

hiding place
by . . . William Morrison

There are many ways of hiding a dangerous secret. But the deadliest way is not to conceal it at all.

William Morrison's versatility is just one of the many qualities which enable him to fulfill in superb fashion the literary conditions which science fantasy imposes on its most gifted practitioners. There are Morrison stories with the subdued flavor of mellow ale in nut-brown bottles, and others as exuberant as a swarm of golden bees. Now he has chosen to confer with a teacher of Latin, and the somber, restlessly pacing shade of Poe, and to evoke stark terror with a most compelling logic.

HE WALKED UP to the door and then, for three full minutes, he waited. When at last the door swung open, he was staring at the man for whom he had been looking. And the man knew.

The cool gray eyes examined him knowingly from behind the rimless glasses, and the thin lips smiled as if in recognition. "You're looking for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Burroughs."

"Well, you've found me. Come in here, where we can talk in suitable discomfort. I hope you're not used to luxury."

"I'm not."

The door closed behind them. Burroughs said, "I'd like to know your name, if you don't mind."

"Does it make a difference?"

"It might. You're unlike the others."

"I'm Walter Bales. And you're right about my being unlike them. I'm a chemist, not a detective."

Burroughs smiled and said, "This is going to be a pleasure." He gestured politely. "Sit down, Mr. Bales. The chairs aren't as weak as they look. Neither, by the way, am I."

Bales sat down. "I don't judge by appearances."

Burroughs smiled again. "I suppose they thought we could become rather chummy talking over old formulas together. Or do you say 'formulae'?"

"That may have been part of the idea. I much prefer 'formulas.' "

"Good. I'm glad you're no pedant. And perhaps they hoped we'd chat a bit about new formulas too?"

"That would be fine," said Bales. "It won't work, you know. Nothing will work."

Bales had a strong inclination to agree with him. But he said patiently, "You don't get the idea, Burroughs. *Something* is going to work. There's too much money involved, and the fact that you've held out as long as you have is driving them frantic. Sooner or later they're going to find out what you've been hiding."

"It'll be later, not sooner, Mr. Bales. And if it's enough later, I won't mind."

"If you don't cooperate, you won't get a cent, you know."

"Of course I know," said Burroughs.

"Whereas, if you're willing to talk now, you can name your own terms."

"I'm still satisfied to keep quiet." For the first time Bales paused to take a good look at the room. The furnishings were shoddy and worn, the rug threadbare. The table was as rickety as the chairs, and even the lamp shades were ragged. The man's clothes were fairly new, but of poor quality and unpressed. There was, obviously enough, no woman in his life. No second mouth to feed, no one to nag him about his poverty and urge him to accept the bribes he had been offered.

"You're going to lose your present job too, Burroughs. You realize that, don't you?"

"I've never been an idiot, Bales. I understand my situation."

"Not quite, or you'd be frightened." Bales said thoughtfully, "I'd like to ask an irrelevant question, if

you don't mind. Why did you become a school teacher?"

"Simple enough," said Burroughs. "To rest my mind."

"That's why you chose a dead language as your subject?"

"That's the idea, Bales. Can you think of anything more soothing than droning through Caesar's Commentaries with a classful of uninterested schoolboys, translating word by dull word the same boring descriptions that have made young victims squirm for one unhappy generation after another? Why, I can teach the stuff in my sleep. I very often do."

"You've never taught science?" asked Bales.

"Oh, no. That would stir up thoughts that had better remain dormant. I shouldn't have minded teaching Greek, though. But they don't go for Greek in high school."

"A scientist who knows Latin and Greek. You're an unusual scholar."

"You're the first one who's come after me who's been unusual enough to think so."

Bales paused. The man seemed perfectly self-possessed, perfectly confident of his own ability to keep his secret. He had a right to feel that way. How long had it been now? Twelve years—but at first, of course, no one had suspected.

Burroughs said, "I'm surprised it took so long to find me. A mere change of name shouldn't have baffled you. And what is it they say about criminals—that once a man has chosen a pattern of crime, he doesn't change it? You should have known I'd continue to teach."

"You forget that you left us a few false clues," said Bales. "And we didn't think you'd succeed in getting another job in a school system. How did you supply the necessary records?"

"There was no trouble. A colleague of mine was offered the job and turned it down. I forged his name and used his record. And the salary was so low that no one else applied."

Bales nodded. If you had nerve and acted as if there was nothing to be afraid of, you could get away with almost anything. And it had become clear that behind his prim schoolteacherish front, Burroughs had nerve. Nerve—and brains.

Bales put his hand into his pocket for his cigarettes. As he pulled the pack out, he became aware of a faint tapping sound that came from behind him. He swung around.

A Great Dane had come through the doorway from the next room. It was the dog's claws that had tapped on the floor.

Burroughs said pleasantly, "He's been watching you all the time, you know. When you put your hand in your pocket, he had no idea what you'd bring out."

"You have him well trained," said Bales.

"Naturally. I'm ready for a limited amount of violence."

"Limited?"

"A dog is no match for a group of reasonably intelligent and very determined men. I know that the men behind you, Bales, are extremely determined, even if their intelligence is limited. But Arthur, here, would give me a little time. Time to kill myself and keep from falling into your hands."

"We have no intention of using violence."

"You used it before."

"We did?" said Bales politely. "That must have been before I was called in."

"They searched my rooms and found nothing. So they waylaid me one evening and knocked me out."

"And again they found nothing?" said Bales. "I suppose they forgot to tell me."

"It was after that incident that I decided to change my residence." Bales said, "I'm sorry to hear of it. Obviously they had no idea of the kind of man you were. They should have appealed to your better feelings—"

"They did that too. They appealed to my love of money, my desire for fame, my patriotism. It didn't do them any good. You see, I knew what thy discovery could do."

"All it has done so far is blow up a laboratory."

"But it did that so easily. And it could just as easily blow up a world. That's what I can't allow, Bales. When the proper time comes, when people are different—"

Bales waited, but Burroughs didn't finish the sentence.

"You mean you have the secret written down some place?" asked Bales.

"I didn't say that."

"You talk of killing yourself to keep the secret from falling into our hands. And then you say that when the proper time comes, people will be able to use it. Even though you're dead, they'll be able to use it."

"There does seem to be a contradiction, doesn't there?" said Burroughs. "Stupid of me. But as I told you, I've been resting my mind. These days I say many stupid things."

"Not many. Just this one. You've admitted that the secret is easily accessible."

"Have I? Why don't you take it then?"

"We probably will," said Bales pleasantly. "You see, Burroughs, *we* can say and do stupid things, and in the long run they won't do us much harm. But all you have to do is make one slip, like this one—and you're finished."

Burroughs stared at him and then turned to look at the huge dog. The animal quivered with excitement, and Burroughs said soothingly, "Easy; Arthur. Nothing for you to do."

Then he turned back to Bales. "You're lucky."

"Not lucky. Just patient."

"No, you're lucky that I'm the kind of man I am. That I'm the kind of damn fool, as you'd put it, who'd give up millions in royalties just because I know that my discovery would kill off a good part of the human race. That I'm the kind of damn fool who won't order the dog to kill you, just because I hate bloodshed. Even though you're the only man who has drawn the conclusion that the secret is easily accessible."

"I won't be lucky until I've found it."

"You won't be lucky then either," said Burroughs. "Get out." Bales got out.

The man who was waiting for him at the corner said nothing. His look asked, "Well?"

"I've got a hunch, Ridley, that the thing can be found," said Bales. "A hunch?"

"A hunch. Nothing more." No use telling Ridley about the slip Burroughs had made. Nor about the way the man had thrown him out. In this business it didn't pay to tell everything you knew. When you told too much about other people, you also told too much about yourself.

Ridley said, "Is it in the apartment?"

"It can't be. When he got away from the other place, he didn't have a chance to take anything with him."

"I don't know. He didn't come home that time, but he might have found a way to manage."

"He didn't find any way," said Bales flatly.

"Well, he didn't have the thing on him."

"I know," said Bales. "You searched him."

Ridley said, with a certain amount of irritation, "Not in his apartment, not on his person. Where do you think it is? Put away in some locker room somewhere? Not after all these years. A safety deposit box? He'd have to pay the rent for it year after year, and we'd have traced it. Left with a friend? He had only one friend who was close to him, and we searched that one's home too. And besides, the man is dead now."

"So I've been told. I never heard how he died."

"Heart attack," said Ridley. "Don't worry, Bales, we had nothing to do with it. We didn't go around murdering."

"Good for you. By the way, how much do you yourself get when we find what we're looking for?"

"I get ten thousand," said Ridley. "Maybe an extra-special bonus if I'm very smart. You must get more. Maybe an even more extra-special bonus if *you* are smart. Still, it's out because there's no sense to it. This friend of his was another Latin teacher. He had nothing to do with science. And he was no man to keep secrets, either. We had him under our eyes for a couple of months, and he didn't even suspect it.

"Hell, even the kids he taught could read his mind. They could always figure out when he was going to spring a test, and other things like that. You don't leave an important secret with that kind of man."

"No, you don't. Still— How did he die, did you say?" asked Bales.

"Bad heart," said Ridley. "He was putting out a new edition of Julius Caesar—you know, that 'All Gaul is divided into three parts' stuff—and the excitement must have been too much for him. He keeled over just before he finished the last page."

"Nothing there, then. Still—all the same—and yet—"

Ridley nodded understandingly, the irritation in his voice stronger than ever. "Damn it, everything would have been different if we had been called in right away. But they never suspected. At first they thought that laboratory explosion was something ordinary—vapor fumes near an oxygen tank, or something like that. There were some details that didn't quite fit in with that theory, but you know how these investigators are. It was the easiest answer, and they took it. And when Burroughs quit, he gave them a sob story about losing his nerve. Two of the guys who worked with him had been killed and he said he was afraid of its happening to him. They didn't know he had found anything important."

He paused an instant, then went on, "They didn't catch on until almost ten years later. The hint came in an old progress report that had been filed away and forgotten. It wasn't much, but it was enough to start them looking for Burroughs again. And when he wasn't willing to talk—they knew."

"They'd been working in the laboratory on the same general problem all the time?" Bales asked.

"Full speed ahead. But no luck."

"Then there's nothing to do but keep watching him," said Bales.

But there was something else to do, and he knew it. No use telling it to Ridley though. Not when they were both thinking of a handsome bonus, and what one man got the other would undoubtedly lose.

Keeping an eye on Burroughs wouldn't get them anywhere. They could watch his comings and goings for the next week or month or year, and learn nothing. The thing to do was to use their brains.

Twelve years, and nobody else had hit on it in the laboratory. That meant that the discovery Burroughs had made was a lucky accident. It mightn't be made again for another hundred years—a thousand. And yet Burroughs had said people would eventually be able to use it—

It was Poe all over again, the "Purloined Letter" lying around in plain sight. Only, they weren't as simple-minded as Poe's detective had been. When they searched, they searched everything. Everything physical, that is. They hadn't been able to search Burrough's mind.

Bales was beginning to know something about that mind. Burroughs was not a man who cared much for physical comforts, and he wouldn't have chosen a physical hiding place, either. It would have to be something in plain *mental* sight.

Bales finally said with pretended weariness, "I don't think he intends to leave the house. I'm going down the street for a few drinks. Maybe I'll get an idea."

But he didn't want a drink. Whatever fictional detectives might say, he had never found that alcohol improved his powers of reasoning. Detectives and the people who wrote about them might drink at their work. Einstein and company didn't. All he needed was to get away from Ridley and have time to arrange his thoughts. The answer was in his grasp, it must be, or Burroughs wouldn't have considered putting the dog on him.

He went down the street into a cheap, almost deserted restaurant, and got himself a cup of coffee.

A mental hiding place. Now, what would that be?

Somebody else's brain? No good. A man died, the brain died, and the hiding place died too. Look at that Latin teacher. A book? That would be both physical and mental. But they wouldn't have overlooked that. After they had read that old progress report they must have gone through every piece of paper in Burroughs' place.

They'd have read every book, paid attention to every note scribbled in the margins. Besides, that was out because it wasn't in plain mental sight. People wouldn't be able, when the time came, to find it, to use it.

Three cups of coffee got him nowhere. He left the restaurant and began to walk the streets.

A mental hiding place. A mechanical brain? No, it didn't fit, any more than a human brain would have fitted. A phonograph record? A tape recording?

Bales' eyes narrowed. He'd have to check with Ridley about that.

But it was no good. The next day he didn't ask any direct questions, but he got Ridley talking, and it was plain that this couldn't be the answer. Besides, there was no indication that a record or a tape recording wouldn't rot before it was found and played.

They had decided not to go to the school authorities about the forged information that Burroughs had sent. There was nothing to be gained by getting him thrown out, so that he'd have to leave town. Better to keep him here, where he'd be under constant observation.

But Bales did go to the school to learn a few things.

Burroughs was a good teacher. He took his kids from the beginning of Julius Caesar to the middle of the book, and then shifted them to something tougher and more interesting. He wasn't the pally type, but the kids liked him anyway, and even learned some Latin. Forged data or not, the school board was getting its moneys worth.

Bales took a look at one of the textbooks, the pages of the first half grimy, where the kids had ploughed through them, those of the second half nice and clean. It was put out by some publishing company he had never heard of. The editor was Virgil K. Stuart, Head of the Latin Department at some jerkwater high school—

Excitement quickened through him. Wait a minute, that was the high school where Burroughs had taught. Vigil K. Stuart must have been his pal. But Virgil had never finished the text. What was it Ridley had said? He had dropped dead just before knocking off the last page. And yet here the thing was, neatly printed and already in use. Who had finished that last page? Burroughs?

Way back in his own high school days, Bales had gone through most of Caesar's Commentaries himself, and outside of Gaul being divided into three parts, he didn't remember a thing about it. What he remembered about Latin he could have put in a pig's eye.

But this was, you might say, a mental hiding place—a hiding place open to public view, too open to be suspected. He picked up a copy of the book and a Latin dictionary, and began to fight his way through Caesar's Gallic wars ...

Bales was back at the man's apartment once more. Burroughs said, "What do you want to talk about this time?"

"The strange customs of the Germanic tribes Caesar fought," said Bales. "The peculiar medicines they used."

Burroughs' breath came faster. He said, "You've found it."

"Sure I've found it. You expected it to be found some day, didn't you? And after the hint you gave me, it wasn't so hard."

Burroughs must have made some signal. The dog padded in and stood there looking at the two men.

"Put your dog at ease," said Bales. "We've got some talking to do."

"What about?" asked Burroughs.

"How clever you are. And how stupid I am. It *was* clever, Burroughs, to choose that kind of hiding place. You finished Stuart's book, didn't you?"

"It was a labor of friendship."

"It was more than that. It gave you the chance to insert your pretty little formula in Latin right in the middle of Caesar's Roman gobbledygook. You knew what a Latin class was like. You knew that all the kids did when they translated was use words."

"They never expect to make sense out of Caesar," said Burroughs.

"Of course not. So when the kids came to your formula, they could translate it word for word, and not expect to understand it any more than they understood most of what they read. But one thing I don't get. How about the teachers?"

"I was the only teacher."

"Sure of that?" asked Bales.

"Stuart would have used his own book, but he was dead. I put up the money to publish it, out of my own savings. That's why I could insert the formula without anyone's noticing or caring. I used the book in the other high school, and in this one. But I didn't advertise it, and no other Latin teacher ever heard of it."

"So there are copies only in two high schools."

"And a couple of warehouses," said Burroughs. "Some day they'll be sold as remainders."

"Aren't they still in use in the other high school?"

"No. When a new teacher comes in, he uses a text he's accustomed to. He doesn't like to get stuck with an edition which may suggest a meaning different from the one he gives the kids."

Bales nodded. "You could count on the teachers not reading it, and the kids not understanding it. Copies, however, are lying around. And in the future, somebody with nothing better to do will start reading out of idle curiosity. Or some teacher with no money to spare for the standard textbook may pick these up as a bargain, and the thing will be read. And, eventually, understood for what it is."

"That's what I counted on. I hoped the time would come after people knew how to use it. Not now. Have you spoken to anyone about what you've found?"

"No."

The dog seemed to tense.

Bales said sharply, "Don't be a fool. If anything happens to me, especially here, they'll know I found something. They'll trace my movements, learn that I spent time with your book and a dictionary, and they'll have it. If nothing happens to me, they won't learn a thing."

"I can't take a chance. I hate to do it, but I have to kill you. I'll have to get rid of those books even if I burn the school—"

"You'd only give yourself away. Don't panic, Burroughs. If conscience can make you give up millions of dollars, do you think it can't make me give up ten thousand and a bonus?"

"I don't know. I can't take a chance."

"You have to," said Bales. "You have to take a chance on my intelligence. Let me remind you that I'm a chemist. I realize how easy the stuff will be to make. And once it was made in quantity, there'd be no secret. Everybody would use it, and I wouldn't live any longer to enjoy that ten thousand than you'd live to enjoy your millions. It's for my own sake that I have to keep my mouth shut. And incidentally, I have a wife and kid. Does that mean anything to you?"

Burroughs said frozenly, "I don't know. I've seen men with wives and kids—"

"I want mine, to live. Goodbye, Burroughs. When the next guy comes around, don't talk. Don't open your mouth to say a thing."

The dog was still tense, but he made no move to stop Bales horn getting to the door. There Walter Bales paused. "One more thing," he said.

"What is it?"

"Damn you for leaving me with a secret like this. How do you think I'm going to sleep nights now—like *you*?"