

Collector's Item

The bet itself was simple enough, but the stakes were insane

BY ROALD DAHL

IT WAS getting on toward six o'clock so I thought I'd buy myself a beer and go out and sit in a deck chair by the swimming pool and have a little evening sun.

I went to the bar and got the beer and carried it outside and wandered down the garden toward the pool.

It was a fine garden with lawns and beds of azaleas and tall coconut palms, and the wind was blowing strongly through the tops of the palm trees making the leaves hiss and crackle as though they were on fire. I could see the clusters of big brown nuts hanging down underneath the leaves.

There were plenty of deck chairs around the swimming pool and there were white tables and huge brightly colored umbrellas and sunburned men and women sitting around in bathing suits. In the pool itself there were three or four girls and about a dozen boys, all splashing about and making a lot of noise and throwing a large rubber ball at one another.

I stood watching them. The girls were English girls from the hotel. The boys I didn't know about, but they sounded American and I thought that they were probably naval cadets who'd come ashore from the U.S. naval training vessel which had arrived in harbor that morning.

I went over and sat down under a yellow umbrella where there were four empty seats. I poured my beer carefully, wiped the froth off my upper lip, settled back comfortably and lighted a cigarette.

It was very pleasant sitting there in the sunshine with my beer and my cigarette. It was pleasant to sit and watch the bathers splashing about in the water.

The American sailors were getting on nicely with the English girls. They'd reached the stage where they were diving under the water and tipping them up by their legs.

Just then I noticed a small, oldish man walking briskly around the edge of the pool. He was immaculately dressed in a white suit and he walked very quickly with little bouncing strides, pushing himself high up onto his toes with each step. He was one of those people who have springs in their legs. He had on a cream-colored Panama hat and he came bouncing along the side of the pool toward where I was sitting, looking at the chairs as he went.

He stopped beside me and he smiled and his teeth were white and slightly uneven and obviously expensive. His skin was rather dark and I figured that he was some sort of a South American.

"Excuse, pleess, but may I sit here?"

"Certainly," I said. "Go ahead."

He bobbed around to the back of the chair and inspected it to see that it was safe, then he sat down and crossed his legs. His white buckskin shoes had little holes punched all over them for ventilation.

"A fine evening," he said. "They are all evenings fine here in Jamaica."

"Yes," I answered. I didn't want to talk with him.

"Ha!" he said. "Who are all dese?" He pointed at the bathers. "Dese is no hotel people." He was a talker all right.

"I think they're American sailors," I told him. "They're Americans who are learning to be sailors."

"Americans? So dat's it. Well, I hate Americans. Dey make too much noise. You are not American, no?"

"No," I said. "I am not."

Suddenly one of the American cadets was standing in front of us. He was dripping wet from the pool and one of the English girls was standing there with him.

"Are these chairs taken?" he said.

"No," I answered.

"Mind if we sit down?"

"Go ahead."

"Thanks," he said. He had a towel in his hand and when he sat down he unrolled it and produced a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He offered the cigarettes to the girl and she refused; then he offered them to me and I took one. The little man said, "Tank you, no, but I tink I have a cigar." He pulled out a crocodile case and got himself a cigar, then he produced a knife which had a small scissors in it and he snipped the end off the cigar.

"Here, let me give you a light." The American boy held up his lighter.

"Dat will not work in dis wind."

"Sure, it'll work. It always works."

THE little man removed his unlighted cigar from his mouth, cocked his head on one side and looked at the boy.

"All-ways?" he said slowly.

"Sure, it never fails. Not with me anyway."

"No?" The little man's head was still cocked over on one side and he was still watching the boy. "Well, well, so you say dis famous lighter it never fails. Iss dat you say?"

"Sure," said the boy. "That's right." He was about nineteen or twenty with a long freckled face and a rather sharp birdlike nose. His chest was not very sunburned and there were freckles on that, too, but he was nicely built and he looked well enough in his bathing shorts. He was holding the lighter in his right hand, ready to flip the wheel. "It never fails," he said. "Come on."

"One momint, pleess." The little man raised the hand which held the cigar. "Now juss one momint." He had a curiously soft, toneless voice and he kept looking at the boy all the time.

"Shall not perhaps make a little bet on dat?" He smiled at the boy. "Shall we not make a little bet on whether your lighter lights?"

"Sure, I'll bet," the boy said. "Why not?"

"You like to bet?"

"Sure, I'll always bet."

The little man paused and examined his cigar. He raised his eyebrows and he frowned and he kept on smiling. I suddenly found that I was leaning forward in my chair, listening rather tensely (Continued on page 59)

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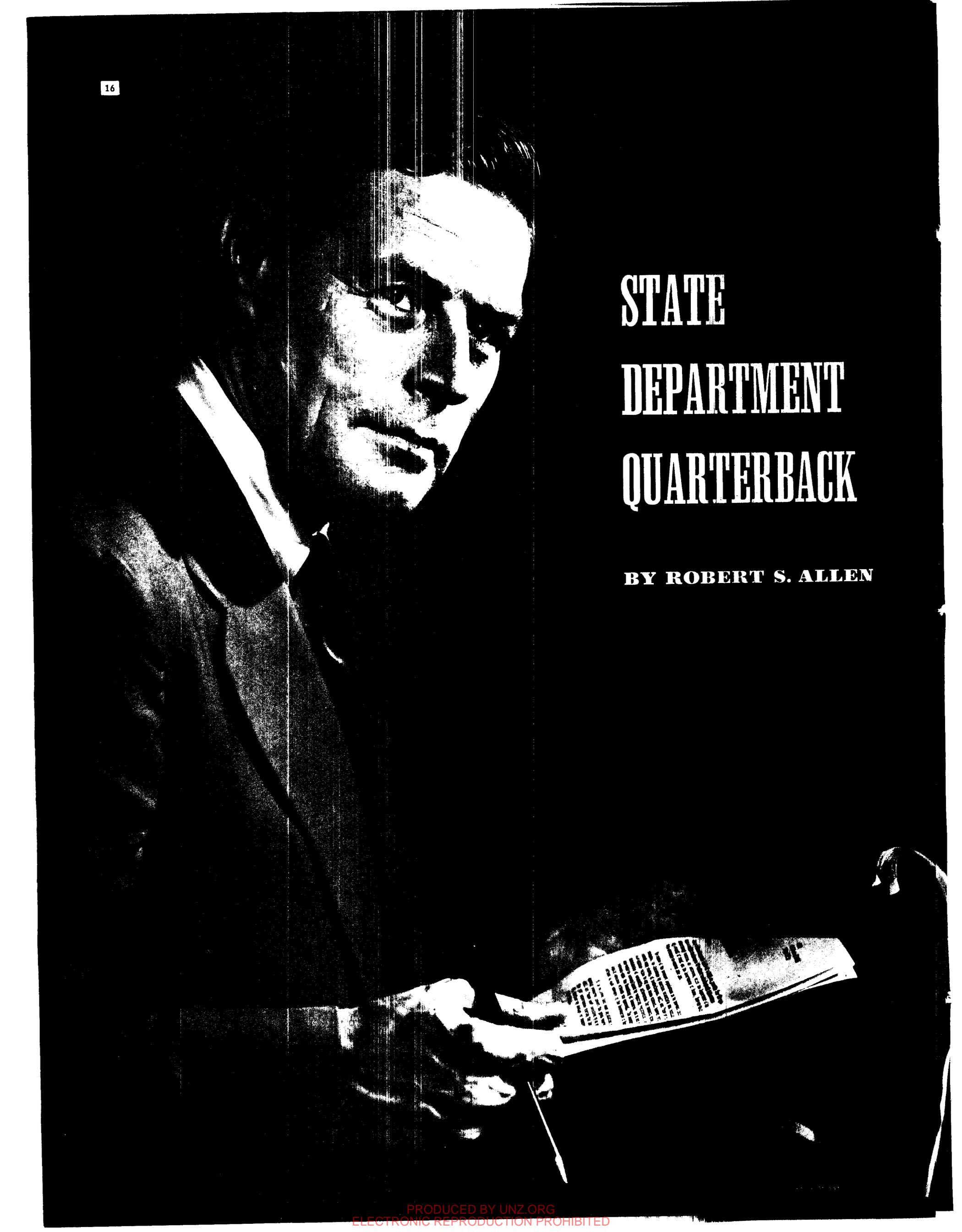
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No one said anything. The boy kept his eyes on the lighter. The little man held the chopper up in the air and he too was watching the lighter. "Three!"

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID BERGER





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