too. And I looked again at the piles of work on his desk and I thanked him and excused myself.

It was nearly noon. I was only a ten minutes' drive from home, so I decided to have lunch with Marge. Sometimes I go home for lunch and sometimes not, depending on what part of town I happen to be in when lunchtime comes around. Marge always keeps stuff on hand that she can rustle up quickly if I do get home.

IV

"I'm on it," I told her, as soon as I got in. She knew what I meant; I didn't have to tell her.

While we ate I told her the little I'd learned that hadn't been in the papers. I said, "So you see it wasn't a gray cat Max Easter was shooting at in the dark. It was a rooster in silk pajamas. For once you're wrong on a hunch. And on your other wild idea, too; Easter is really blind."

She turned her nose up at me. "Bet you a dime he isn't."

I said, "That's one dime I'll collect."

"Maybe. I won't bet you on the gray cat, but it's no sillier than Captain Eberhart's rooster in pajamas. Or than your silk hatband with a feather in it."

"But if it was that, he'd have worn it out with him. If it was a gray cat, what happened to it?"

"The killer carried it out in the suitcase he took from the closet, naturally."

I threw up my hands on that one.

Just the same, Marge had been serious in regard to her hunch that Max Easter wasn't really blind, and when Marge takes one of her hunches seriously, I do too. At least to the extent of checking as thoroughly as I can. So before I left home I phoned Cap Eberhart and got the name and address of the doctor who was treating Max Easter's eyes.

I went to see him and was lucky enough to get into his office right away. After I'd identified myself and explained what I wanted, I asked him, "How soon after the accident did you see Mr. Easter?"

"I believe I reached the plant not over twenty minutes after I was phoned. And the phone call, I was told, had been made immediately."

"Did you notice anything unusual about the condition of his eyes?"

"Nothing unusual considering the dilute acid that had been splashed into them. I'm not sure I understand your question."

I wasn't sure I understood it myself; I didn't know exactly what I was fishing for. I asked, "Was he in considerable pain?"

"Pain? Oh, no. Tetranic acid causes temporary blindness, but without pain. It's no more painful than boric acid."

"Can you describe the effect for me, Doctor?"

"It dilates the pupils, as does belladonna. Ultimately it's as harmless. But in addition to dilation of the pupils, which is an immediate reaction, it causes temporary paralysis of the optic nerves and consequent temporary blindness. Normally the duration of blindness is from two to eight hours, depending on the strength of the solution."

"And the strength of the solution in this case?"

"Medium. Mr. Easter should have recovered his sight in not over six hours."

"But he didn't," I pointed out.

"He hasn't as yet. And that leads to one of two possible conclusions. One, that he is abnormal in his tolerance for the substance in question. In that case, it is merely a matter of time; his eyesight will return before much longer. The other possibility is, of course, hysterical blindness—blindness caused by self-delusion. I am almost certain this is not true in Mr. Easter's case. However, if his blindness persists more than a week, I shall recommend a psychiatrist."

I asked, "Isn't there a third possibility? Malingering?"

He smiled. "Don't forget, Mr. Hearn, that I am employed by the company and in the company's interests. He couldn't possibly pretend dilation of the pupils, which still persists. And he is *not* faking blindness. There are certain tests.

"And I am, as I said, reasonably sure it is not hysterical. I base that on the continued dilation of the pupils. Hysteria would be much more likely to continue the nerve paralysis alone."

"When did you examine him last?"

"Yesterday afternoon at four. I've been calling every day at that time."

I thanked him and left. For once, one of Marge's hunches had been wrong.

And I'd been stalling long enough on going to the Easter's house. I went there. I rang the doorbell.

A woman who turned out to be Mrs. Max Easter, Louise Easter, opened the door. I identified myself and she identified herself and she asked me in. She was a good-looking woman, even in a housedress. It would have been interesting to examine her to see if she had any bullet scrapes; but then her alibi was as good as any I've ever seen and besides there's Marge.

Her husband, Louise Easter told me, was still in bed in his room upstairs and did I want to go up? I said I did, but that first she might as well show me around downstairs because I wanted to learn the layout of the place.

She showed me around. The drawer from which Max's gun had been taken, the cabinet where the silverware had been, the shelf in the kitchen where the cotton gloves had lain.

"Those were the only things missing?" I asked.

"Yes. From downstairs, that is. He took Max's wallet and watch from the dresser upstairs. There was about twenty dollars in the wallet, and that's all the money there happened to be in the house. And the suitcase."

"How big a suitcase was it?"

She held her hands to show me; it had been about two feet by one foot by seven inches. Bigger than he'd have needed to carry what he took — but maybe he'd thought he'd find more.

I asked her to tell me just what had happened that evening, starting at the time she phoned Mrs. Armin Robinson to call off the movie date.

She said, "That would have been somewhere around half past six; I'd just given Max his dinner but hadn't washed the dishes yet. I decided I'd better not go and leave Max alone. But then Armin said he'd come around and talk to Max and that I should go. And by the time I finished the dishes and got dressed, Armin was here. That would have been about half past seven, I guess.

"I didn't have to leave *right* away to get to the movie by eight—that's when our appointment was—so I stayed and talked with both of them, up in Max's room, for five or ten minutes, and then I left, and that must have been — oh, at least twenty minutes before eight, because I got to the show a minute or two ahead of time and lanthe — Mrs. Robinson, that is — got there just at eight."

"Did you lock the front door when you left?"

"No. I wondered whether I should and decided not to because it isn't a spring lock. I'd have had to lock it from the outside and take the key and that would have seemed funny, to lock Armin and Max in. The back door was locked though."

"You think the killer got in after you left, between then and eight o'clock?"

"He must have, unless he was hiding in the basement. He couldn't have been upstairs; there are only the two bedrooms, the hall and the bath, and I was in all of them. And he couldn't have been downstairs, because when I came down, ready to leave, I couldn't find my purse right away and had to look for it. I found it in the kitchen, but I'd looked everywhere else first."

I asked, "How are your husband's eyes? Any improvement?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not — yet. And I'm getting really worried, in spite of what the doctor says. Up to this morning, anyway, there'd been no improvement at all."

"This morning?"

"When I changed the bandage and bathed them. I'll have to do it again in about an hour. You won't have to talk to him longer than that, will you?"

"Probably not that long," I told her. "But maybe I'd better start now, in that case."

We went up the stairs. The door of one of the bedrooms was ajar, just as it must have been Friday evening. And through it I could see Max Easter, his eyes bandaged, sitting up in bed. Just as the killer must have seen him when he'd walked up these stairs after Louise Easter had left.

I stood in the doorway where the killer must have stood first to fire the shot that killed Armin Robinson, before he'd stepped closer to the bed and tossed down the revolver on the mattress.

Louise Easter had preceded me into the room and said, "Max, this is Mr. Hearn from the Homicide Department," and I was acknowledging the introduction but without thinking about it because I was looking around the room, seeing the chair Armin Robinson must have been sitting on, the one next to the bed, and the hole in the plaster above and behind that chair where the bullet had been dug out of the wall. And I turned and saw the place where the other bullet had been dug out. It was about a foot and a half up from the floor and about five feet from the doorway.

The bullet that Max Easter had fired. The one that had showed minute traces of blood, silk and feathers. Not blood, sweat and tears—but blood, silk and feathers.

I visualized the line of fire — Max sitting up in bed aiming the gun at a sound, then lowering the muzzle as he heard the killer's knee hit the floor. I tried to visualize the killer standing somewhere in that line of fire, then crouching or kneeling to get under the muzzle of the gun.

But Max Easter had said something to me and I had to think back to the sound of the words to get that he had asked me to sit down.

I said "Thanks" and crossed over to sit in the chair that Robinson had sat in. I looked toward the door. No, from that angle, Robinson would not have been able to see the head of the stairs. No matter how far ajar the door had been, he couldn't have seen the killer until the man had actually stepped into the room.

I looked from Max Easter to Louise Easter and then around the room, and I realized that I hadn't said anything for some time and that Easter couldn't tell what I was doing.

I said, "I'm just looking around, Mr. Easter, trying to visualize how things must have happened."

He smiled a bit wanly. He said, "Take your time. I've got lots of it. Louise, I'm going to get up a little while; I'm tired of the bed. Will you get my bathrobe?"

"Of course, Max, but—" She didn't go on with the protest, whatever it had been going to be. She got his bathrobe from the closet and held it while he slipped it on over his pajamas. He sat back down on the edge of the bed.

He asked, "Would you like a bottle of beer, Mr. Hearn?"

I opened my mouth to say that I would like one but that I never drank on duty. Then I realized that he wouldn't be able to get the beer, that Louise would have to go downstairs for it, and that just possibly he had that in mind, that he might want to say something to me privately.

So I said, "Sure, thanks."

But when Louise had gone downstairs to the refrigerator, I found I'd been wrong. Apparently Max Easter had nothing to say.

He stood up and said, "I think I'm going to try my wings, Mr. Heam. Please don't help me. Louise would have insisted if she'd stayed, but I want to learn to find my way alone. I'm just going to cross the room to that other chair."

He was feeling his way across the carpet toward the other side of the room — almost exactly toward the place where the plaster had been chipped out of the wall to extract the bullet he had fired. He said, "Might as well learn to do this. For all I know—" He didn't finish the sentence, but we both knew what he'd started to say.

His hand touched the wall, then groped for the chair. He wasn't going to touch it from where he stood so I said, "To your right, about two steps."

"Thanks." He moved that way and his hand found the back of the straight chair against the wall. He turned and sat down in it, and I noticed that he sat hard, as one does when the surface one sits on is lower than one had thought. As though a pillow might have been on the chair, but wasn't.

I'm not too bright, but I'm not too dumb. Pillow made me think of feathers. Blood, silk and feathers. A silk-covered chair pillow.

I had something, even if I didn't know what I had.

And just maybe, too, Max Easter's sense of direction, in walking for the chair, hadn't been as bad as it had seemed. He'd walked toward the place where the bullet had hit the wall. And if the chair was standing where he'd looked for it and if it had had a pillow on the seat the bullet would have gone through that pillow.

I didn't ask him if there'd been a silk pillow in that chair. I knew there had been.

I got a little scared.

Louise Easter was coming back up the stairs. Her heels clicked across the wood to the doorway and she came in with a tray that held three bottles and three glasses. She held the tray in front of me first and I took a glass and a bottle, but I wasn't thinking about beer.

I was thinking about blood. I knew now where the silk and feathers had come from.

I stood up and looked around me. I didn't see any blood, or anything that gave me an idea about blood, but I noticed something else unusual — the shade over the one window in the room. It was a double shade, very heavy, peculiarly constructed.

I got scareder. It must have shown in my voice when I asked about the shade.

Max answered it. He said, "Yes, I had that shade specially made, Mr. Hearn. I'm an amateur photographer; I use this room as my darkroom. Had the door fixed so it closes light-tight, too."

I counted back hours since—

I said, "Max"—without realizing that I was calling him by his first name — "will you take off that bandage?"

I'd put down the bottle and glass without having poured myself a drink. When something's about to break I want my hands free.

Max Easter reached up uncertainly for the bandage around his head. Louise Easter said, "Max, don't! The doctor —" and then her eyes met mine and she knew there wasn't any use saying any more.

Max stood up and took the bandage off. He blinked and rubbed his eyes with uncertain hands. He said, "I can see! It blurs, but I'm beginning to—"

Then his eyes must have blurred a little less, because his look fixed on his wife's face.

And he *did* begin to see.

And I made it as fast and as merciful — for Max Easter — as possible. I got her out of there, down to headquarters. And I took along the bottle that was labeled Boric Acid, but that contained the tetranic acid that had been keeping him blind.

We brought Lloyd Eldred in. He wouldn't talk until two of the boys went out to his house with a search warrant. They found the suitcase buried in his backyard and brought it in with them. Then he talked.

V

Winding up something like that takes time; I didn't get home until almost eight. But I'd remembered to phone Marge to hold dinner.

I was still feeling shaky when I got there. But Marge thought talking it out would be good for me, so I talked; I told her about it:

"Lloyd Eldred and Louise Easter were planning to run away together. That was part of it. Another part of it is that Lloyd had embezzled some money from Springfield Chemical. He says about four thousand. He couldn't make it up; he'd lost it gambling. And they were due for an audit in two weeks—a routine annual audit—so he'd have had to lam anyway, even if it hadn't been for the Louise Easter part.

"But he wanted money to lam with, a stake to give them a start somewhere. He'd been putting through fake vouchers like mad and mailing checks to himself under other names. He had to have Max out of the way to do it; Max helped on the regular bookkeeping, besides his payroll work, and would have spotted it. And Wednesday of this week — day after tomorrow — is the semimonthly payroll. And they pay the workmen, but not the white-collar workers, in cash. With Max out of the way he could have got his hands on that money. It would have been plenty — if he could get away with it.

"So he rigged a little booby trap over the acid vat so that when Max pulled the pad of time slips, the jug would fall into the acid. That got rid of Max—but it wouldn't have kept him away long enough if Louise hadn't cooperated. And that was simple. He gave her some dilute tetracycline from the plant to substitute for the boric she cleaned his eyes with several times a day. She did it in a darkened room; I don't mean she pulled the shades down secretly, just that she told her husband it was supposed to be done that way. And she'd always do it an hour or two before the doctor came each day so when he'd take the bandage off to check Max's eyes, they'd be about the same as they were the first time he'd examined them."

Marge looked at me Wide-eyed. "Then he *wasn't* really blind, George! But I just said that because—"

"Whatever you said it," I told her, "you were right. But wait; I haven't got near the payoff yet. The murder wasn't something that was planned; it just came up. You see, Armin Robinson had learned that Lloyd Eldred and Louise Easter were having a clandestine affair. He probably saw them somewhere — anyway, he learned it somehow. Of course he didn't know about the embezzlement or that they were planning to run away together. But he knew Max's wife was cheating on him — and Max was his best friend. That was what he'd been worrying about, whether to tell Max or not.

"And he'd made up his mind to tell Max that evening, when he was alone with him. Louise must have guessed it—from his attitude or the way he talked to her when he came she guessed that he knew something and was going to tell Max after she'd gone. She says she almost decided to stay home and break the date with Mrs. Robinson — and then realized that wouldn't stop things anyway, and that she might as well go and just hope Max wouldn't believe what Armin was going to tell him.

"Then, just as she was leaving, Lloyd Eldred came. He'd dropped around to pay a duty call on Max, and had brought him a present, something he knew Max would like and that would help him keep amused while he was blind. Something that he could play with in bed."

Marge saw it coming. The back of her hand went to her mouth. "You mean—"

"Yes," I said. "A kitten. Max is crazy about cats. They'd had one and it had been killed by a car only a week before. And Lloyd had to bring Max something he could enjoy without seeing — books and things like that were out, and you don't take flowers to a man. A kitten was the perfect answer."

"George, what *color* was it?"

I said, "Louise met him at the front door and told him Max was talking to Armin and what she thought Armin was going to say. And Lloyd told her to run along, that he'd take care of things. He didn't tell her how.

"So she left and Lloyd went on into the house. He was much more worried about it than Louise had been. He realized that if that much of the truth came out, there'd be a showdown and probably his embezzlements at the plant would come out too, and that his whole plans would be shot and that he'd have to lam without the payroll money he was waiting for and counting on.

"He put the kitten in his pocket and went to where he knew Max kept a gun and got it. And he saw the cotton gloves and put them on. He went up the stairs on tiptoe and stood outside the door listening. And when he heard Armin Robinson say 'Max, there's something that I hate to —' he stepped into the room. And shot Armin as Armin saw him and stood up. It's a good thing Armin didn't speak his name, or he'd have shot Max too."

"But why did he toss the gun on the bed?"

"He didn't want to take it away with him. And his first thought was simply to confuse things by leaving the gun. And leaving the kitten — it just happened that he'd got it in a way that it couldn't be traced to him — and walking out. You see, it wasn't a planned murder; he was ad libbing as he went along.

"He walked nearer to the bed and tossed the gun onto it and then took the kitten out of his pocket and was holding it by the scruff of the neck to toss it after the gun. And then he saw that Max had got the gun first grab, and was aiming it toward him, from only a couple of yards away. He dropped down on his knee to get under the shot as Max pulled the trigger. The muzzle of the gun went down as he dropped and Max shot. The bullet killed the cat — and buried itself in the wall after it'd gone through a silk pillow on the chair next to the wall.

"Then Max dropped the gun and it went onto the floor out of his reach—and the danger was over. Lloyd decided that his best bet was to make it look as nearly as possible like a burglary. He took the wallets and the watch, and a suitcase from the closet. To make it look like a burglary, he couldn't leave the kitten — burglars don't leave kittens. On his way to the closet he dropped the dead kitten on the chair, on the pillow that the bullet went through, to have his hands free. When he got the suitcase, he put kitten and pillow into it together because there was blood on the pillow.

"Meanwhile, Max hadn't moved — and he knew Max wouldn't dare to move until he heard the front door close. So he could take his time. He went through the downstairs and took the silverware and a few other little things. And left. Period."

Marge said, "George, *what color was that cat?*"

"Marge," I said, "I don't believe in intuition or clairvoyance. Or in coincidence — not *that* much coincidence. So I'm damned if I'm going to tell you, ever."

But I guess that was enough of an answer for her; she didn't ask again.