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*Murder*  
*at the*  

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*Margin*

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# 1

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“NOW YOU CAN SEE why a parrot could be a passably good economist. Simply teach it to answer ‘supply and demand’ to every question!” Professor Henry Spearman chuckled as he helped his buxom wife Pidge settle onto the cushioned bench of the power launch. He had just explained to her the price of their taxicab with a supply and demand illustration. The six-dollar fare had taken them and their luggage from the Charlotte Amalie airport to the Red Hook landing on the other side of St. Thomas. Now they were on the last leg of their journey. The boat they had boarded would take them directly to St. John where soon Spearman and his wife would be enjoying dinner at Cinnamon Bay Plantation, the hotel which they had chosen for their holiday.

The flight they had taken that day from New York to the Virgin Islands had been a tiring one, prolonged by a layover in the sultry and crowded San Juan airport. The leisurely boat ride in the fresh sea air was going to be a welcome contrast to the tedium of air travel, Spearman anticipated.

Not that he was opposed to air travel. In fact, that was the way he usually went. In recent years time had become even more valuable to him, and he was often most aware

of this when he began to relax. As the boat began its twenty-minute journey across Pillsbury Sound, Spearman thought of how one's expectations often are not realized. When he decided to become a professor, it was partly in the belief that he would have plenty of time to pursue side interests of travel, philately and wide reading—activities that were not options for his father, whose business had required such long hours of attention. But now Henry Spearman's name had become prominent in the economics profession, and it was rare that the hours he put in did not exceed even those that his father had worked. As his reputation grew, the demand for his services grew with it, and his fees for public lectures, guest columns in newspapers, as well as the return on the sales of his books went up in direct proportion. All of this presented him with a paradox. With his increase in income he felt he could afford more leisure activities. At the same time vacations and other leisurely pursuits seemed like luxuries he could ill afford compared to the days when his income was lower. But the paradox was not puzzling to an economist who understood the doctrine of "opportunity cost." For each evening spent enjoying his stamp collection, Spearman gave up the opportunity to work on a lecture, article, or book that would bring him a large monetary return. On balance he decided to choose work over leisure. As his book sales and fees rose, the cost to him of that leisure time went up accordingly. Consequently vacations were rare, his stamp collection generally went unattended, and many extracurricular books remained neglected.

It had always been hard to explain to his family just what it was that took up so much of his time, a problem his father never faced. The elder Spearman had owned a tailor shop. Everyone knew the nature of his work. It was



performed in his shop, the product was tangible, and the rewards and disappointments were in the form of profits and losses.

But scholarly research was just the opposite. As an academician, Professor Spearman did much of his work in his head, or unobtrusively hidden away in a library carrel. His work product took the form of books and articles which did not directly pay his salary. That salary was at the top of the Harvard faculty pay scale and was not subject to the vicissitudes of the marketplace as had been his father's earnings.

Spearman also had not expected, when he first took his Ph.D., that preparing lectures for his students would be only a minor part of his duties. Harvard, like any major university, rewarded its faculty for their research, not their classroom performance. Still, Spearman took his teaching duties seriously. His classroom demeanor was not unlike the English tutors of an earlier era who genuinely believed everyone wanted to have their thought processes clarified or corrected. Spearman's impish probing had made him at once the delight and the dread of his students. Over the years the short, balding professor had become a familiar figure to many Harvard students who had been introduced to the rigors of economic thinking in his classes, and the professional accolade he most cherished was the distinguished teaching award conferred upon him by the students of the university. Yes, he thought to himself, his work had taken turns he could not have expected.

About quarter way across the sound, Spearman's reverie was interrupted by a Boston accent. "Professor Spearman, this is a pleasant surprise."

Both Professor Spearman and his wife looked up,

quite a way up in fact, to see the gaunt, bearded face of a Harvard colleague, the celebrated theologian Professor Matthew Dyke. Professor Spearman knew Dyke only slightly and feigned pleasure at seeing him. But actually he felt only chagrin in encountering another faculty member on what he had promised himself and his wife would be a get-away-from-it-all expedition.

Professor Spearman's expression belied his real sentiments as he said, "Pidge, you remember Professor Dyke, don't you?"

"How nice to see you," she said quietly, but she shared her husband's feelings about the intrusion.

Spearman's dismay at seeing Dyke was more than matched by Dyke's surprise in seeing Spearman. The economist had a reputation for living and breathing his subject matter and this made him an unlikely candidate, Dyke thought, for a Caribbean vacation.

"With all of the world's economic problems, I did not know you economists could take time off for vacations."

"You may not have heard," Professor Spearman smiled, "that we economists have just met and conveniently decided that the world's problems are ultimately spiritual and so we have agreed to go out of business. Now it's your turn to go to work."

Dyke laughed heartily as he folded his six-foot-seven frame into the seat across from them. Spearman's retort was characteristic. At the faculty club he was known for being quick on the draw. But in point of fact, Professor Spearman was only half jesting, for he had just come from the annual convention of the nation's economists in New York City. As president-elect of the economics association his chief duty had been to plan the meeting and

decide all the topics on which scholarly papers would be given. It had been the rigors of this task which led him to the reluctant conclusion that he needed a place to unwind.

Spearman explained all this to Dyke, who in turn pointed out that his visit to the Virgin Islands was prompted by both business and pleasure. He hoped that amidst the beauty of the famed resort at Cinnamon Bay there would be an opportunity to apply the concept of “contextual morality,” of which he was a leading exponent. Recent racial disturbances in the islands had persuaded Dyke that his ethical method might find some useful illustrations for a book he planned to write on race and morality.

Professor Dyke’s first book, *The Case for a New Morality*, had caused a stir when it first appeared because its conclusions seemed controversial coming from a seminary professor. Indeed the book had become a best-seller, its popularity stemming from the clever incorporation of the scholarly language of theology with the *au courant* language of the youth culture. This combination had proved to have great appeal. But Spearman knew that Dyke’s older colleagues in the divinity school considered him a pop theologian.

As Dyke began to expostulate on the research he planned to do, Spearman’s hopes for a restful boat trip across Pillsbury Sound began to sink. He was therefore relieved when a steward announced that iced tea would be available during the voyage for one dollar a glass. Professor Spearman made one of those rapid, almost unconscious computations that was second nature to most people but in reality hid a complex series of intermediate

steps. With eyebrows raised above his broad spectacles, he examined the tray of tall coolers, each glass garnished with a wedge of fresh lime.

“I’ll have a glass,” Spearman said. Pidge joined him.

The ratiocination that had led Spearman to this deceptively simple decision to buy a glass of tea had actually involved the following lightning calculation: the probable satisfaction expected from the glass of iced tea being offered exceeded the pleasure from any alternative purchase at that price.

Until Spearman had noticed the lime accompanying the tea, he had been on the margin: he placed the same value on a dollar as he did on a glass of iced tea served without lime. It was the wedge of lime that tipped the scale in favor of purchase.

The man on the street could take such processes for granted and go on to other concerns. The psychologist might pause to notice these mental operations and remark upon the wonder of the human brain. But only the economist could claim to practice a science constructed almost entirely on the premise of such reasoning. Spearman still remembered the excitement he felt when, while a graduate student at Columbia, he discovered the quotation from Alfred North Whitehead which he had been quoting to his students ever since: “Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them.” The fledgling economist had found satisfaction in the image this gave him of a highly advanced civilization of consumers and producers, the domain of the economist.

They settled back with their tea and Professor Dyke resumed his monologue. At this point Spearman did not

even pretend interest in the conversation. He preferred to devote his attention to the scenery: the cays, the sky, the water brought together into a scene of such unreal beauty it was unexpectedly similar to one of those amateurish landscapes done by beginning artists. At times like this Spearman was relieved at the presence of his wife Pidge. One of the benefits of his marriage was her ability to hold up their end of a conversation in which he had lost interest. She had been raised in a professor's home, and pleasantries of the type that she exchanged with Dyke were second nature to her. As Spearman surveyed the tropical vista, over the drone of the boat he could hear his wife's 'How interestings' and 'You don't says' interjected at appropriate moments to fuel Dyke's monologue.

The boat neared the hotel's dock. Conversation began to trail off as the passengers anticipated the transition from the harried pace of travel to the pleasant role of guest at one of the world's great hotels. The captain of the trawler skillfully edged his craft alongside the pier while one of the crew tossed lines to a waiting youth who secured the boat. An aluminum gangplank was glided to the dock and a perky attendant, carrying a clipboard, cheerfully came aboard to greet the guests.

She introduced herself, expressed a welcome to Cinnamon Bay, and read a list of the expected arrivals. Each of the eight passengers on the boat, including the Spearman and Dyke, were quickly matched with entries on the list, and Spearman made an admiring mental note of the hotel's efficiency. He knew that even seasoned travelers breathed a sigh of relief upon learning that they were expected at their destination and their reservations were in order. After helping his wife down the gangplank, Spear-

man walked with her towards the registration desk along with some of the other arriving guests.

Professor Dyke stayed behind momentarily to chat with the boat's steward but called out to his Harvard colleague, "I hope you find the peaceful interlude you came for."

"He will," replied the economist's spouse, "I'll see to that."