

John Sladek

By an unknown hand

What an artist dies with me! – NERO

Thackeray Phin took a sip of his iced papaya juice and looked around for a place to set the glass. The coffee table was heaped with anthropology journals, the desk held a clutter of games and puzzles, and the mantel was covered with pieces of agate and rock-crystal. The only remaining table bore a set of accidentally related objects: a desk-top computer, books on British snakes, pages of computation in Phin's snaky scrawl.

At last he made room on the mantel by removing a large round magnifying glass. This he held at arm's length, looking through it at Mrs Dawson.

"Interesting! I see that you've been travelling in the Galapagos Islands, that you are a keen player of *jai-alai*, that you suffer from dyslexia, and that you are my housekeeper."

Mrs Dawson turned on her vacuum cleaner by way of reply. Phin dropped into a chair near the window and used the magnifier to ignite a joss stick.

"Think of it: me, a detective! Mrs Dawson, I can't tell you how much it means to me. Even when I was a kid, I wanted to be a detective. While all the other kids planned careers in middle management, I went around *observing*: counting the steps to my door, comparing cigarette ash ... and now it's all paid off. Today I do some real sleuthing. In a deerstalker, I suppose. Wonder if Holmes ever did? Stalk a deer, I mean."

The housekeeper made no answer. Not only was she running the vacuum cleaner, she was also slightly deaf. Moreover, she tried as much as possible to ignore her mad Yank employer. A grown man, a philosophy professor, playing Sherlock Holmes like a little boy! And the advert he'd placed in the paper:

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER seeks worry. On sabbatical, this drop-out from a think tank, professional logician and amateur sleuth would like a challenge.

Today there had actually been a reply. The Anthony Moon Gallery had rung up to ask if he could see Mr Moon at eleven, on urgent business. Thackeray Phin now sat chortling over the prospect. A detection job in Bond Street.

"Or maybe I should wear spats, kid gloves and a buttonhole. Why not? You English always expect us Americans to overdo it. We talk too loud and overtip. We're all whooping Texans and Californians in loud shirts. Not true. It may surprise you to learn that I've seen Californians in *plain suits and ties* – recognisable, in fact, only by their hatbands." He hoisted spatless feet as her machine bore down on him. It was getting to be Bond Street time.

While he waited, Phin examined one of the Anthony Moon Gallery's pieces, a disturbing sculpture called *Kitchen Shrapnel*. It had been assembled from an old iron sink and an assortment of sharp-pointed implements. Every surface of the sink bristled with knives, scissors, razor blades, skewers, nails and needles – anything capable of rupturing flesh.

The sculpture was enclosed in a glass box, on which appeared a blood-red *SOLD* sticker and a title card: *KITCHEN SHRAPNEL. Assemblage, various metals. AARON WALLIS, 19–*. Phin could see his own gaunt face in the glass, apparently caught in a forest of blades. He could also see a rather short, smiling Italian coming up behind him.

"Mr Phin? I'm Anthony Moon. Sorry to have kept you waiting." The art dealer's smile was dazzling. Phin saw that he wasn't Italian after all; that was the effect of his moustache, his tan and his tailoring.

"That's all right. I've just been looking at – er – this."

The grin broadened. "A little embarrassing, isn't it? One of Aaron's early notions. He was at that time part of the group known as the Aggressives. Let's step into my office, shall we?"

Phin remembered the Aggressives. They had sprung up, issued their manifesto (“Art is gut-cutting crunch. Art chokes Hypocrisy on its own puke ...”) and dropped back into oblivion. Aaron Wallis alone had gone on to better things. His paintings and painted sculpture commanded record prices, and there were even rumours of an “Aaron Wallis Retrospective” exhibition at the Tate.

“It’s actually Aaron I’m worried about, Mr Phin,” said the dealer. He closed the door and offered Phin a chairlike block of upholstered foam rubber. “I have reason to believe his life is in danger. There have been threats.”

From a desk drawer he took two papers and passed them across, one at a time. The first typed message read: *YOU DON’T DESERVE TO GO ON LIVING YOU BLOODY MONSTER. I’LL PUT AN END TO YOUR ROTTEN LIFE.* The second line read: *YOU DIE ON FRIDAY AT 9 P.M.*

Phin looked up, blinking. “That’s this evening!”

“Yes. That’s when I want you to guard him.”

“What do the police make of all this?”

Anthony Moon sighed. “Aaron refuses to let anyone go to the police on his behalf. You see, he can’t make up his mind about these letters. On the one hand, he’d like to think they’re a joke – and he has friends capable of such jokes – but on the other hand, he’s frightened. I persuaded him to let me hire you, as a kind of compromise. He’ll have nothing to do with it directly, nothing at all. He literally doesn’t want to know.”

“I’m not much as bodyguard,” Phin said. “I’m no man of action.” At the moment, he was clearly having trouble maintaining his seat on the foam rubber chair, which was much too low for his long legs. “Why didn’t you try a security agency?”

Moon smoothed his moustache with two fingers. “Well, first of all, Aaron was against it: ‘No fuzz of any kind.’ Then the threatener seemed so damned confident, too. I mean, giving the time of the killing and all. If he’s that clever, I’d rather not have to depend on an ordinary security guard. I’ve checked up on you – your work with the Potomac Institute – so I know you’ll provide better than a plodding police mind.”

“Thanks.” Phin produced a small notebook and a pencil. “I should get a few police-type ‘particulars’, however. How were the threatening letters delivered?”

“They came in the post. The first about two weeks ago, the second on Monday.”

“Can you think of anyone who might want to kill Aaron Wallis?”

“Thousands.” Moon did a church-and-steeple with his fingers. “He’s a successful artist, so there are the envious. Probably a few cranks who are upset by his works – someone slashed one of his nudes at the Hayward last year. Then there’s Aaron’s personality: he’s an unsavoury person in many ways. He’s conceited. He’s more or less bisexual, and doesn’t care who knows it. That’s got him beaten once or twice.”

“Any broken affairs?”

“A few. The only notable one was Bob Price, a motorcycle boy. He was one of the Aggressives, too. Aaron couldn’t make up his mind whether to be an artist or Marlon Brando.

“Then came Polly. Polly Bradbury, the actress. Aaron just dropped Price and the leather scene like that. And Price took it badly. He made a lot of ugly threats at the time – that was six years ago – and he started saying that *Kitchen Shrapnel* wasn’t Aaron’s work at all, but his! He came to me about it, saying he could prove it was his work. I told him to go find a good solicitor and sue us. Nothing came of it, naturally.”

Phin leaned forward. The chair-thing bulged and quivered uneasily, but he clung on. “Speaking of solicitors, does Wallis have a will?”

“Yes, I persuaded him to draw one up. He leaves everything to Polly and to his brother Hector.”

“Tell me about Hector, then.”

Moon stroked his moustache. “He’s a spirit medium. I gather that he comes around quite a lot, trying to borrow money from Aaron. Otherwise he does some kind of clairvoyant act. I suppose he could be ready to get all the golden eggs at once.”

Phin stood up and folded his notebook. “Now about the actual bodyguarding ...?”

“I’ve persuaded Aaron to stay home this evening. All you’ll have to do is stand guard outside his flat. Here’s the address. I’ll meet you there in the lobby after lunch – say, three?”

The sleuth spent his lunchtime at home, contemplating the two threatening letters. The telephone interrupted.

"Mr Thackeray Phin? This is Polly Bradbury. See here, Mr Phin, I've just been talking to Tony Moon. I want you to stop this bodyguard nonsense at once."

"May I ask why?"

Miss Bradbury was clearly not used to being asked questions. "*Just leave Aaron alone.* Those letters have already made him sick with worry, and I'll not have him upset any further. Surely you can see that the letters are a joke?" There was a pause. "Are you there, Mr Phin?"

"Eh? Ah yes, excuse me, Miss Bradbury. I was just wondering why you really want to call off the watchdog. Surely it's better to upset Mr Wallis than to risk his life? Anyway, joke or not, a threat has been made. So you see, either I protect Mr Wallis, or the police will have to do it."

The earpiece clicked painfully, and the dialling tone began. It was replaced almost at once by the voice of an older woman, inquiring about double-glazing prices.

Aaron Wallis lived in Battersea, in a medium-rise block of no great character. Made of brick and brick-shaped, it squatted on concrete legs over a complex of amenities: car park, gardens, garages and – as at hospitals – a florist's. Thackeray Phin passed up the canopied steps to the glass entrance.

Everything about the enormous lobby was soft: thick carpets, fabric walls, deep plastic chairs, indirect lighting and canned music. Soft shades of green everywhere. Perhaps the only hardness was in the gaze of the commissionaire, but even he had been placed behind a large, padded Information desk. Phin managed to avoid his eye for a minute, until Moon arrived.

"You're here. Good." Moon steered him over to Information. "House phone, George."

Information shook his head. "Mr Wallis isn't here, Mr Moon. He said to tell you he'd be back sometime this evening. He didn't say where he'd be."

Moon looked annoyed. "Come on then, Phin. We'll set you on guard, anyhow. Maybe he'll come to his senses ..." He pulled Phin towards the lift.

"Luxury," said the sleuth. "Though I'm a little surprised at an artist's living here."

"Aaron's no ordinary artist, though. He says he likes the slight edge of bad taste. He works better when irritated."

"He works at home?"

"Yes. He has the whole eleventh floor to himself."

"Is that usual?"

"Not at all. There are twelve floors, the first eight being divided into four dwellings each, and the top four being immense single flats. Aaron's is Eleven. He'd have a magnificent view of the river if only – but that's another of his eccentricities. Aaron has a positive phobia about natural light. So much so that whenever he goes out, it's in sunglasses. And not content with drawing the curtains, he's had every window in his flat bricked up!"

"What?"

"It's true. He told me that it violated some fire law to do it, too, because there's an outside fire escape that's now inaccessible to him."

They stepped into the lift and Moon pressed the button for Eleven. The doors slid shut and motion dragged at Phin's stomach.

"Oh! I meant to show you something." Moon fished a folded pink paper from his pocket and handed it to the detective. It was a circular:

OZANAM PREDICTS!!
OZANAM PREDICTS!!
Clairvoyant – Spiritist – Telepathist

I, OZANAM, have a shattering prediction to make. My
own earthly brother, who is the artist AARON WALLIS,
will die within the week!

I fear this must come to pass even though I try with all
my aetheric powers to prevent it – Fate cannot be
cheated! My true visions are never wrong!

Trance Lecture & Guidance Session ... Saturday, 9
p.m. Spirit guidance by appointment.

Under a picture of the medium (a flabby businessman in heavy mascara, fingers to brow in contemplation) it said simply "OZANAM (Hector Wallis)".

"Wow! I think I might go into a trance myself," said Phin. "Did he send those notes or just cash in on them? I wonder."

"He sounds damned confident that Aaron's going to die," Moon drawled. "Ah, here we are."

They emerged from the lift into a hall decorated in the lobby's dead greens. The lift door faced a panelled oak door across the hall, near one end. At the other end was a glass door marked EMERGENCY EXIT and fastened with an aluminium bar. There was no furniture at all, nothing to look at but the oak door with its brass plate, engraved with an italic "H".

Phin began to pace. "I don't like this," he said. "Wallis could be across town being hacked to pieces ... Damn!"

Moon felt his moustache. "It's a long way till nine, though."

The detective paced the hall twice. He tried the oak door, which was locked. He examined the glass door and rattled its handle. A small placard informed him that this door was for fire or emergency only, that it could only be opened by lifting the bar, and that this would automatically set off an alarm. Beyond the glass were a set of dusty concrete steps.

"Where do these lead down to?"

The art dealer shrugged. "I think they come out behind the Information desk."

"And you say there's *another* fire escape outside?" "Right. I think this place was built by a man who dreaded fires. It also has an automatic sprinkler system and God knows what else – a private fire brigade in the basement?"

"Hmm. Is there any way we could get in to have a look round the flat?"

"Not really. Aaron has the only key. Oh, and Polly has one, though she doesn't live with him."

"No?"

"I don't know why. Theirs is a love-hate relationship, I guess. Aaron seems to enjoy humiliating her in public. For instance, a few weeks ago, he described to a large gathering some of her – ah – intimate physical flaws. It was cruelly witty. Any other woman would have –"

"Killed him? It sounds like everyone wants him dead."

Glancing at his watch, Moon said, "I'd better get back to the gallery. We're rushing *Kitchen Shrapnel* to its new owner, a collector in Rio. I'd better oversee the crating personally. It's delicate." He rang for the lift. "I'll drop by again from time to time, bring you some dinner and so forth. I hope you'll be able to maintain continuous surveillance that way."

Thackeray Phin passed the hours easily, reading a paper on queuing theory, doing callisthenics, and meditating. He of course allowed himself only a light trance, quickly broken by the slightest disturbance, and that leaning against the oak door.

At 8.12, the lift doors parted, and a slightly bizarre figure emerged. The large mirror lenses of his sunglasses gave him an insect expression, but otherwise he looked much like the famous symmetrical self-portrait, *Nora Aron*. He was a plump, pale man of just over average height, with fluffy brown hair to his shoulders. His costume was elaborate, as Phin had expected, a gold mesh shirt under a dark blue velvet suit, completed by blue patent shoes, white gloves, and a blue malacca cane with a gold handle.

"Aaron Wallis, I presume."

"I hope you're the bodyguard and not the – other."

Phin smiled. "I'm here to protect you. My name is Thackeray Phin."

"Oh." He unlocked the door. "Great. See you, then." He went in and started to close the door, when Phin's foot interrupted.

"Just a minute, Mr Wallis. I wonder if I might have a look around the place? I mean, the person who threatened you could be lurking in there –"

"Look. I don't need you to look around. There is no assassin. The whole thing is somebody's idea of a joke. If it'll make you feel better, I'll have a look myself, okay?"

"But that would defeat the whole –"

The other had already closed the door. After about a minute, he opened it again. "No one, okay? And here's a chair for you. Now you just relax, and don't bother me again. I'll be working." He handed out a wooden kitchen chair painted bright orange, and the door closed. Phin heard the click of the lock and the rattle of the safety chain. It was evident that Wallis wasn't as calm as he pretended.

Half an hour later, Moon returned with sandwiches and plastic cups of coffee. The after-dinner conversation turned, not unnaturally, to art, and they discussed the works of Wallis and his contemporaries. The art dealer made it clear that he thought Wallis the first artist of the age.

At ten o'clock he gathered up sandwich wrappings and cups, and rose to go. "It looks as if our threatener has chickened out," he said. "Still, I'd like you to keep watch until midnight. Just in case."

More callisthenics and meditation, until Moon returned at midnight. "One more hour?" he suggested.

At one o'clock they gave up. Moon looked worried. As they rode the lift down to the lobby, he said, "I can't understand it. I could have sworn those threats meant something. So much for premonitions."

Stepping into the lobby, the two saw someone having an argument with the commissionaire. The stranger, a fair-haired man in a leather motorcycle suit, gripped the edge of the desk and leaned over it. "But I was told –"

"Yes, and I was told to keep you out. Mr Wallis gave me specific orders to keep you away from here – especially today. So hop it, lad."

The stranger leaned over him and muttered something unpleasant.

"Price!" Moon exclaimed. "What are you doing-?"

Price turned and ran out of the entrance. A second later, a motorcycle started in the street and drove away.

"He knows he's been barred from here," said Moon. "He has been for months. And Aaron underlined the orders for today. I don't like the look of this. May I use the house phone, George?"

The commissionaire deferentially pushed the telephone a few inches across his desk. Moon dialled one-one and waited, rapping his gold lighter on the Information sign. "Doesn't answer. I wonder – say, there's Polly!"

A pretty, boyish girl in yellow trousers and sweater came through the entrance, clutching a long mahogany-brown coat about her shoulders.

"Polly!" Moon gestured with the receiver. "Polly, Aaron isn't answering his phone. And Price was just here – I'm worried."

"I'm just going up to see him now," she said.

"May we come with you?"

"We?" She looked at the detective. "I suppose you're Thackeray Phin. Look, why can't you two play cops and robbers somewhere else? I – oh, never mind. Perhaps a word from Aaron will convince you. Come on."

The lift was still waiting at ground level. When they reached the eleventh floor, the orange chair was still in place beside the oak-panelled door. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed. They rang the bell and, after a pause, Moon knocked. Finally Polly brought out her key.

It opened the door, but only an inch; it caught on the chain. "Aaron!" Polly called through the crack. "Come here and open the door. We can't get in! Aaron?"

Silence answered.

"We'd better break it in," said Moon. The two men threw their weight against the door once, and again. After half-a-dozen lunges, they made the chain pull its staple from the wall.

The trio passed through a short entry hall, then down three steps into a large sunken room.

Part was furnished, and the rest was used as a studio. Several half-finished and finished canvases stood against the walls, and a table had gone swaybacked under the weight of pots and jars, tins and tubes. A prepared canvas stood on an easel, but Aaron Wallis was not about to start work on it. He lay before it on the carpet, as if contemplating it from a low angle, his hands tucked behind his head. The sunglasses mirrored the canvas, emptiness in emptiness.

Because of the way he lay, the collar of his blue velvet jacket at first obscured the cause of death: a length of rubber tubing had been twisted and knotted around his neck.

"You two stand guard by the door," Phin said quickly. "I'm going to search the other rooms."

He found no intruder, however. "We'd better call the police."

"We'd better not touch anything," Moon cautioned. "I'll telephone them from the lobby."

Polly sat sideways on a chair and leaned over its back in an attitude of graceful despair. With the amateur detective as audience, Antigone mourned.

The police persuaded everyone to tell his story at least five times – even the commissioner. Inspector Gaylord seemed particularly dissatisfied with Phin's version.

"There are only three possibilities, Mr Phin. Either Aaron Wallis killed himself – which I cannot believe – or you killed him, or else you helped someone else kill him. Now I think you'd better go home and have a good think about this incredible story of yours. Maybe you can come up with some reason for me to believe it."

Phin left, sharing the lift with George, the commissioner. George looked a hundred years older. "It's horrible," he said. "Horrible. The worst of it is, them poor angel fish."

"Angel fish?"

"They belong to the Blenheims, in number ten. They're off in Bermuda for a few weeks, and Mr Wallis was supposed to care for their angel fish. Now I suppose it's up to me. Poor bleeding fish never harmed nobody. Better than some people."

It was mid-morning. Outside, the sun thawed London slightly. Phin decided to walk home, while mentally tabulating all the information he'd gleaned from the police:

1. The dead man was Aaron Wallis.
2. According to the medical evidence, he'd died of strangulation between eight and nine p.m.
3. Though it was barely possible that he committed suicide, the odds were enormous against it. Tying a rubber tube around one's neck isn't difficult – the hard part is restraining oneself from ripping it off again. Wallis would have had an easier time drowning himself in a washbasin.
4. The flat was completely windowless. Its only apertures were the oak door and a four-inch ventilation hole in the kitchen. The louvres of this vent would not pass anything thicker than a stick of chewing gum.
5. The emergency stairs behind the glass door had not been used, for three reasons: the alarm would have been set off; the commissioner would have seen anyone emerging at the bottom; finally, detectives had found a layer of dust on the steps, hand-rails and door-handles of the stairs – all undisturbed for months.
6. Wallis's neighbours could not help. Mr and Mrs Blenheim of the tenth floor were in Bermuda. Mr and Mrs Talbot of the twelfth belonged to a "First Nighter" Theatre Club. They had gone to the first night of a West End play, leaving at about seven p.m. and not returning until after one a.m.
7. Wallis's movements could be accounted for all evening, up to his death. He had been at various places – a friend's studio, a pub, a club – with people who knew him well. The commissioner had seen him come home at "about eight".

When he had listed these, Thackeray Phin realized that it was an impossible crime.

A man is killed inside a locked, watched room, he thought, adding a mental groan. The killer vanishes. The sleuth gives up and commits dishonourable suicide ... or else is arrested for the crime.

Sherlock Holmes wasn't going to be any help at all. Phin hurried home to read some locked-room mysteries. If Dr Fell could not cure this devil case, then perhaps Father Brown could exorcize it.

Bob Price threw down the wrench and wiped his hands. "The thing that gets me is, somebody tried to mess me about, last night. While I was at work, somebody telephoned my place. My landlady took down the message. It said that Buzz wanted to see me around one a.m."

"Buzz?"

"Aaron to you, Buzz to me. I see now it was a phoney. You saw what happened at the desk. But who sent the message?"

"Good question. Why did you think it was real?"

Price gazed around at the disassembled motorcycle. "Well, I thought maybe he'd had second thoughts about our sculpture. Thought maybe he wanted to split the money – I heard it had been sold."

"Kitchen Shrapnel?"

"Yeah. It was mine. I let Buzz enter it for me in a competition, and he put his name down on the entry form. I didn't much care then – we were all part of the group, names didn't matter – but then Buzz took the prize money and split! That was the last the group saw of him. But it *was* my work, and I can prove it."

"Really? How?"

"I made this inventory, see? Of everything I put into it. How many knives, pins, nails ... every bloody piece. Some of them don't show much, and so nobody but the bloke who made the thing could tell for sure. Here's the list." He peeled a tattered document from his wallet and gave it to Phin.

"Interesting. Can I have this photocopied, Bob?"

"Sure, keep it. I only kept it because I thought of suing him for half the money ... only I couldn't sue a mate ... and now ..."

Phin left him standing in the garage, surrounded by metal motorcycle bones. Price was using his fists to scrub black grease into both eyes.

Phin took Mrs Dawson to see Ozanam's performance. The medium turned out to be a thin, balding man, looking much more like his brother than the slick Svengali of the circular. He droned for ten minutes about life on the aetheric plane, mysteries of the ancients, astral projection, secret powers of the mind.

"How do you think he did it?" asked Mrs Dawson, already certain that Ozanam was the murderer. "Do you suppose he really can walk through walls?"

"The demonstration's beginning!" Phin whispered back.

Ozanam asked everyone who had a problem to write their question on a slip of paper. "The assistants will give you slips. When you've written, fold the slip and place it on the tray as it comes by."

When all folded slips had been collected, Ozanam selected one, pressed it, still folded, to his forehead, and with his eyes closed, endeavoured to "see" its message "with the third eye". When he had answered each question, he would unfold the slip and read it aloud, to prove himself right. He successfully "third-saw" Mrs Dawson's question about her sister in Australia, and promised that she would return rich.

"There must be something in it," she said, impressed.

Phin smiled. "Oh, there's something in it, all right. Fraud." He watched Ozanam, who had finished his performance and was now autographing copies of his book, *Meet the Aether!*

Later, the sleuth explained: "Ozanam or one of his aides simply adds one extra slip to the tray. Call it slip X. X has been prepared with a message he knows. Now he takes any genuine slip, A, from the tray. He holds this first slip to his head and 'sees' message X. Then he opens it and pretends to read out message X.

"At the same time, of course, he's getting a look at the real A. Then he takes B from the tray, holds it to his head, and 'sees' A. So he can go on forever, keeping one ahead. He ends with slip X."

"Still," said Mrs Dawson, "he must be a bit occult. How else could he walk through walls to kill people?"

Phin stayed out, prowling London most of the night. He talked with George and with Inspector Gaylord. Sunday morning found him strolling on the Embankment. The news hoardings offered a choice:

the murder, a cabinet crisis, or the *BOAC* cargo strike. He stopped before a paper depicting a pair of eyes, with the headline: *ARTIST'S MEDIUM BROTHER: DID THESE EYES FORESEE TRAGEDY?*

And suddenly he knew all; the last bit of answer was joined to the rest.

It was time to call all the suspects together. Phin decided to summon them to Hyde Park, to a rendezvous by the Serpentine.

Polly Bradbury reluctantly took the last deck-chair, between Anthony Moon and Bob Price. Next to Bob sat Inspector Gaylord, then Ozanam, and then two Japanese youths who were taking movies of the motionless water. Thackeray Phin stood shivering in the cold breeze.

Polly shivered, too. "I hope you have a damned good reason for calling us here, in this filthy weather."

"Oh, the best." Phin began to pace. "You see, the murderer is one of us in this very park! And I mean to name the name. First, let me recapitulate what seemed to happen.

"The only entrance to Wallis's flat was watched by me continuously from three p.m. to one a.m. During that time, only Aaron Wallis went in, and no one came out. Wallis searched and found no one lying in wait for him. Yet, within an hour, he was strangled to death. Moreover he died at the exact time mentioned in the two threatening letters – on the day predicted by his brother Hector."

Ozanam blushed. "I saw what I saw," he said. "Not with the physical eye, but –"

"Possibly. Anyway, I at first thought the killer must have escaped while Moon and I were down in the lobby, before we returned to find the body. But the elevator stayed down on the ground floor during that five minutes; the stairs were not used; and there were no windows. Escape was impossible."

The Japanese youths moved off to film a tree.

"That eliminates several ways in which Wallis could have been killed. The killer was not hiding in the flat ahead of time, to kill him and make his escape later. Nor are we at liberty to suppose that Wallis lay in the flat all the time, drugged or tied up, that the killer impersonated him coming in, killed him, and then made his escape.

"We move on to bizarre mechanical notions. A clockwork device flings out a loop of deadly rubber tubing at the stroke of nine. Or the victim is persuaded to stand in front of a hole in the wall through which the killer can garrotte him. Or else a secret panel or a priest-hole in which the killer hides. Needless to say, none of these is the answer.

"We are left with even more frivolous theories: Wallis is strangled somewhere else, staggers home and dies. He is hypnotized into throttling himself. A stranger from the fourth dimension walks through walls to kill him for some four-dimensional reasons of his own. Mysterious gases. Astral projection. Ghosts. The devil claiming painter Faust's soul."

"Can we get on with this?" Ozanam asked. Polly looked away and tapped her foot. Moon appeared to have fallen asleep.

"You're right." Phin stopped pacing and faced them. "I know that Aaron Wallis was alive and well until about eight o'clock, when he came home to that windowless flat of his. There the killer strangled him with that length of rubber tubing, within minutes of his arrival."

Polly said, "But you were watching the door all the time!"

"I was, yes. *But it was the door to a different locked room.*"

Phin took a pipe from his pocket, a calabash. "Since you all look blank, perhaps I'd better explain.

"First, the killer had to make certain advance preparations. He – or she – knew that the tenth-floor neighbours were away and that Wallis had their key. He also knew that the twelfth-floor neighbours would be out to the theatre on this night. He managed to get copies of the keys to Wallis's flat and to Flat Ten. He also had a false door-number plate made up – a false "eleven" – which he stuck over the real plate on the door of Flat Ten. The idea of course was to have a real and a false eleventh floor. He added little touches like the orange kitchen chair. You see, the Blenheims had a set of four such chairs – but if you go and have a look today, you'll find only three. The fourth is in Wallis's flat.

"I was then set to watch the disguised door of Flat Ten. Wallis came home to Flat Eleven and was strangled. Now came the elegant part." Phin hooked the calabash in the corner of his mouth. "The killer undressed Wallis and put on Wallis's clothes. With the aid of a wig, mirror sunglasses and white gloves – and one or two extras – it wasn't hard to fool me. I hadn't met the painter, after all.

"False Wallis then took the lift from the eleventh to the tenth floor and did his little act for me. I almost spoiled things by asking to look around inside. But False Wallis was a good actor, or actress, good enough to put me off. He gave me an orange chair to sit on.

"Then he closed and locked the door, pretending to chain it, and went straight through, out of the window to the fire escape with another chair. Naturally he couldn't get into the eleventh floor, so he climbed on past to the twelfth. After gently forcing one of the Talbots' windows, he passed straight through their flat and took the lift back to the eleventh floor. Now all he had to do was dress the corpse in its clothes again, and the deception was all but complete."

"Preposterous!" said Ozanam.

Price looked thoughtful. "Hey, how about rigor mortis? I mean, it must have been hard to dress and undress a stiff."

"Rigor wouldn't have set in much – the whole thing took less than half an hour. Anyway, he put Wallis's arms up the way we found them, to make it easier.

"Now when he had re-dressed his victim, the killer set the duplicate orange chair outside the door and locked up. First he put the chain on from outside. This takes a piece of string and some coat-hanger wire, but anyone can do it after a few minutes' practice. Finally he locked the door.

"Later on, after I'd left the tenth floor, he could put the Blenheims' kitchen chair back in their kitchen and remove the false number eleven from their door – stuck on with rubber cement, I imagine. He probably did this during the excitement following the discovery of the body. On his way to phone the police. In other words, the killer is Anthony Moon."

Moon appeared to be waking from a doze. "Eh? Ai?"

"I said, *you killed Aaron Wallis.*"

"Rubbish!" Moon sat up. "Why in the world should I want to kill him? To cut off my supply of golden eggs?"

Phin began pacing again. "I wondered about that myself, until I learned a little about your business. You aren't just a dealer, you're a collector. You collect Wallises. Many of his best works are in your hands.

"But Wallis seemed to be drying up. In fact, he hadn't done any large works for over a year. When the goose stops laying – *pâté de foie gras*. You knew that nothing drives up the prices of an artist's work like his sudden death. So you bought more and more of his stuff, practically cornering the market – and you laid plans.

"I should have suspected you the first time I saw you doing what you're doing now – feeling your moustache to see if it's still stuck on. I imagine the tan washes off, too. And at your house I'm sure we'll find the Wallis wig – or its ashes."

"That's your proof?" Moon smiled his indulgence.

"I have proof," said the sleuth quietly. "Only you could have decoyed me to the tenth floor. Easy, wasn't it? You pressed the button for eleven when we got on the lift. Then you shoved that circular at me, and, while I read it, you pressed for ten. Naturally the lift stopped at the lower floor first. And since I could plainly see the false door number, I suspected nothing."

"So you say." Moon looked more confident. A roar went up from the crowd at some Speakers' Corner rally. "You're like them, really. Plenty of noise, but nothing much to say."

"You've said too much," Phin retorted. "You told me Wallis would have a beautiful view of the river, if not for his blocked-up windows. You weren't just guessing; you'd seen the view from the tenth floor."

"More bluff. Anyone could tell from the location of the building what the view would be. You haven't a single scrap of real evidence."

"Because then you disposed of the false number plate and the two keys. It must have been unpleasant, sitting there for hours answering police questions with that damning evidence in your pocket. Even then you wouldn't just throw them off a bridge. You had to plan their disposal, as you planned the rest. You went to the gallery, where your men were crating *Kitchen Shrapnel* for shipment to Rio. While no one was about, you used epoxy cement to fasten that evidence to inconspicuous parts of the sculpture."

"Nonsense! That's too fantastic to bother answering." The art dealer turned his face away from Phin. The Speakers' Corner crowd cheered their chairman once again.

"You figured the only hard evidence against you would be in the hands of a private collector in Rio de Janeiro within a day, never to be seen again. No one who looked at it would notice an extra bit of metal or three. And the artist was safely dead. Right?"

"Wrong." Phin pointed the stem of his pipe at Bob Price. "The artist is right here. He knows exactly how the assemblage was made, and he has a complete written inventory of its components. It lists every nail and pin. But no brass number plate. No keys."

Moon started to speak, but the detective cut him off. "One more flaw in your plan. Thanks to the cargo handlers' strike, that sculpture isn't in Rio, it's at Heathrow. Shall we all go have a look at it now?"

Inspector Gaylord moved, but not fast enough. In almost a single movement Moon managed to upend his deck-chair over the policeman. In another eyeblink, he butted Phin into the Serpentine and was off over the nearest hill.

Everything seemed to conspire to help Moon escape. Phin had to thread his way through a children's football match. Several large dogs joined the romp. The inspector collided with a kite-flyer. The murderer made an unimpeded run to Speakers' Corner, vaulted over a barrier and merged into the crowd.

Thackeray Phin hung half out of the window, blowing soap bubbles with the calabash. He explained to Mrs Dawson that this was no frivolous game but an important experiment in surface tension. "Besides, it helps me concentrate. Not that there's much to concentrate on, since Moon's capture. A few ciphers to crack ... a game of postal Frobisher ..."

Mrs Dawson clucked. "How did they ever catch that Mr Anthony Moon, anyway?"

"Just his bad luck, really." Phin blew an enormous, wobbling globe. "Right after he joined the demonstration, a fracas broke out with the police. Moon got the worst of it. When they rounded him up, he was minus one tooth and one moustache."

"No better than he deserved, the vagabond!"

The sleuth did not answer. He puffed, blew a dream of bubbles and watched them float down towards the black iron spikes of the fences below.