

FROST IN INLAND DISTRICTS

ALTHOUGH he was a dentist by profession, Dave Dawber had family claims above the malice of the Hunt Club to threaten or subdue. That is to say, his folk were sheep farmers. Even in the days before a sheep could carry on its back the price of a refrigerator or a radio-cocktail-gram the Dawbers had had two trucks and sent their children wailing away to a school in the South Island where the fees were flatteringly ruinous. Somewhere off Kaikoura at the beginning of every term their lamentations would mingle at sea with those of the children of South Island farmers going north.

So it was that Dave often found himself invited to week-end parties deep in the tussocky hinterland that raves into ridges and ravines beyond the reach of Rural Delivery. The unbridged creeks would be stirred to mud by a succession of custom-built Bentleys which automatically elected to stay in low gear for hundreds of miles after the tar-sealing gave out. Overhead squadrons of topdressing planes made the air gay with their carolling. Sheep sighed and coughed away over the landscape, bowed down with the weight of more refrigerators, more Bentleys and more South Island culture.

On the occasion of which I am to tell, Dave Dawber's humble Hawk was exhausting its gasoline in the direction of Mangapatama, as it had been called at one time. Now it was called Lipton Lodge, and Dave was struck with the way life imitated art. For none of the Liptons (unlike the other farmers whose wives' departure and arrivals by air regularly filled the local newspapers) had ever been in a Lodge, or a Court, or a Manor, or a Grange. They did, however, bring home a car-load of detective novels every time they went to town in the summer so that they might

read through the period of swollen creeks and impassable roads.

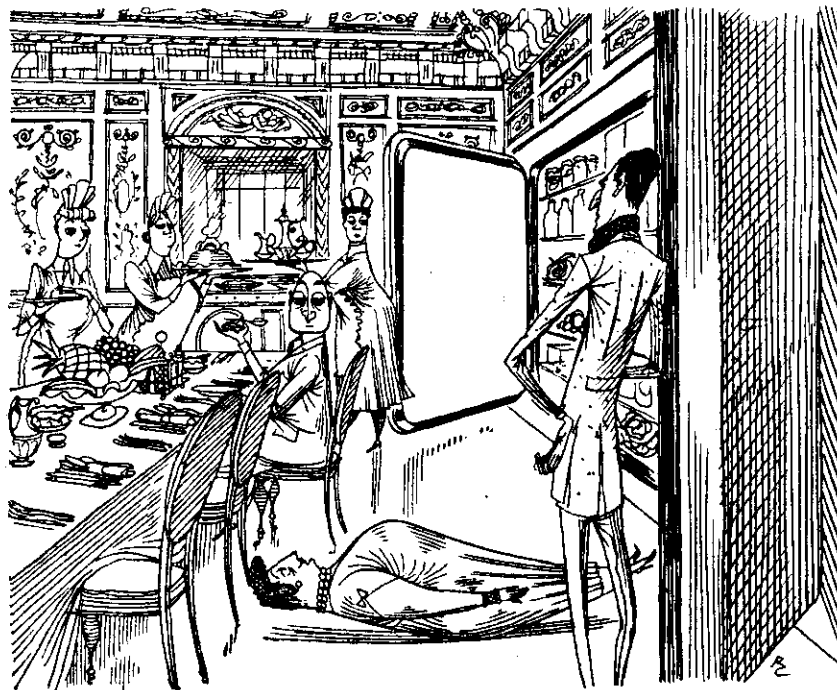
A Maori cowboy, hearing Dave's horn above the harmonies of Tex Merton, hurried out to swing wide the wrought iron gates. He pulled his forelock and murmured, "Welcome, Missa Dawber, suh." Dazedly, Dave flipped him a fiver, reflecting that the imitation of art came expensive.

A winding gravel drive bordered by box hedges brought Dave in view of the ivy-coloured house. Aged menials appeared, to take away his car and his luggage. When a bat floated out of the ivy and back again Dave knew there

by "AUGUSTUS"

was going to be a murder. Art is not mocked.

THERE were eight guests and a butler, Count Bachwartz had a smooth swarthy skin and a reputation as a duellist. His wife wore a black evening frock with a chromium dagger as ornament. Dr. Ellen Davis was stained to the armpits with the chemicals she carried everywhere in her valise. And Mrs. Pfeifer was, as everyone knew, a secret dipsomaniac. Carmonetta Bromley had studied necromancy and herbs in the



"Mrs. Lipton fell out on the floor with a chink"

Congo after leaving boarding school. None of these could conceivably have become the murderer.

There was Slade Spear, whose long steel fingers, grey stone eyes and faultless evening dress, marked him at once as a sleuth. That left only Mr. Wilkinson, a clergyman, whose meek manners and slight stammer betrayed the murderer, had there ever been any doubt about it. For the butler was an ex-convict, as Dave noted by the shaven head.

No, the only problem was, who was going to be murdered. It was at dinner that the frightful truth came home to Dave. They were all sitting there silently while Mrs. Lipton shrieked and crowded about income tax and the Coc-teau Party and tapped ash into her soup from a platinum holder. Dave looked up to see the pale blue eyes of Mr. Wilkinson fixed sadly upon him. The blood rushed to his head. He looked in terror down the table to where Slade Spear was alternately flicking cigarettes into his mouth from a silver case and stubbing them out on his plate. Slade Spear, it may be added, was impassive.

That night Dave had a nightmare from which he woke up screaming. Mr. Wilkinson had been pushing him into a bale of wool and clamping him down in the press. In a lather of relief Dave remembered that he was preserved from that particular fate by the laws of copyright.

Saturday wore to a close with the count and his wife coming sideways downstairs with their hands pressed to the wall behind them. When Dr. Ellen Davis stood up after lunch an empty phial fell from her lap and splintered on the parquet floor. Mrs. Pfeifer and Carmonetta Bromley reeked of absinthe and voodoo. Slade Spear sat impassively flicking cigarettes into his mouth and stubbing them out. But Mr. Wilkinson spent the day in his bedroom playing Handel on the Wurlitzer organ. Dave was petrified.

The thing that preyed on his mind now was Mr. Wilkinson's method. Not the motive, but the *motif* as it were. He would gaze morbidly around the house searching for its central feature. A great bed of Housemaid's Knee (*poliflora*) dominated the South Terrace but even to his excited fancy these seemed hardly lethal. The vast marble reproduction of the Venus B. de Mille which lunched on one hip at the turn of the stairs gripped his imagination for some time. He saw the title page: Dead Flat, and spent the night pondering how the statue was to be launched upon him.

An air of foreboding lapped the sleeping house. It seemed to be coming from the stables. But the next morning Dave discovered that the statue was plaster-of-paris and hollow.

SUNDAY wore towards a close. A lot of Sundays are worn in the country. On the surface it was just another country Sabbath. A speckled adder slid in and out under Carmonetta's door; Slade Spear flicked his lighted cigarette with deadly accuracy into a bowl of dahlias which blew up; towards four o'clock Mr. Wilkinson sinisterly changed to Bach.

Dave was washing his hands and reflecting that if something didn't happen soon Mr. Wilkinson would be seriously violating the Unity of Time. At that moment his eye fell with a thud on to the refrigerator for toothbrushes, and the motif was in his mind in a flash. Also the title: Stone Cold Dead. He shuddered.

He ran in a panic down to the library, looking for Slade Spear or at least a

(continued on next page)

(Solution to No. 653)

P	R	O	N	E		P	R	E	S	S	E	D
A	V	X	O	X	E							E
T	R	I	V	I	A	L		T	A	R	E	S
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			R	E	S	T	R	A	I	N	T	S
S	L	N	E									T
H	E	A	R	T	S		B	A	T	T	L	E
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L	E	G	I	T	I	M	A	T	E			F
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N	S	I	M	E		D	P	E				
G	R	E	A	S	E	D						E

Clues Across

- I am found in the centre of the labyrinth.
- Stay, men, for the general pardon.
- Becoming void.
- Found in reverse in a piece of rare porcelain.
- Give way to ill-temper.
- Wager after the first Greek letter of the whole.
- Roy and Ned are over there.
- Pymalion's of Gelatea came to life.
- Soak.
- Look before you do this.
- Glaring.
- Rest, but not repose.

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- "And do you now cull out a —? And do you now strew flowers in his way. That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood?" ("Julius Caesar," Act 1, Scene 1).
- The brides are apparently beheaded.
- "Under the wide and — sky, Dig the grave and let me lie" (R. L. Stevenson).
- Elemental spirit of the air.
- "Our revels now are —" ("The Tempest," Act 4, Scene 1).
- If upset, this continental river would rise.

No. 654 (Constructed by R.W.H.)

Clues Down

- Wine containing charity?
- Force with a piece of limp elastic
- Time not only stands still here, it stands on its head.
- "And flights of — sing thee to thy rest" ("Hamlet," Act 5, Scene 2).
- Religious novice.
- Her best drink?
- Found in every Easter-egg.
- With greed Dad is this.
- "The heartache, and the thousand — shocks That flesh is heir to" ("Hamlet," Act 3, Scene 1).
- Explicit.

