Some people thought that Michael Matheson was rather young for a Professor of Philosophy. But his appointment had raised no eyebrows in informed circles. He'd always been a fairly dynamic, progressive kind of person, constantly brimming with ideas. But it was his enthusiasm and personality rather than any great originality as a philosopher that had ensured his success as an academic. Not that he wasn't bright. All through school and university he'd hovered around the top of the class — but he knew as well as anyone that during the course of his life, although he might publish a few books he'd never come up with an immortal work that would set him on the shelf alongside Plato, Descartes, Kant and Russell.

As a Professor, Michael Matheson was as much occupied with the running of the university as he was with the teaching of his subject. If he'd ever thought about it he would have decided that he found the business of administration and internal politicking that he was involved in quite as fascinating as the moral philosophy that he taught to his students. Perhaps it was the element of surprise that thrilled him. At university meetings he was never sure how easily he would be able to sway the opinions of others — in fact he was rather envious of John Bennet, the Professor of Law, who always seemed to know how a meeting would go, and by manipulating emotions and the proper procedures he never failed to gain support for his ideas and funds for the Law Department. Michael Matheson had decided that one day soon he would be as clever as John Bennet in meetings. He would know what to think and do before everyone else.

That's how it was with his teaching. He'd been doing that for so long that he really did know what to think and do well before everyone else, as he went with his students through the series of time-tried moral problems that teachers of philosophy use. He would pose a problem and before any of his students could speak he knew exactly how to cope with the responses that they would give. There was a finite number of responses and he could counter each one with "yes but what if," sending each student back into a flurry of thought. That was his job really, to make them think, not tell them what to think. Of course when it came to moral problems Michael Matheson always knew what to think.

So there he was, at the age of thirty-five, well-liked by his colleagues and adored by his students — with the possible exception of a few serious
and spotty young men. He had a lovely house where he shared matrimonial bliss with his wife Yvonne — who liked doing things for charity — and knew paternal joy with his daughter Debrah who was learning to play the violin. Apart from her teeth, Debrah, at seven, was quite beautiful, and Michael loved her as much as he did his wife. Indeed there were times when he suspected he loved his daughter more than he did his wife and that made him uneasy. So he would treat it as a philosophical problem to be tossed around inside his head for hours. Invariably he would conclude that he loved both women in his life equally — but differently. But then, as far as moral problems were concerned, Michael Matheson always knew what to think.

He was a very regular man. Every morning at eight he would kiss both women in his life and leave the house. He drove to work and occupied himself fully until ten thirty when Mrs Bowen would bring him a cup of coffee and two gingernut biscuits. The fact that Mrs Bowen never slopped coffee into the saucer, rendering the biscuits that nestled there a trifle soggy, was a measure of how good a secretary she was, and why Professor Matheson thought highly of her.

As he took the coffee cup from her he said thank you, and this was usually enough to send her on her way smiling and silent. But instead she stayed and spoke. A young man, serious looking, long-haired and spotty, had left this for him. Matheson took the untidy brown-paper parcel and said thank you again. This time Mrs Bowen left on cue, smiling and silent again. As he sipped his coffee and nibbled at his now soggy gingernut biscuit he eyed the parcel. He didn’t know what it was so he opened it. It came apart easily — it had been badly tied up. The child’s school-bag that he found inside puzzled him for only the merest split-second as his mind cleared and raced and his fingers tore at the fastener that held the bag shut. Inside he found Debrah’s name — he’d seen her write it there himself — and the crude note made up of words cut from newspapers and stuck on a sheet of ordinary notepaper. The message was clear enough — his wife and daughter had been kidnapped — he was to await a telephone call at one o’clock — the code name Albatross appeared at the bottom.

For the next two hours Michael Matheson’s mind worked as it had never done before. The mind that had grappled with so many philosophical and moral problems for so many years that they had become as simple as crossword puzzles was suddenly confronted with a real problem and the novelty was fascinating. But it was also infuriating, his trained mind that had coped so deftly with all those hypothetical problems was suddenly useless because he could not look at the case dispassionately, he was far too emotionally involved to come up with the
merest glimmer of a solution. He couldn't go to the police for they were far too clumsy, he couldn't allow the responsibility for his wife and daughter to fall onto someone else and he still felt that he might be able to do something himself. Why, he asked himself, why me? I'm not rich. I could give them ten thousand dollars perhaps, but no more than that. There are lots of men in my position who could pay far more.

The phone rang exactly on one o'clock, it was Albatross and Matheson was surprised to find himself so calm. His instructions were to carry on normally throughout the day and to go home at the usual time, he would be telephoned again soon after he got home. There was just the one other thing, the voice said, the note. Would he please set fire to it? He could hold it over the ashtray on his desk, yes the big blue ashtray. Matheson felt extremely uneasy, he felt as though whoever was talking to him was sitting opposite his desk and not on the other end of the telephone line. Good, said the voice, now would he take the ashes to the window and sprinkle them outside. Matheson was powerless and did exactly as he was told. He got back to the phone and began to explain that he did not have much money but whatever they wanted he would try to get for them, his wife and child must not be harmed. He had not told anyone. No, it wasn't money the voice said, rather coldly and evenly. The voice continued, Mr Matheson had to do something special if he wanted his family returned, he must kill someone, in fact he must kill the Professor of Law, Mr John Bennet.

Professor Matheson by now was utterly confused and could only say things like when, where, why. He seemed to have no control over his faculties at all. He would be given further details later, the voice said, he would be phoned at home that evening. The line went dead.

Matheson tried to do as he had been told and behave normally for the rest of the afternoon. He had to give a lecture between three and four and he did. But he had no idea what he was saying for that hour, he was like a machine, like a loudspeaker amplifying the neatly typed notes on the lectern in front of him.

After the lecture alone in his office he began tackling the problem once more, and then suddenly he realized something very strange. He realized that the problem he was now confronted with in reality was the same problem that he had confronted his students with, hypothetically, a week earlier. That is, everyone agrees that it is morally wrong to kill, but what if you found yourself in a position where you could kill a mass-murderer? Would that be morally wrong, because by killing a mass-murderer one saves the lives of his future victims? In fact if you did not kill the mass-murderer would you not be responsible to a degree for the deaths of his subsequent victims? Similarly, thought Michael Matheson,
I know it is wrong for me to kill John Bennet, but if I don’t then I will be responsible for the death of two people, my wife and my daughter. Suddenly the problem was solved and every moral fibre in his body was resolved to kill John Bennet, the Professor of Law.

It was time to go home. Despite his resolution Matheson was not happy at the prospect of returning to his empty house. He was so used to finding Yvonne and Debrah there when he got home. He picked up Debrah’s school-bag and made his way wearily to his car. It was a dreadful evening, dark, cold and rainy, he hated driving in such conditions at the best of times. A bus pulled out suddenly in front of him, he swore and drove on even more carefully.

Walking from the garage to the house he noticed that the kitchen light was on. He thought about that and realized that it had probably been switched on during the struggle that morning. He felt the pain well inside him as he began to imagine the scene. Inside the house, in the dark, he was afraid. He didn’t want to go into the kitchen because of what he might find there — signs of a struggle, blood perhaps. But he went through anyway and found Yvonne busily putting the finishing touches to their evening meal. Had he had a nice day she asked. Matheson said nothing for a while, his mind was racing again and getting nowhere. He asked where Debrah was. Over in the study watching television, as usual, said Yvonne, but where did he get that — her school bag. There was no reply from her husband, he just stood there, silently transfixed. Oh she would be so pleased to have it back, she’d lost it on the bus that morning, thought some serious-looking and spotty student had made off with it, but wasn’t sure. Oh she was so upset when she got home. She would be pleased to have her bag back. Matheson told his wife that he would take the bag to Debrah. She didn’t reply because she was so busy with the cooking.

Debrah was so pleased to have her bag again. She quickly checked to see that everything was there then threw it into the corner and resumed her viewing of the cartoon on television. Her father was slumped in the chair behind her. He felt and looked absolutely exhausted, but Debrah didn’t notice. Matheson tried to remember the agonies that he had suffered earlier that day but they were already dim and vague memories.

In the distance he heard the telephone ringing and then Yvonne answering. Her voice was becoming more concerned, more serious as she spoke. He heard the receiver being cradled and soon after she came in. Something terrible had happened. That was Brenda, she said, John Bennet’s wife. He’s dead, Michael, run over by a bus in Queen Street tonight.

Michael Matheson didn’t know what to think.