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A BLACK MAGIC BOOK OF TERROR

THE HAUNTED DANCERS

(original title: The Tandem Book of Ghost Stories)

edited by Charles Birkin

MURDER . . . MENACE . . . HORROR . . . DEATH . . .
THAT IS THE CURSE OF THE HAUNTED DANCERS

Here is a volume of Black Magic masterpieces certain to chill your blood and set you trembling with fear.

Beware the nameless terrors of the evil which awaits you on every page of this extraordinary excursion into the supernatural. But don't try to escape, for you can't—once you have fallen under the spell of

BLACK MAGIC

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INTRODUCTION

Ghost stories, maybe more than any other form of fiction, have a widely varying impact on the individual reader, for some like economical understatement, while others enjoy their dread with all the stops full out! A situation which one man or woman might find terrifying could well leave a friend comparatively unmoved—and vice versa. There are of course a few classics which cannot fail to grip all who read them, such as the Henry James masterpiece, *The Turn of the Screw*.

Belief in ghosts and phantoms is age old. It exists in all countries and is found among all peoples both sophisticated and primitive. The supernatural holds court from China to the Congo, from Melbourne to Tokyo. In common with witchcraft and sorcery, of which indeed it is all too often a part, the uncanny has countless devotees. "You look as if you have seen a ghost!" How frequently have those words been uttered to express adequate concern for a face that has been drained of colour by shock and dismay?

Much of the reader's alarm can lie in the march of weird events and much, also, can be attributed to the sharpness of the writing, where the emphasis is on *no escape*—and the keynote of which is being trapped and cornered—and where the menacingly incredible is made cunningly to seem within the bounds of credence. The stories included in this collection range from delicate fantasy, progressing through stark terror to ultimate tragedy. They should be read by the light of a lamp, preferably when one is alone and beside a fire, and shortly before going to bed.

The titles and, indeed, the cautionary warnings of some popular anthologies are not intended to be taken too seriously, for should one be reluctant to be emotionally disturbed one does not buy a book of strange stories. If one is apprehensive it is better sense that such volumes be left on the shelf. If a good night's rest is the aim then a sedative should be swallowed to ward off insomnia, and less astringent books should be opened.

More daring souls like to experience at the very least a sense of unease and to feel the *frisson* of fear's cold finger, when, strong of stomach and stout of heart, they are left to puzzle over the inexplicable.

The authors who have contributed to this collection are a formidable group, diverse and experienced spine-chillers. From our own country come Lady Eleanor Smith, Shamus Frazer, Edith Olivier, H. R. Wakefield, Marguerite Steen and E. M. Delafield, some of whom unfortunately are now deceased.

Two writers from the United States have also been included and we have M. F. K. Fisher, who is a contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine, and Arthur Mayse who tells a touching story of help offered to the living by suicides from beyond the grave.

This volume includes tales which are printed here for the first time together with others which, for the enjoyment of a wider public, unquestioningly merit republication. It was suggested that I include a story of my own, and this I have done with sincere diffidence. Should this book give you pleasure and entertainment, may I suggest that you read its companion volume, *The Tandem Book of Horror Stories,** which is to have simultaneous publication, and contains tales from such talented pens as those of John Betjeman, George Langelaan, who wrote *The Fly,* Shamus Frazer and others. I am sure that you will not be disappointed.

CHARLES BIRKIN

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THE LOST, STRAYED, STOLEN

by

M. F. K. FISHER

The few people who did not like Mr. and Mrs. Beddoes laughed, perhaps jealously, at their ambience of golden wedding, their greeting-card happiness. Even friends teased a little, half irked by the feeling that, in spite of the Beddoes' hospitality and warmth, all they really needed was themselves. "What is your secret?" friends would ask. "Tell us how you managed to stand it all these years!" But the Beddoes would smile the secret smile of any long marriage and close the door gently, just as they had been doing ever since he made the trip to England, soon after the depression.

At first, on board ship, Mr. Beddoes felt upset to be without his wife for the first time in his married life. Then he remembered Perry MacLaren, a tall Scot whom he had met ten years before on this very same ship. They had exchanged speakeasy addresses and had suddenly felt like brothers—as happens occasionally, both on and off ships. Since then, there had been a few disappointing notes, formal and forced. But impulsively Beddoes sent MacLaren a cable, and now there was a wire waiting at his hotel in London: "DELIGHTED CAN PROMISE YOU INTERESTING WEEKEND MEET YOU CARLISLE FRIDAY AFTERNOON."

As Beddoes unpacked his bags, he was stirred by an almost skittish thrill. Almost before he knew it, he had broken two appointments with representatives of his firm and one date with a lovely Swedish woman from the boat and was stepping in a rumpled, excited state onto the gray platform at Carlisle. "Mac, old boy!" he shouted heartily.

"Beddoes, you . . . you son of a gun!"

The two men stood in a sweat of embarrassment, each listening to his own attempt to make the other feel easy—and then everything was all right and MacLaren picked up the suitcase, smiling, and Beddoes said, "My God! Excuse me, Mac, but I forgot you were a minister—a priest, I mean. Or do I mean a padre?"

"No, not padre. It's quite all right. Come along, Beddoes. I've got a neat little buggy since I last wrote—a real beauty."

Beddoes tucked himself into the tight tiny car that stood near the station, and wondered if his legs would go to sleep. They headed into disjointed traffic and then were in the country, and he felt fine, as if time had not come between the two of them.

MacLaren looked sideways at him, sharply. "You mustn't bother about the clericals, will you? These collars are really quite comfortable, you know. Sometimes they help in crowds. And there are other things that are good, too."

"Sure," said Beddoes. "Sure. Fine."

They headed north. The sun slanted over increasing hills, with great rocks and sweeps of high meadowland—moors, Beddoes reminded himself pleasurably. Mac drove hard, with a gleeful look on his bony red face. They stopped at a tavern and drank some bitter ale and ate an awful snack of cold canned American beans from the bar, and then tooled ahead as if they were pursued. It grew dark. Their talk was spotty and meaningless through the speed until the minister said, "Beddoes, I don't plan to take you home to Askhaven tonight. Of course we could make it, and Sally hopes we will. But I've a job to do. I thought perhaps you'd not mind helping me."

Beddoes clucked and murmured. "Sure thing," he said. He felt comfortable, spiritually if not physically, and his cramped legs and buzzing bones only heightened an inner cosiness. He liked Mac, and the thought of being useful to him. He liked the almost sensual way Mac drove the silly little roadster.

"You see," Mac said, "I told some people—a very nice simple woman, as a matter of fact—that I'd come to help her. And since she's on our way home from Carlisle and I was meeting you . . ."

The country grew mountainous. Beddoes swayed sleepily with the skilfully violent cornering of his driver, and was half aware of bare steppes and sudden shouting streams and long heady straight stretches where Mac let out the little car like a demon. Then they pulled up before a dimly lighted inn. The Queen's Head, it said in a small box with a light in it, the black paint cracking off and blurring the letters.

"Here we are, then." Mac's voice sounded falsely hearty, like an echo in a cave. "That's the village, over there."

Beddoes looked into blackness, and then hopefully back at

the dour tavern sign. He untwined his prickling legs. He felt tired and vaguely peevish, and yet there stirred in his mind a strange excitement: he, son of the wide Midwestern prairies, stood at last in the heart of an English village, on a green. "God, it's wonderful to be an American—to have this heritage, and to come back to it," he told himself solemnly.

Mac walked toward the black closed door, and slapped at it. The peremptory sound echoed across the darkness and settled thinly down. Somewhere a toad croaked. Mac pounded again. "Mrs. Protheroe," he said. His voice was sharp but low, almost secretive. "Mrs. Protheroe, are you there?" His voice was still low but now deeply urgent.

Then the door clanked open and warm light poured out, and Beddoes, who had begun to feel uncomfortable, blinked and staggered into it, with bags in either hand.

"Here, sir. Let me help you." A short woman with dark eyes took the bags. He followed her up a flight of narrow stone steps harshly lighted, to a small bedroom. The woman poured water into a basin, and left him.

He sat for a minute on the side of his bed. He was dog tired. His hands dropped between his legs, and his lips felt as if they were made of feathers. Mac is quite a driver, he thought wryly. There was a banging on his door. He jumped up, and then laughed at his nervousness as he recognised MacLaren's quiet, full voice calling him to open. Soon washed and slicked, Beddoes felt better—strong and in an odd way excited.

The two men went down the stairs, which seemed friendly now, and into a small parlour. There was a fire burning in the tiny grate. It caught with gold the corners of the fussy anti-macassared chairs and the ugly piano and the round table laid with silver and plates. A lamp on a chain hung over the table.

"My God, Mac, it's like a fairy tale! You can't possibly know what this means to me." He saw MacLaren looking at him remotely, and he stopped, choked by a thousand conditioned reactions, from Christmas cards and history in school to his own mother's saccharine reminiscences of her "trip through the Lake Country." He wanted to tell Mac what England meant to a middle-class, sentimental, moderately sensitive American salesman. Instead, he gulped awkwardly, feeling young and naïve before the minister's tired friendliness, and said, "Well, Mac, I'm certainly glad to be here!"

"So am I, Beddoes, glad you're here. It's been too long. I asked Mrs. Protheroe—ah! Here she is!"

Before he knew it, Beddoes had slipped back in his chair under the delightful impact of a double Scotch and was watching Mrs. Protheroe's black shadow come and go in the lamplight, and then was tucking into two chops and some crisp pickles and pretty plum tart with cheese. He felt like a million dollars. Almost at once, it seemed, he was in bed, and comfortably, to his mild surprise. He had meant to talk with Mac —what about Chamberlain, and this business of Hitler or whatever his name was, and L'Entente Cordiale, and . . .

Then Mac was sitting on the edge of his bed with a candle. It seemed quite natural.

"What's up?" Beddoes asked.

Outside in the dark of the village green, the toad honked and gargled. Mac sat for a minute. His eyes were shadowed, but Beddoes felt the trouble in them. His head was clear as a bell. Nothing like good liquor, he thought.

"Beddoes, I need your help." Mac's voice did not sound solemn, but at the same time it was not light. He looked down at the candle in his hand, which flared and sputtered in the window's draught and lighted the bony solidity of his good Scottish face. "I meant to tell you before—Mrs. Protheroe wrote and asked me to come. She's had to close the Queen's Head, and she needs my help."

As Mac talked quietly, his friend thought of the silent dark-eyed woman who had unlocked the inn door for them and led them to their rooms and served them.

". . . and I knew that as a man of God it was my duty. And you, Beddoes . . ." Perry MacLaren hesitated, and looked full into the other's eyes. He sighed sharply. "Your coming was an answer to my prayer. I need you—your good, honest, unspoiled soul—for company. Come along." The candle flickered as he stood up.

Beddoes, confused but keenly awake, pushed his legs into his trousers, feeling almost virtuously sane and sensible.

They walked in their stocking feet down a cold, silent corridor. It seemed longer than Beddoes remembered—or were they going into another part of the inn? He was bewildered. He put his hand on MacLaren's strong thin shoulder and felt comforted and indirectly hilarious, as if he were a character in a French comedy in a dream. The candle lit

numbers on dark, heavy-looking doors. The corridor turned, and grew even colder.

"Here we are," Mac muttered. "It's this one."

As they stood for a moment while the candle wax formed slowly into a burred tongue over his fingers. MacLaren turned irrevocably into a priest. Beddoes, facing him before the closed door in the guttering light, knew probably for the first time in his life that he was in the company of a vessel of the Lord. He felt overwhelmed, not with shyness as at the railroad station but with an inchoate terrible respect, as before a great stone or a sudden inexplicable light.

"Yes, this is the door," the priest muttered again. He stared calmly at Beddoes. "Are you ready? You can help me, perhaps. We can try." He turned the handle of the door.

The bed in the room was like something in a movie—tall with a flat tent top, and curtains half pulled around its high mattress. Queer, but even in the candlelight, steady now though feeble in the cold, still air, the curtains were pure blue, with silver threads woven here and there through their stiff folds. MacLaren set the candle on a table and stood at the foot of the bed. His face was long and dreadful. He raised his hand.

Beddoes' heart seemed to flop like a trout against his ribs, and his breath moved cautiously over his dry lips.

"Thomas and Martha Gilfillan!" The priest spoke earnestly, entreating someone named or something unnamed to listen to him.

Beddoes' eyes saw more and more clearly: the fluted lines of the panelling and of the chimney, and the soft impenetrable blueness of the bed curtains; his old friend, straight and thin, standing with head bent into his hands; the bedspread, dimly white; and at last he saw the things beneath the bedspread. There in the blue-hung bed lay two people. Or were they dead bodies? Or were they shadows? They made sharp mounds, surely, under the coverlet. The lengths of their thighs, the sharp peaks of their feet and pelvic bones pushed up the cloth and shifted in the candlelight. But over their two still skulls it did not move.

Beddoes put out his hand again, like a child, for his friend's shoulder, but MacLaren stood away from him, tall and stern. His hands hung now at his sides. His head dropped like a ripe fig from the stem of his spine. "Remember not, Lord, our

iniquities," he prayed, "nor the iniquities of our forefathers . . . neither take thou vengeance . . ."

Beddoes looked wildly at the ridges and mounds and hollows under the counterpane and then at the emerging shell of the room. There was an electric clock on the wall. He could see it, round and plain, as a piepan, and it said twelve-twenty and then whirred tinnily, so that he wondered why he had not heard it before. It made him feel almost real again.

". . . and be not angry with us forever," MacLaren went on, and then answered himself, "Spare us, good Lord. Let us pray!"

Beddoes kneeled, peering up into the well of light around the candle on the table. He watched MacLaren now with trust and a kind of hypnotised belief, and thought, This isn't the Burial Service. For prisoners, is it? Or dead murderers? "Christ, have mercy upon us," he heard himself responding.

The two men prayed there by the bed, as unself-conscious as savages, and after they had said the Lord's Prayer, MacLaren went on in his flat, sombre voice through all the Visitation of Prisoners and the mighty words for those under sentence of death, and Beddoes sweated beside him, knowing that he was wrestling with the Devil. The electric clock whirred occasionally, and outside on the black village green the old toad croaked. "O Saviour of the World, save us and help us."

Beddoes held his hands before his face now, and his eyes were shut, but still he saw like fire on fire the outlines of the two ghosts beneath the coverlet. They lay there, finite and evil, resisting him and MacLaren and all the words of God. "No!" he cried out. He could stand no more.

The priest stopped his supplication. He seemed not to be breathing. "Save us and help us!" he cried toward the dreadful bed. "Save us and help us!"

The electric clock whirred. The toad belched again in the weeds outside. Sweat started from the men's armpits and foreheads and spines. And from the bed rose such a wave of hatred, such foul resistance, that they backed away, Beddoes still kneeling, until they touched the stone of the hearth.

Hurriedly, MacLaren raised Beddoes to his feet. "I have failed," he said softly. With his left hand he pulled the American after him. His right he raised high, and his voice shouted out, stern, flat, awesome, "In the name of the Father . . . and of the Son . . ." From the bed rose a horrible feeling—like a

stench, like a shriek. But the bony shapes still lay under the coverlet. The curtains were unruffled. The clock whirred. ". . . and of the Holy Ghost."

Beddoes never knew how he found his way back to his room. The priest followed him blindly, his hand on Beddoes' shoulder, and then lay on Beddoes' narrow bed. His face looked like a death mask. Beddoes covered him with an ugly, lump-filled quilt, and went to the washstand and stood for a long time in the dark, listening to the priest's exhausted breathing, forgetting England and his friends and even himself in the abysmal realisation that some souls are lost souls.

The next morning, Beddoes felt bright as a dime, although he had spent the remnant of the night sitting in various agonised positions on a prickly black horsehair chair. Mac had lain like a snoring corpse on the narrow bed, and only once did Beddoes feel any of the earlier horror, when his friend's raucous breathing suddenly beat in his sleepless ears with the same whirring as the clock. He straightened in the discomfort of the armchair and pulled his topcoat sensibly over his knees.

Now, as the little car roared out through the dim, dawn-bound village, the struggle of the night seemed misty. He made himself forget it. He listened to the engine with fresh ears, and smelled the brightening air delightedly. "That was a good breakfast!" he shouted, grinning.

Mac laughed and drove faster. "You're right there, old boy. Mrs. Protheroe—poor woman, I failed her. She knew my father, you know. She'd never let us creep out, as I wished, without waking her."

The silent woman with tear-reddened eyes had lighted the lamp in the sitting room and blown on the warm coals and set before them such a breakfast as Beddoes had never had. Tea, and a round fat loaf of country bread with a great knife stuck in it, and butter in a pat! And bacon as thick and lean as ham. They ate, and as the fire mounted and Mac's face took on its usual ruddiness and his eyes looked less pained, Beddoes felt exhilaration creep like smoke or some strong wine into all his intimate corners. "That little lady admires you, all right," he said now, his belt snug and his mind serene. "You say she knew your father? Was he a—that is, have you followed in his footsteps?"

Perry MacLaren let out a good yell of laughter, tightened one arm on the steering wheel to bang Beddoes roughly on the

back with his other, and said, "Old boy, you're wonderful! Sally will love you. Yes, by damn, she will!" He laughed again, and the little car swerved upward merrily into the mist. As the sun touched the hills with a thin light, bluish and pure, snippets of fog caught on the occasional oaks in the glens, and on the bushes, and then, like music or perfume, disappeared. Once, a lark sang, startlingly near and clear above the impertinent racketing of the car. And then suddenly they went through a kind of gorge and Mac stopped the car. "Askhaven," he said.

Below them, in a narrow valley, lay a village so much like all the things that meant "village" in Beddoes' somewhat muddled Anglophilic mind that he almost shouted. The wee houses, rosy brick and tile, straggled along a grassy street, and smoke rose from their doll-like chimneys, and there was a tiny church with a steeple, and there was a green in front of it, with a fountain and a cross—and then, miraculous and perfect, in the still air rose the jewelled, dream-familiar notes of a hunting horn. Beddoes drew in his breath sharply. "God, Mac," he said softly. "It's—it's England!"

"Yes, yes, it's a decent little spot. Bad drains, of course."

Mac started the car, resolutely British, and Beddoes felt silly. Then, as they coasted down into the valley and the houses became sturdy reality, he peered keenly about him. He saw children and old people at the windows, and once a woman flapped her apron in the doorway to scare away three pecking hens. There were early-summer flowers everywhere. The church door was open. They were off the street now, and wheeling into a lane behind the small buttressed chancel of the church. Then Mac stopped violently, sprang out of the car, and ran up the path toward a small ugly house, his face young and dazzling with love. "Sally!" he called.

Beddoes watched without any modesty while his friend folded himself around and against the woman in the doorway. Their embrace was in itself so without shame that it never occurred to him to turn away his eyes. Instead, he smiled dazedly, and then crawled with stiff joints from the car and carried the two suitcases up the path.

"Beddoes—Sally." Mac kept his arms for a minute around his wife, and then the three of them laughed and scrambled into the narrow darkness of the hallway, which smelled, like narrow dark hallways of English literature, of wet woollens and cabbage.

Soon Beddoes was alone in his room, which smelled faintly like the hall and had one window looking across and through some yews into the stoniness of the church wall. It was a cheery cubbyhole, with a high narrow bed and a small fireplace twinkling with polished brass fittings, and an armchair drawn up, cramped but comfortable, between the fire and the dresser. There was chintz all over everything, just as it should be in the vicar's guest room of a village in—yes, Beddoes assured himself happily—in the heart of England. He opened his bag, yawned, and stood looking down into its familiar tidiness, its sterile order of a salesman's allotted shirts and ties and razor blades, with the cabinet photograph of his wife on top.

Beddoes' mind filled, suddenly and completely, with his first real sight of Sarah MacLaren. Now *there,* he thought helplessly. Now *there!* Ripe and beautiful, her voice like warm honey . . . He shook his head. Then, as he listened to new sounds in the tight little house, his thoughts swerved toward normal nothingness again.

There was a subdued tussling and giggling outside his door, and a kind of whispering, as if two or three children were in the midst of some secret. A voice said, "The water's hot for your bath, sir."

"All right. Thanks!" Beddoes felt like adding jovially, "O.K., you kids. No more fooling around out there, either!" He pulled open the door to speak to them, but they had gone. He felt foolish, and stood rather crossly for a minute, certain the next door hid his watchers. The hall was too dim to see whether there was a crack open. He laughed self-consciously, and went back into his room. A bath at eleven-thirty in the morning was nonsense anyway. He soon flapped obediently down the hall to the bathroom, though. It was a bleak barn, probably once meant for beds and now draftily occupied by an ancient oak flush toilet on a raised platform, a shabby armchair with a huge towel draped over it, and the tub. It was of green tin, and enormous. The geyser hissed and let occasional blobs of soot into the water. For some reason, the whole place was delightful.

With the good hot water running slowly into the tub, Beddoes lay back and felt like Leviathan awash. It was damn nice of Mrs. Mac to think of this for him. Funny he hadn't seen the children. But *hey!* Whose children? That wasn't a thing people kept quiet about. Certainly there had been

giggling and tussling outside the door before one of them said, "The water's hot for your bath, sir." Beddoes sat up in the tub. He suddenly felt chilly. *Had* he heard a voice say that? Or had he just thought so?

He dried himself hurriedly and, not waiting with his usual tidiness to wipe the tub, flapped back to his room. He closed his door firmly, forcing himself not to look back at the other closed doors in the dark hall, and went straight to the bottom of his suitcase for his flask of good bourbon. He lifted the bottle with practised courtesy to his wavy image in the mirror, took a firm pull, and shuddered pleasurably. Never take baths so early in the day, he decided; steam gets in the brain.

He dressed quickly, strapped on his watch and found that it marked past noon, started downstairs, and then remembered the tub. But in the bathroom it was as neat—and almost as cold—as if he had not sloshed about in it a few minutes before. Damned efficient maid, he thought wryly, even if she runs off tittering. Rather to his surprise—for he was a moderate man—he took another ceremonious swig from his flask, and then descended almost gaily into the increasing cabbaginess of the vicarage.

And true enough, there was cabbage for lunch, or dinner, or whatever the badly cooked meal was called. Beddoes hated the stuff, but this noon, for some reason, it tasted very good. Perhaps it was the way it lay all higgledy-piggledy with onions and carrots in the big bowl of stew, or perhaps it was the bottle of ale that he drank with it—or the bourbon he had drunk before. Probably, though, it was because he was eating it with the MacLarens.

He had never been with two people like them. Everything they said sounded musical to his enchanted ears. When they looked at each other, which was often, their eyes darkened and widened with an almost audible protestation of love. They seemed wrapped around with bliss, so that the whole stuffy little dining room was transfigured. He felt a part of their passion, just as he had when he first saw them melt into each other in the doorway, and the fact that he now found himself in love for the only time in his life, and with Sarah MacLaren, was a part of the whole. He did not feel disturbed, only a little dizzy. He ate solidly of the watery, ill-cooked stew, and clicked glasses now and then with Mac, and spooned his way in a kind

of happy vertigo through a tough apple tart with some clotted cream that had waited on the sideboard.

"Agatha made it," Sarah said, laughing softly and looking sideways at her husband from her long brown eyes.

"Then no wonder it's so . . . That is, my dear Sally, you must admit it's pretty dreadful." MacLaren stared at the glutinous pile on his plate.

"Yes," she said placidly. "That's why I got the cream. I thought it might help. But you know Agatha's so anxious . . ."

"Of course, darling. It's just that I do love decent tarts."

"Yes, I know. Mr. Beddoes, Perry's really rather a humbug. He idealises himself as the simple parish priest, but often he has to pretend dreadfully hard that he's having supper at the Café de Paris in order to stand it. And, of course, I'm a rotten cook."

"Rotten, my dear. But Agatha's worse." Mac pushed back his chair. "Let's get out of here before I begin to idealise myself as a peppery old colonel and call for my digestive powders."

Beddoes looked with some faint worry at Sarah, expecting that she might seem unhappy, but she smiled at him and pushed her hair from her forehead gently with her plump hands. "I thought Mr. Beddoes might like to watch me show off with my Turkish coffeepot," she said vaguely. "I told Agatha, so everything's ready for it in the parlour. Now, Perry," she exclaimed, laughing so that her cheeks shook up and down, "you know very well that she can boil water!"

Beddoes followed them across the hall and into a surprisingly comfortable room, somewhat cluttered with small tables but with all Mac's books at one end in a kind of study, a big couch in front of the fire, so that it seemed intimate and pleasant. It looks lived in, he decided with serene banality.

"Milk, too," Sarah added, after she had stuffed a pillow with absent-minded hospitality behind Beddoes on the couch and seated herself in front of her low coffee table. "Agatha boils milk well, too."

"Yes, that she does, darling. Where in hell's my pipe? Any mail while I was gone?" Mac rummaged about on the top of his desk, humming gently; then he wandered back to the hearth and folded himself into a big chair.

The fire burned with clear flame in its grate, so different from the fireplaces at home, and Beddoes stuck his feet as far

toward it as he dared without appearing oafish, and managed to wiggle Sarah's well-meant pillow into a less uncomfortable spot. He watched her tenderly as she sat, completely absorbed with the various boilings and fussings and spoonings of her coffee routine. She was beautiful and, he decided, very much like a little fat hen at the moment. He started to ask, "Who's this Agatha?" but, instead, said mildly, "I heard the children in the hall this morning."

There was complete silence.

Beddoes did not realise it for a few seconds, and then he sat up straighter and looked miserably at the MacLarens. They did not notice him, but seemed as if they were talking silently to each other. Finally Mac sighed and shook his head a little, and Sarah poured three cups of coffee almost nervously, and Beddoes said, "What did I—"

"Yes, quite," Mac interrupted him firmly. "And, Beddoes old boy, I was hoping for a couple of rounds with you this afternoon—there's a decent little course near here—but I see a note saying that old Mrs. Timpkins has 'come over worse, sudden-like,' as she says."

"Again? That old silly! Mrs. Timpkins is always coming over worse when he have visitors." Sarah frowned, and then went on brightly, "How's the coffee? *I* think it's delicious!"

"I do, too," Beddoes said. It was strange and awful, but he echoed quite sincerely that it was delicious.

"Delicious, darling. You get better all the time. When you're an old lady, you can wear a veil—or several might be better, good thick ones—and you can make coffee in a seraglio or a big French restaurant. Don't you think so, Beddoes?"

Beddoes giggled shrilly, and then before he could help it he yawned an enormous, engulfing noisy yawn. He was sickly embarrassed and put down his cup, trembling, blinking his wet eyes. "I'm *sorry,"* he said. *"Please* excuse me. It—"

"It come over you worse, sudden-like," Sarah said. "I know. It's just as well Perry can't drag you around the golf course. Perry, you go and comfort old Mrs. Timpkins—she's in love with *you,* not the Church—and Mr. Beddoes and I will curl up on the couch. That is, he'll curl up for a nap, and I'll sit here and mend every damned sock in the whole house!" She took one last sip of coffee, licked her full lower lip delicately,

murmured "Delicious!" again, and withdrew into a kind of trance, like a cat.

Beddoes saw Mac kiss her forehead and then the back of her neck, and tiptoe out of the room. But almost before he put his feet up on to the soft couch he was asleep, with Sarah MacLaren's image, like a brown butterfly, behind his peaceful eyelids.

When he wakened, it was to the sound of coal embers falling whisperingly from the grate under the weight of fresh fuel. Someone was poking the fire. But when he opened his eyes, almost at once, Sarah sat quietly across the hearth from him, and the coals burned all by themselves in the odd little iron basket. He lay looking at her, and in spite of a stronge sense of bewilderment he was very content. His eyes felt as fresh as a child's and, indeed, his whole body tingled and cooled as if a gentle wind blew privately over it from some other world. He had never felt so alive. He lay easily within his skin, and if anyone had told him he looked the same as ever—an average man—he would not have understood.

He gazed calmly at Sarah and thought without pain of his love for her. It was strange, of course, but in some way quite natural that he should have waited so long to fall so utterly in love with any woman, let alone with this chubby little hen of a creature. What would his wife think of her? Sarah's hair was long and unstylish and seemed to slip out of its pins pretty easily, and her knitted dress had a definite and matronly bag behind. He smiled and stirred, and veiled his eyes as she looked up quickly at him from her darning. He wanted not to talk for a few minutes longer. It seemed to him that he had talked all his life and never said anything until today—and at that he could not remember what it was that he had said. Perhaps nothing. But he felt potentially able to say, to utter at last, some of the thoughts that all his years had been lying like eggs in a nest, ready for this hatching. What they would be he did not know and certainly did not care. It was enough to realise that they were there.

He must have dozed again, because he woke to hear Sarah scolding, in a muted, exasperated voice. *"No,* Tom! You've been very good today, and I'm proud of you, and indeed you've managed beautifully with the others. But *no!"*

Beddoes watched her poking her needle against the sock she darned, frowning and clucking as she did it.

My love is a madwoman, he thought, and asked quietly, "Who are you talking to, Mrs. MacLaren?"

"Tom's pestering me to play the gramophone," she said, and then dropped her mending and put both hands against her lips. Her eyes stared at him. They no longer looked placid or merry or mysteriously deep, but round as plums with consternation. Finally, she put down her hands and folded the mending carefully into the basket and then came over and sat on the floor beside Beddoes.

He lay absolutely still, not fearful at all but listening as if every pore in his skin were a little ear.

"Go away now, Tom," Sarah said clearly. "That's a good soul." She waited a minute, and then started to talk, in a rather strained way at first and then almost eagerly.

"I *told* Perry we'd have to explain to you. You're a friend, or I suppose we'd never have let you come at all. These last few months, we've been so absorbed in this job that we've rather forgotten how strange it may look to people who don't know about it. Of course, here in Askhaven everyone understands. Everyone knows Perry for the dear godly man he is. He *is* a man of God, you know, Mr. Beddoes. He could be a bishop if he wished—a *good* bishop. But I've no ambition for him—and I'd be such a ninny as a bishop's wife! And Askhaven is his whole life. Mine, too."

Beddoes held out a cigarette to her, and she lit it for herself and then said, "They really seem to like me, too. Vicars' wives are often disliked. Of course, I do most of the things I'm supposed to—Girls' Friendly, and Guild, and those ghastly boxes for the missions. And I visit. That helps Perry. I'm really a *very* good vicar's wife, now I think of it." She leaned sensuously against the couch, and let the smoke curl up her cheekbones from her slackened fine lips.

"What about Tom?" Beddoes asked it softly, as if afraid to scare her away—or into plain friendliness again.

"Oh, Tom." She looked vaguely at him, and then shook herself. "Yes, Tom. Well—it's rather hard to start. I do hope he is not listening. He's so terribly sensitive lately. You see, it's getting time for him to leave us, and he doesn't want to. But of course Perry says he must. Oh dear! Mr. Beddoes—Mr. Beddoes, Tom is . . ." Sarah looked earnestly at him, as if she was praying that it was all right to hurt him in some way or frighten him, and without even knowing that he did it he

took one of her hands. She smiled at him. "Tom is a lost soul. There are a lot of them, everywhere. When they're really lost, completely, hopelessly, they're usually what people call ghosts. They're terribly unhappy. Mr. Beddoes, and they do mischievous things, or bad things. It's a kind of rage they're in. They haunt people. It's wretched. The two at Mrs. Protheroe's—Perry feels so depressed about them that he's almost ill, Mr. Beddoes. Poor darling. You see, Mrs. Protheroe called him because she knows how he is helping, and of course she has to support herself and run the inn alone, and the two . . . They were a man and woman in about 1620 who owned the Queen's Head and sent all the decent women who stopped there to London, doped, for the sailors. These two horrible souls have come back, and they are driving away all the trade. They just lie in that bed, which isn't really there, of course, and . . ." Sarah shuddered, and threw her cigarette into the grate.

Beddoes closed his eyes for a moment. He felt nauseated and cold, remembering the waves of hatred that had risen from the blue-canopied high couch last night, and hearing his own voice heavy with prayer against the impossible whirring of the electric clock upon the wall. "Yes, those were damned souls," he said at last, and looked at Sarah.

"Well, Perry will try again. And he has helped many, you know. Agatha is one of the best. She *came* to us! Usually Perry discovers where there is trouble and goes and rescues the poor tormented thing and brings it here. But Agatha came by herself, and asked to stay. Of course, she's more like a guest, you know. It's a queer mess. We hardly feel that we can ask her about herself. But she's never been sly, like some of the others, and she's getting clearer all the time. She insists she was a cook! She'll soon leave us, too. You see, they grow clearer as they find themselves. Some of them, even if you can't see them, you know they're tiny and hideous, more like ideas than things—ideas of pain, perhaps. And then as they find themselves they grow straighter and clearer until they're almost like children, but with old minds, of course. I can see Agatha lately. Today, when she wanted so much to make the tart, she was *there,* Mr. Beddoes—so little and sincere that I knew she'd be honest about it. It was a *terrible* tart, but it was a *tart.* Some of them, even when they promise to be good, do

naughty things, and might use salt instead of sugar. Or rat poison. Or drain cleanser . . ."

"My God!" Beddoes looked angrily at her. "You're in danger, then!"

"Of course. It's a risky business, really. But we must do it. You could tell, couldn't you, the dreadful suffering of those two at Mrs. Protheroe's, caught as they were in their own evil? And Perry can save them. He has had worse. He'll bring them here, and gradually—I think it's probably my quiet nature, and of course I'm patient when eggs get broken because I *often* break eggs myself—gradually they begin to be less cruel and twisted, and I give them little jobs to do. In fact, then can become very helpful. I don't hire anyone at all now." She smiled at him.

He could see her only dimly against the soft glow of the fire, but her eyes looked sure and steady into his. He gave her another cigarette and then said fretfully, "But I don't like your being in danger. I don't like it."

"There isn't much, really. And of course Tom is here."

"Yes. What about Tom?"

Sarah watched smoke rise from her cigarette towards the chimney, and then she laughed. "It's really simple, you know. He's been with us several months now—almost since Perry began this. But every time Perry tells him it is nearly time to go, Tom breaks something or pretends to be naughty, and then we have to start all over again. At least, he means us to. And of course I have to be stern with myself, because really I wish he could stay for ever. I depend on him—too much, I know. He should have a real home, one he could run correctly. No. 1 Boy. But he's wonderful with the others. I told him this afternoon about the silliness outside your door. I think it must have been Lady Donfellows and the Negro girl, Odessa. They've only been here a few weeks. They're not bad at all, just idiotic—completely zany. Nitwits. They got lost before they died, and then fluttered around wondering what was wrong with everybody else—for *centuries,* probably. I told Tom. He felt rather badly. But he'll keep them in order. I'm sure of him."

Once more the soft sound of falling coal ash whispered in Beddoes' ears, and he felt a little prickly, as he had once after an injection of adrenalin. "Where is Tom now?" he whispered.

Sarah looked around. "I can't always see him, you know," she answered rather impatiently. "And I can only feel him here if he wants me to. Tom, are you here?" They waited for a minute, Sarah on the floor, with her soft plump hand warmly in Beddoes', which suddenly felt rather damp. "No, he isn't here. Or else he is but is shy with you." She grinned. "You don't have to *hear* them, you know. I know it's annoying. It annoys me sometimes. Even Tom will tease me a little. I'll think I'm alone and suddenly he'll steal the last bite of a bonbon I've been saving for after supper." She jerked her hand away. "Oh, Mr. Beddoes! Tea! I haven't even told them about tea for you!"

Beddoes laughed. "I'm not used to afternoon tea," he said. "We don't have it much back home, except for company from England!"

"But Perry will be furious with me! Don't tell him, eh?"

He felt delightfully secretive, and grabbed her hand hard. "In cahoots!" he cried. "The tea was delicious, Ma'am! As I live and breathe, it was indeed!"

Sarah laughed excitedly, and then bit at her lip, her eyes bemused. "Yes," she murmured. "Today's Saturday. I have some beautiful fresh eggs. We'll have an egg to our tea, as Mrs. Timpkins says. And that'll be instead of supper. And you and Perry can go down to the Golden Duck and play darts. He likes to go Saturday nights. The men are easier then. They can tell him about—"

The door into the hall opened quietly, and Mac stood dark against the light the streamed in past him. Beddoes started to sit up, feeling vaguely guilty, but Sarah held his hand tighter. "Perry!" she called. "Perry, I've been telling him about our ghoulies. He knows about them."

"Good," Mac said. "That's all right, then. Beddoes, old boy, how about a wee nip before supper? I could stand one myself."

"And I'll go see about things," Sarah said. "I'll tell Agatha about the eggs."

The rest of Beddoes' weekend passed in a pleasant blur. He helped clear the table after meals, at which he ate heartily of the bad food, and he never went into the kitchen, feeling shyly that Agatha and the others might not like it, but instead stacked dishes and cups with his customary neatness on the sideboard. They always disappeared soon after.

Saturday night, he played interminable darts in a crowded smoky saloon—pub, he should say. He drank an astonishing number of double Scotches, but none of them seemed to hit him, and afterwards, in a solemnly clearheaded mood, he walked home through the sleeping village with Mac. He thought a long time and finally started to say that it was queer how well he understood the garbled accent of the village men, but Mac cut into his half-formed words. "Wait here, Beddoes, eh? I'll be but a minute." And, in his tweeds and round white collar, MacLaren hurried into the church through the unlocked door.

Beddoes waited, leaning against the cross by the sweetly dipping fountain. He knew Mac was right to leave him; he was drunk, even if he did not feel so in the least. "Tipsy souls must go to pray all by themselves, inside themselves, if they can find the door," Beddoes said.

Mac came out in a few minutes, his face serene, and they went home to bed.

After morning services the next day (Beddoes did not go, feeling strangely shy about seeing his friends in vestments at the altar), they played golf a few miles from the village with a pair of fat tweedy old boys who scowled for eighteen holes and made Beddoes feel stiffly foreign and oafish, and then relaxed completely in the stuffy little clubhouse and told innumerable jokes so fast and mumblingly that he could only guess when to laugh.

He went to Evensong, rather to his surprise. The church was dim and musty, and two musty dim old women prayed alone on one side of the aisle, while he and Sarah sat, discreetly parted by an untidy pile of hymnals, in a pew across from them. At the back of the church, an ancient man—the sexton, perhaps—snuffled and creaked. Beddoes found himself following automatically the ritual that meant his childhood and then an occasional service with his wife back home. It was wonderful how some things never faded. And it was queer how little he felt at the sight of Mac up there, hunched like a great white quiet bird over the lectern. He had counted on being awed, and instead he felt only a desire to yawn. It was disappointing.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," Mac was saying deeply, his voice echoing from the damp walls, "and the love

of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all, evermore."

"Amen," said Beddoes and Sarah and the two old dim shadows in the pew across the aisle. The invisible sexton at the back of the church cleared his throat sanctimoniously and threw open the doors as for a fine wedding. Beddoes hurried away from Sarah. He felt wildly, urgently depressed. He almost ran around the buttresses of the little church and into the twilit garden, which lay somberly between the high stone structure and the vicarage.

A few minutes later, when Sarah came slowly to join him, she found him sitting on a bench under a tall privet tree. He stared strangely at her, and she saw even in the twilight that his face was almost luminous with emotion. "What is it, my dear Mr. Beddoes? What is it?" she cried, sitting quickly down beside him.

"Mrs. MacLaren—I have just seen Tom!"

For a minute, neither spoke, and then Sarah laughed. "But how good! That is wonderful. Tom must like you very much. As we do, Mr. Beddoes, you know. That's really dear of Tom, I think!"

"I didn't think it dear at all, at first," Beddoes answered rather severely. "I was damned upset, I can tell you. I was sitting here, wondering why Perry didn't have some of his . . . his . . ."

"His ghoulies?"

"Yes, why he didn't have them go to church. And then Tom said—and I heard him as clearly as I'm sitting here—Tom said, 'Because we ain't ready yet, you damn fool!' And damn it, Mrs. MacLaren, he's as American as I am! He's no Limey. What's he doing over here?"

Sarah only shook her head, smiling softly, her eyes dark in the gentle round fullness of her face.

"And then I sat down here feeling sort of queer, and I looked up and there he stood. It's pretty dark, but I *saw* him, all right. He's short and twisted, like a little old jockey, only smaller. There was a sort of blue outline. Oh, hell!"

Sarah sighed, as if she felt tired. "Yes, he's like that. But they all are, for a while, Mr. Beddoes. They all are. But it's good that you saw him. He trusts you. He's still very lost, poor ghoulie, but he's beginning to trust Perry, and me most of the time, and now you. He's beginning to find himself." She sighed

again, and stood up. "Let's go in. Perry's not coming for a time; he's helping the doctor with a poor woman in labour. I wish I'd had children. I'd have been a fine mother, I think."

She walked up the path, talking as if to herself, and Beddoes, following her, felt a deep wrench at his heart. Poor Sarah! She was right. All that rich fullness of her body should have fed something other than lost souls.

"Turn on the switch there, dear Mr. Beddoes," she went on. "Right by your hand. We'll find a plate of cold toast. I like cold toast, especially when it grows a bit chewy, don't you?"

He had never thought about it, but now it was plain to him that he did, indeed, like cold toast. I wouldn't mind a good drink to wash it down, though, he thought.

"Tom says you'd like a drink." She stood in the doorway of the kitchen, with the toast on a blue plate in her hand. "Get a glass, then, and we'll pour a wee bit more from the vicar's bottle. We'll blame it on Tom." There was a faint sound of giggling in the hall, and she laughed, too. "He's a canny one," she added, and disappeared.

Beddoes found a tumbler and half filled it with water, and then followed Sarah down the narrow musty hall to the parlour. He felt, tired, but when he saw her sitting as if broken in the low chair by the hearth he wanted to cry out and fold her to him tenderly and mightily, like a cloud or a giant. Her little round arms lay down along her sides, and she looked up at him with a faint frown, as if she were trying to remember who he was and what he expected her to say. "Where is Mac's bottle?" he asked her.

"In the cupboard on the left—or is it on the right? On *your* right of his desk. Isn't it nice there's a fire? I think we'll have a storm soon. Poor Perry. But he loves to drive in storms. He took the doctor in his car wtih him."

Beddoes poured himself a good wallop from the bottle, and swirled the glass around. Then he walked down the long room to Sarah and said, "Here, you take a little of this."

She smiled, and sipped generously. "I like it," she said. "Thank you, Mr. Beddoes. It's fine now and again, I think, and I could easily do more of it. There's my position to think of, though." She sat up, quickly refreshed. "And now, what do you think of a little music until Perry's here again? Would you like Haydn, or are you noisy and disordered after your sight of poor Tom and ready for Tchaikovsky, perhaps?"

Beddoes felt dull. "I don't know much about music. My wife —she always goes to the Philharmonic, of course. But I haven't had much time for music myself."

"I've heard that of you American men. It's a pity, isn't it? I can tell, Mr. Beddoes, by the bumps on your brow, that you've a fine feeling for it if you'd had the chance. We'll start with Tchaikovsky, then; he'll stir you and not bother your brain much. That's always best at first—not too much thought."

She went quietly to the study end of the room, and he could hear her sliding records out of their envelopes and fussing in a measured way, and then, as she walked back through the half-lighted room nearer to the fire, the first tempestuous strains of a piano playing with an orchestra crashed against his ears. He felt his hair prickling all over his head, and even under his arms. He lay back and let himself wash like seaweed in the tide of the music. Now and then, he sipped at his Scotch, but he did not think. He didn't even feel anything identifiable, but only a great weakness and fulfilment. Then, gradually, he began not to hear. His untrained ears were exhausted; the music became noise, and he looked about him once more. "Is it a Panotrone changer?" he whispered. "I knew a producer in Hollywood with one. It flashed red and green lights, I remember, when it was running out of records. Scared hell out of me."

"No," Sarah murmured. "It's Tom. He loves to change them. But listen—this is 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik.' " She bent her head back again, so that it rolled slowly sideways.

Instead of listening, Beddoes looked at the smooth flow of her cheek. There must be a tiny down upon it, to catch the firelight with such gold. He wished he could see it more clearly, or perhaps touch it.

The music went on, with hardly a pause between records, and then there was a small crash, which sounded sharply in the peaceful room. Sarah stiffened, and Beddoes sat up nervously, the empty glass jerking in his hand.

"It's a record, I'm afraid," she murmured. "Tom, I'm coming. Never mind. Never mind, my dear!" she called out as she hurried to the other end of the room. "It will be all right," Beddoes heard her whisper urgently. "I'll tell Mr. MacLaren. Think no more of it, my darling, but play us the Mozart again. Then we'll stop. Come along now, don't mope!" She walked back to the fire again, and Beddoes, who had thoughtfully kept

his eyes away from the phonograph, saw that she was shaking her head a little. "He feels dreadfully. This time it wasn't on purpose," she told him. "We'll listen to just one more, to buck him up a bit, don't you think?"

"Sure, poor fellow." It did not seem at all queer to Beddoes to be commiserating over the hurt pride of a ghoulie.

The listened dutifully, and then sat without talking by the fire. The man watched the woman and she watched the fire. "I'm sorry you must go tomorrow," she said finally. "Perry will have to call you at five, I'm afraid. The train leaves Carlisle early. We'll miss you, all of us."

They talked for a minute or two of trains and travel, but Beddoes had no feeling that he was actually leaving, and so soon. It was like reading a book—the words were all there, but he himself was not.

The train trip down to London was longer than he had remembered. Fog hid the landscape, except for quick hideous flashes of factories and an occasional hedgerow leading thornily into more fog. He twisted and steamed alone in his compartment until about noon, when an old man in a silk hat climbed angrily in beside him and, after one bitter stare, hid himself behind a paper.

A waiter brought Beddoes a piece of ham with little pickles, and a bottle of stout. It tasted fine, and there was not enough of it. In spite of that, he was on the point of offering a part of it to the silent old man across from him when he saw a crumb or two fall between the discreetly striped thighs and realised that all the time the man had been eating, like a secretive rabbit, at bread and cheese, without another sign than the few crumbs from behind his stiffly held paper. Beddoes laughed to himself. Tea was the same—hot and bitter and welcome to the American, and a matter of hidden nibblings to the silent old man. British reserve, Beddoes decided; if he can stick it, I can.

Once, between luncheon and tea, something that had been mounting in him for more hours than he could count rose like a frightful wave, and for the first time since he had met Sarah MacLaren two days before, desire conquered him. He lay back palely against the cushions, his eyes closed. Every bone in his body ached as if he were catching influenza, and his brain swam. He was helpless, drowning, and he knew that although he had slept well with his slender wife, and would

again, he had never felt passion for a woman until now. Gradually, he grew calm, resigned.

It was after dark, with steam on the windows and the old gentleman still inflexible behind his paper, when Beddoes first knew that Tom was in the compartment. He could not remember later whether Tom spoke to him or not, but there he was. Beddoes, who was wondering whether it was worth a glare from his fellow-traveler to get up and open his suitcase and pull out the flask and take a good swig, clearly felt Tom say, "I'll get it down for you, sir."

"You will not," he snapped.

"What's that?" The paper finally lowered itself, and the old gentleman looked rather shyly over the top of it. "Did you speak, sir?"

Beddoes cleared his throat, rather like a butler being discreet in a bedroom farce, and smirked apologetically. It worked. The old man disappeared again.

From then on, the conversation was silent, but no less violent. "What in hell are you doing here, Tom?" Beddoes asked furiously.

"Well now, sir. Well, listen. I summed you up, see, Mr. Beddoes? And I figured—"

"Oh, you figured, did you? And what do you suppose Mrs. MacLaren is going to do without you? Who's going to keep them in line—Odessa and the old Duchess or whatever she is, and Agatha and all of them? So you walk out? A *fine* way to treat a woman who's—"

"We'd say 'lady' here in England, sir," Tom interrupted slyly, showing himself with a faint blue grin just above the seat level.

"Oh, you would, would you? 'We,' you say? You're no more English than I am, damn it! What in—Tom, what am I going to do with you? That's the hell of it." Beddoes saw the old gentleman lower his paper perhaps an inch and peer at him with a timid bloodshot eye.

"That's just it," Tom said softly. "You don't know yet, sir. But you may some time. The hell of it, I mean."

Beddoes felt him grow sad and dim, and he was humiliated to remember Sarah's kind, tender ways. "O.K.," he said gruffly. "O.K., Tom. But you'll have to go back to Askhaven, you know. I mean it." And that was the end of the incident, as far as Beddoes could remember later.

In London, he felt the muted exhilaration he always knew there, as if he were a happy ghost himself. He sent his bags on to the hotel, and took a cab to the New Clarges on Half Moon Street for a small bottle of rather warm champagne at one of the little green tables in the street bar. Then he went back to his room, with only a sleepy nod from the night clerk and not a thought in his head of Tom. Inside his room, though, he saw that the stolen ghoulie—lost, strayed, *and* stolen, he thought solemnly—had been hard at work. Pyjamas lay neatly ready, and on the marble dresser top were his toothbrush, his tubes of toothpaste and shaving cream, and the cabinet photograph of Mrs. Beddoes.

He felt coldly furious. The nerve of the fellow, to follow him to London and then try to weasel his way into things so that he could stay, when all the time Sarah needed him in Askhaven, and God knows what his wife would think, to have him land home with a ghoulie! He stood for a minute before he closed the door, cursing. There was no sight of Tom.

At last Beddoes saw the letter, which was leaning up against the photograph. It was smudged and cheap-looking, and he turned it over curiously a few times before he saw that the postmark was Askhaven. Askhaven, Thursday. Then it had been written before he went up there—mailed a day before he even started. "Dear Mr. Beddoes and Honor'd Sir," it said, in a sloping pompous hand:

"I regret to inform you that as postmaster and former keeper of the public house now known as ye Golden Duck now closed that your telegram being duly received re your visit I regret to inform you that the reverend Mr. Perry MacLaren our dear pastor and his good wife were immediately killed some eleven months five days ago in a dreadful motor accident in the highlands near us. Please believe me honor'd sir your ob't servant and hoping to serve you if I but had the pub still but trade has gone to nothing lately so I remain,

Yours the postmaster,

JOHN GATES

P.S. The accident was in new car and all knew Mr. MacLaren was not a slow driver.

Yrs.

J. G."

Beddoes sat quietly for a long time. Outside the windows, partly open, an occasional taxi tooted, and, inside, the little glowing tube of the electric fireplace glowed like a scar against the wall. He felt, without thinking about it, as if he had in the last few days or minutes lived more than a thousand years.

This letter lay like a grimy leaf upon his knee, and he looked dispassionately at it and at his hand beside it—his hand still firm and strong. He thought wearily of Mac and Sarah, and of the cold toast on the blue plate, and the whisky and the music.

"O.K.," he said at last. "All right, Tom. Come on. My wife and I . . ."

FLORINDA

by

SHAMUS FRAZER

"Did you and Miss Reeve have a lovely walk, darling?" Clare asked of the child in the tarnished depths of glass before her.

"Well, it was lovely for me but not for Miss Reeve, because she tore her stocking on a bramble, and it bled."

"The stocking?"

"No, that ran a beautiful ladder," said Jane very solemnly. "But there were two long tears on her leg as if a cat had scratched her. We were going along by the path by the lake when the brambles caught her. She almost fell in. She *did* look funny, Mummy, hopping on the bank like a hen blackbird a cat's playing with—and squawking."

"*Poor* Miss Reeve! . . . Your father's going to have that path cleared soon; it's quite overgrown."

"Oh, I hope not soon, Mummy. I love the brambly places, and what the birds and rabbits'll do if they're cut down I can't imagine. The thickety bushes are all hopping and fluttering with them when you walk. And the path wriggles as if it were living, too—so you must lift your feet high and stamp on it, the way Florinda does . . ."

But Clare was not listening any more. She had withdrawn her glance from Jane's grave elfin features in the shadowed recesses of the glass to fix it on her own image, spread as elegantly upon its surface as a swan."

"And if Daddy has the bushes cut down," Jane went on, "what will poor Florinda do? Where will she play? There will be no place at all for the little traps and snares she sets; no place for her to creep and whistle in, and tinkle into laughter when something funny happens—like Miss Reeve caught by the leg and hopping." This was the time, when her mother was not listening, that Jane could talk most easily about Florinda. She looked at her mother's image, wrapt in the dull mysteries of grown-up thought within the oval Chippendale glass—and thence to the rococo frame of gilded wood in whose interlacing design two birds of faded gilt, a bat with a chipped wing and flowers whose golden petals and leaves showed here and there little spots and tips of white plaster like a disease, were all caught for ever.

"That's how I met Florinda." She was chattering quite confidently, now that she knew that it was only to herself. "I had been down to the edge of the lake where there are no brambles —you know, the *lawn* side; and I knelt down to look at myself in the water, and there were two of me. That's what I thought at first—two of me. And then I saw one was someone else—it was Florinda, smiling at me; but I couldn't smile back, not for anything. There we were like you and me in the glass —one smiling and one very solemn. Then Miss Reeve called and Florinda just *went*—and my face was alone and astonished in the water. She's shy, Florinda is—and sly, too. Shy and sly—that's Florinda for you."

The repeated name stirred Clare to a vague consciousness: she had heard it on Jane's lips before.

"Who is Florinda?" she asked.

"Mummy, I've told you. She's a doll, I think, only large, large as me. And she never talks—not with words, anyway. And her eyes can't shut even when she lies down."

"I thought she was called Arabella."

"That's the doll Uncle Richard gave me last Christmas. Arabella *does* close her eyes when *she* lies down, and she says 'Good night, Mamma,' too, because of the gramophone record inside her. But Florinda's different. She's not a house doll. She belongs outside—though I *have* asked her to come to tea on Christmas Eve."

"Well, darling, I've lots of letters to write, so just you run along to the nursery and have a lovely tea."

So Florinda was a doll—an idea doll, it seemed, that Jane

had invented in anticipation of Christmas. Nine in the New Year, Jane was growing perhaps a little old for dolls. A strange child, thought Clare, difficult to understand. In that she took after her mother—though in looks it was her father she resembled. With a sigh Clare slid out the drawer of the mahogany writing-desk. She distributed writing-paper and envelopes, the Christmas cards (reproductions of Alken prints), in neat piles over the red leather—and, opening her address-book, set herself to write.

Roger came in with the early December dusk. He had been tramping round the estate with Wakefield the agent, and the cold had painted his cheeks blue and nipped his nose red so that he looked like a large, clumsy gnome. He kissed Clare on the nape, and the icy touch of his nose spread gooseflesh over her shoulders.

"You go and pour yourself some whisky," she said, "and thaw yourself out by the fire. I'll be with you in a minute." She addressed two more envelopes in her large clear hand, and then, without looking round, said: "Have we bitten off rather more than we can chew?"

"There's an awful lot to be done," said her husband from the fire, "so much one hardly knows where to begin. The woods are a shambles—Nissen huts, nastiness and barbed wire. One would have thought Uncle Eustace would have made some effort to clear up the mess after the army moved out . . ."

"But, darling, he never came back to live here. He was too wise."

"Too ill and too old—and he never gave a thought to those who'd inherit the place, I suppose."

"He never thought we'd be foolish enough to come and live here, anyway."

Roger's uncle had died in a nursing-home in Bournemouth earlier in the year, and Roger had come into these acres of Darkshire park and woodland, and the sombre peeling house, Fowling Hall, set among them. At Clare's urging he had tried to sell the place, but there were no offers. And now Roger had the obstinate notion of settling here, and trying to make pigs and chickens pay for the upkeep of the estate. Of course, Clare knew, there was something else behind this recent interest in the country life. Nothing had been said, but she knew what Roger wanted, and she knew, too, that he would hint at

it again before long—the forbidden subject. She stacked her letters on the desk and went to join him by the fire.

"There's one thing you *can* do," she said. "Clear that path that goes round the lake. Poor Miss Reeve tore herself quite nastily on a bramble this afternoon, walking there."

"I'll remind Wakefield to get the men on the job tomorrow. And what was Jane doing down by the lake just now as I came in? I called her and she ran off into the bushes."

"My dear, Jane's been up in the nursery for the last hour or more. Miss Reeve's reading to her. You know, she's not allowed out this raw weather except when the sun's up. The doctor said—"

"Well, I wondered . . . I only glimpsed her—a little girl in the dusk. She ran off when I called."

"One of the workmen's children, I expect."

"Perhaps . . . Strange, I didn't think of that."

He took a gulp of whisky, and changed the subject: "Clare, it's going to cost the earth to put this place properly in order. It would be worth it if . . . if . . ." He added with an effort, "I mean, if one thought it was leading anywhere . . ."

So it had come out, the first hint.

"You mean if we had a son, don't you? . . . Don't you, Roger?" She spoke accusingly.

"I merely meant . . . Well, yes—though, of course—"

She didn't let him finish. "But you know what the doctor said after Jane. You know how delicate she is . . . You can't want—?"

"If she had a brother—" Roger began.

Clare laughed, a sudden shiver of laughter, and held her hands to the fire.

"Roger, what an open hypocrite you are! 'If she had a brother,' when all the time you mean 'if I had a son.' And how could you be certain it wouldn't be a sister? No, Roger, we've had this out a thousand times in the past. It can't be done." She shook her head and blinked at the fire. "It wouldn't work out."

Roger went into the nursery, as was his too irregular custom, to say good night to Jane. She was in her pink fleecy dressing-gown, slippered toes resting on the wire fender, a bowl emptied of bread and milk on her knees. Miss Reeve was reading her

a story about a princess who was turned by enchantment into a fox.

"Don't let me interrupt, Miss Reeve. I'll look in again later."

"Oh, do come in, Mr. Waley. We're almost ready for bed."

"I was sorry to hear about your accident this afternoon."

"It was such a silly thing, really. I caught my foot in a slipnoose of bramble. It was as if somebody had set it on the path on purpose, only that would be too ridiculous for words. But it was a shock—and I tore myself painfully, trying to get free."

There was still the ghost of that panic, Roger noticed, in Miss Reeve's pasty, pudgy features, and signalling behind the round lenses of her spectacles. "It's not a very nice path for a walk," she added, "but one can't keep Jane away from the lake."

"I'm having all the undergrowth cleared away from the banks," said Roger; "that should make it easier walking."

"Oh, that'll be ever so much nicer, Mr. Waley."

"Florinda won't like it," thought Jane, sitting stiffly in her wicker chair by the fire. "She won't like it at all. She'll be in a wicked temper will Florinda." But she said aloud in a voice of small protest—for what was the use of speaking about Florinda to grown-ups—"It won't be nice at all. It will be quite horribly beastly."

The men didn't care for the work they had been set to do. It was the skeletons, they said—and they prodded suspiciously with their implements at the little lumps of bone and feather and fur that their cutting and scything had revealed. There was a killer somewhere in the woods; owls said one, stoats said another, but old Renshawe said glumly it was neither bird nor beast, that it was Something-that-walked-that-shouldn't, and this infected the others with a derisive disquiet. All the same, fifty yards of path were cleared during the morning, which took them beyond the small Doric pavilion that once served as boathouse and was reflected by a stone twin housing the loch mechanism on the eastern side of the lake.

Miss Reeve took Jane out in the afternoon to watch the men's progress. Jane ran ahead down the cleared path; paused at the pavilion to hang over the flaking balustrade and gaze down into the water: whispered something, shook her head and ran on.

"Hullo, Mr. Renshawe—*alone*?" she cried, as rounding a sudden twist in the path she came upon the old man hacking at the undergrowth. Renshawe started and cut short, and the blade bit into his foot. This accident stopped work for the day.

"It wasn't right, Miss Jane, to come on me like that," he said, as they were helping him up to the house. "You gave me a real turn. I thought—"

"I know," said Jane, fixing him with her serious, puzzled eyes. "And she *was* there, too, watching all the time."

Whatever the killer was, it moved its hunting-ground that night. Two White Orpingtons were found dead beside the arks next morning, their feathers scattered like snow over the bare ground.

"And it's not an animal, neither," said Ron, the boy who carried the mash into the runs and had discovered the kill.

"What do you mean, it's not an animal?" asked Wakefield.

"I mean that their necks is wrung, Mr. Wakefield."

"Oh, get away!" said Wakefield.

But the following morning another hen was found lying in a mess of feathers and blood, and Wakefield reported to his master.

"It can't be it's a fox, sir. That head's not been bitten off. It's been pulled off, sir . . . And there was this, sir, was found by the arks." It was a child's bracelet of blackened silver.

The path was cleared, but on the farther side of the lake the shrubberies that melted imperceptibly into the tall woods bordered it closely. Here Jane dawdled on her afternoon walk. At the bend in the path near the boathouse she waited until her governess was out of sight—and then called softly into the gloom of yew and rhododendron and laurel, "I think you're a beast, a *beast*! And I'm not going to be your friend any more, d'you hear? And you're *not* to come on Christmas Eve, even if you're starving."

There was movement in the shadows, and she glimpsed the staring blue eyes and pinched face and the tattered satin finery. "And it's no use following us, so there!" Jane stuck her tongue out as a gesture of defiance, and ran away along the path.

"Are you all right?" asked Miss Reeve, who had turned back to look for her. "I thought I heard someone crying."

"Oh, it's only Florinda," said Jane, "and she can sob her eyes out now for all I care."

"Jane," said Miss Reeve severely, "how many more times have I to tell you Florinda is a naughty fib, and we shouldn't tell naughty fibs even in fun?"

"It's no fun," said Jane, so low that Miss Reeve could hardly catch a word, "no fun at all being Florinda."

A hard frost set in overnight. It made a moon landscape of the park and woods, and engraved on the nursery window-panes, sharply as with a diamond, intricate traceries of silver fern. The bark of the trees was patterned with frost like chain-mail, and from the gaunt branches icicle daggers glinted in the sun. Each twig of the bare shrubs had budded its tear-drops of ice. The surface of the lake was wrinkled and grey like the face of an old woman. "And Wakefield says if it keeps up we may be able to skate on it on Boxing Day . . ." But by mid-day the temperature rose and all out-of-doors was filled with a mournful pattering and dripping.

Towards evening a dirty yellow glow showed in the sky, and furry black clouds moved up over the woods, bringing snow. It snowed after that for two days, and then it was Christmas Eve.

"You *look* like the Snow Queen, but you *smell* like the Queen of Sheba. Must you go out tonight, Mummy?"

"Darling, it's a bore. We promised Lady Graves, so we have to."

"You should have kept your fingers crossed. But you'll be back soon?"

"In time to catch Father Christmas climbing down the chimneys, I expect."

"But earlier than that—promise . . . ?"

"Much earlier than that. Daddy wants to get back early, anyway. He and Wakefield had a tiring night sitting up with a gun to guard their precious hens . . ."

"But she . . . it never came, did it?"

"Not *last* night. And now you go to lovely sleeps, and when you wake perhaps Father Christmas will have brought you Florinda in his—"

"No," cried the child, "not Florinda, Mummy, *please*."

"What a funny thing you are," said Clare, stooping to kiss her; "you were quite silly about her a few days ago . . ."

Jane shivered and snuggled down in the warm bed.

"I've changed," she said. "We're not friends any more."

After the lights were out, Jane imagined she was walking in the snow. The snowflakes fell as lightly as kisses, and soon they had covered her with a white, soft down. Now she knew herself to be a swan, and she tucked her head under a wing and so fell asleep on the dark rocking water.

But in the next room Miss Reeve, who had gone to bed early, could not sleep because of the wind that sobbed so disquietingly around the angles of the house. At last she put out a hand to the bedside table, poured herself water, groped for the aspirin bottle and swallowed down three tablets at a gulp. It was as she rescrewed the top, she noticed that it was not the aspirin bottle she was holding. She could have sworn that the sleeping-tablets had been in her dressing-table drawer. Her first thought was that someone had changed the bottles on purpose, but that, she told herself, would be too absurd. There was nothing she could do about it. The crying of the wind mounted to shrill broken fluting that sounded oddly like children's laughter.

The first thing they noticed when the car drew up, its chained tyres grinding and clanking under the dark porch, was that the front door was ajar. "Wait here," said Roger to the chauffeur, "there seem to have been visitors while we were away."

Clare switched on the drawing-room lights, and screamed at the demoniac havoc they revealed, the chairs and tables overturned, the carpet a litter of broken porcelain, feathers from the torn cushions, and melting snow. Someone had thrown the heavy silver inkwell at the wall glass, which hung askew, its surface cracked and starred, and the delicate frame broken.

"No sane person—" Roger began.

But already Clare was running up the stairs to the nursery and screaming, "Jane! . . . Jane!" as she ran.

The nursery was wrecked, too—the sheets clawed in strips, the floor a drift of feathers from the ripped pillows. Only the doll Arabella, with a shattered head, was propped up in the empty bed. When Clare touched her she fell backwards and

began to repeat, "Good night, Mamma!" as the mechanism inside her worked.

They found Jane's footsteps in the snow, leading over the lawn in the direction of the lake. Once they thought they saw her ahead of them, but it was only the snowman Roger had helped her to build during the afternoon. There was a misty moon, and by its light they followed the small naked footprints to the edge of the lake—but their eyes could make out nothing beyond the snow-fringed ice.

Roger had sent on the chauffeur to a bend in the drive where the car headlights could illuminate the farther bank. And now, in the sudden glare, they saw in the dark centre of ice the two small figures, Jane in her night-dress, and beside her a little girl in old-fashioned blue satin who walked oddly and jerkily, lifting her feet and stamping them on the ice.

They called together, "Jane! . . . Jane! . . . Come back!"

She seemed to have heard, and she turned, groping towards the light. The other caught at her arm, and the two struggled together on the black, glassy surface. Then from the stars it seemed, and into their cold hearts, fell a sound like the snapping of a giant lute-string. The two tiny interlocked figures had disappeared, and the ice moaned and tinkled at the edges of the lake.

DEAD MEN'S BONES

by

EDITH OLIVIER

I knew that my grandmother was dying; and I, who had never seen death, sat fearfully by her bed wondering when the end would come. Would it be tonight? Could she live till tomorrow? I could not say. All I knew was that I had heard my parents say to each other that she could never recover, and that she must not be left alone. She had always been fond of me, and she wanted me to stay with her. And yet this silent watch filled me with restless terrors. I dared not move for fear of disturbing her, although I wished that she would rouse herself and say some word to break the silence of the room. The light tried her eyes and so we had no lamp, but the firelight

shone fitfully, now flaming up and then dying down. As the flames came up they threw grotesque shadows on the walls. Granny was propped up against the pillows, and her face had grown terribly thin. Now and again its shadow was thrown, magnified and emaciated, on to the wall behind her bed. Her cap seemed all peaks, and her face was hawk-like. Those shadows fascinated me, but they frightened me also and filled the room with uneasy fears. It was a rough night too, and I had always felt frightened by the sound of wind howling round the house. It reminded me of something terrible which had once happened—something which I had remembered when I was surely too young to have had any memories of my own. A memory of a previous existence? Perhaps.

Suddenly grandmother spoke:

"I don't like that wind," she said. "It reminds me of a terrible thing which once happened. Come and sit by me and listen. I don't want to die without telling someone about the most unforgettable experience of my life."

She lay silent.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Sixteen," I said.

"I was only twelve, and Southover Church had not long been built. People used to come from far and near to see it, for it was unlike any other church in the countryside. Lord Southover had always been a great collector, bringing home treasures from every country in Europe, and when he built this Church for his native village he filled it with rare and curious things which seemed almost out of place in the little village. There were curious carved columns of porphyry which he had brought from a baroque palace in Spain; the twisted pillars of black marble had once stood in a Florentine church; and the deep dead colours of the mosaic pavement had shone on the floor of a house in ancient Rome. The font was roughly carved from a huge piece of red marble, and was said to have held libations in some strange heathen rite. The thirteenth century glass in the windows had glowed like jewels in the walls of a chapel dedicated in a little Provençal town by a company of returning Crusaders. Grotesque episodes in the lives of the saints were carved in deep relief on the doors which he had found in a far-off town in Silesia. The church itself was like one of those baroque buildings that one finds in South Bavaria, and it was set among lines of quiet grey poplars, while close

beside it a thicket of ancient yews suggested the site of an earlier burial ground.

"There had always been a tradition that an ancient church had stood among those yews; and, sure enough, as they dug the foundations, the builders came upon a large quantity of human bones. This seemed to prove that the new church was being placed on ground which had already been consecrated, and these bones were now carefully collected and placed in a stone sarcophagus or casket.

"A crypt had been built under the altar as a mausoleum for the Southover family. It had a low doorway leading into the churchyard, and over this was now placed the sarcophagus containing the ancient bones. As you came down the formal path which led to this door, walking between two stiff Victorian flower borders, you could read the elaborate inscription which told of the finding of these nameless bones, yet ended with the words:

" 'And he said unto me, Son of Man, can these bones live? And I answered, Oh Lord God, Thou Knowest.' "

My grandmother stopped. I wished she would not go on, and yet I longed to know the end of her story. I sat breathless, and after a moment the thin old voice began again:

"My father," it went on, "was the first rector of the new church, and well I remember its dedication. That was a great day in our childish lives—a day of pealing bells, of robed bishops, and of public luncheons, for the whole neighbourhood came to see the church, which was already something of a legend. Southover never seemed to be a new church, and indeed it was not, for the outer walls alone had been newly built. Its interior was crowded with the creations of men of varying minds and differing faiths. It held the memories of a hundred generations. 'Far-fetched' was indeed the word to describe it, and many people called it out of place in the little English village; and yet it was its strangeness which gave it beauty and mystery. That was what Lord Southover had sought for and found.

"Yet I remember my own grandmother saying to my father (she was older then than I am now):

" 'Such things should not be mixed. They don't meet well. They look wrong, and they bring evil. You cannot tell what you have let loose in your church.'

"My father laughed at her at the time, but sure enough,

within two months of the consecration of the church, Lord Southover was dead, and his was the first coffin to be placed in the crypt under the altar. It was a long narrow chamber with, at the far end, a very grotesque representation of the Good Shepherd found in one of the Catacombs. A series of shallow recesses down the sides of the crypt awaited the coffins, and Lord Southover's was now placed in the innermost of these, in no way enclosed, but visible to anyone entering the crypt.

"Lady Southover was a beautiful creature, and to this day I can remember the impression made on me by the sight of her tragic beauty in the heavy mourning clothes which were worn in those days. She could not bear to leave her husband's coffin, and she insisted on spending hours in the crypt every day, kneeling beside it. Every morning, my father himself unlocked the crypt, and left the vault open for her to enter when she would. She always came and went by the private way which led from the Great House to the church, and no one saw her pass. Everyone kept out of the way. In the evening, my father locked the door for the night.

"Some little time had passed, when my parents had both to be away for a few days. I was always proud that, as the eldest of the family, I was already looked upon as able to shoulder a good deal of responsibility, and now I felt it fitting that it was to me, rather than to the old sexton, that my father committed the key of the vault.

" 'Unlock the door at eight in the morning,' he said, 'and lock it at seven every night. Lady Southover won't come later than that, for it will be dark. Do not give the key to anyone else, and keep out of the way when Lady Southover comes.'

"Two days passed. I unlocked and locked the door with conscientious punctuality. Then came an evening when I went out fishing with my brother, and we stayed so long away that we returned to find ourselves in dire disgrace with our very severe old nurse. To bed at once, and without supper, was the sentence, and I was so mortified at being thus punished before 'the little ones,' that I forgot the crypt.

"I awoke in the middle of the night, and there swept over me the memory of that open door. The crypt had not been locked. It was my fault. I don't think you can realise in these easy-going days, the overwhelming sense of guilt with which I then looked upon a failure to do my part in a family undertak-

ing. For a few moments I was completely overcome with despair at the knowledge that I had failed in my trust. But as I grew more awake, I realised that it was not yet too late. I still could lock the door. The key was on my table, and the church nearby.

"I sprang out of bed, threw on a few clothes, and crept quietly downstairs into the garden. It was not dark. The moon was a few days after the full, and I never saw her shaped so uncannily. No beauty in her. She looked deformed and wicked. It was a windy sky, and the clouds fled one after another across the moon, so that her light came uncertainly, broken by patches of darkness. I went quickly along the garden path which led to the churchyard. The three old yews, their boughs spreading to the ground, stood like vast motionless presences, their shadows moving beneath them as the moon came out or disappeared behind a cloud. The words 'the shadow of death' came into my mind as I saw those dark terrible trees. The poplars behind them were, on the contrary, very thin and transparent. They were full of movement—little frightening breaths went through them, as though something invisible were passing.

As I ran up the walk to the crypt, a horrid swarm of bats rushed out, their twinkling flight making them seem like dark stars thrown up from some fretful little universe, to flutter purposeless beneath the majestic march of the distant heavens. I ducked my head, covering it with my hands, and dived for the door of the crypt. As I put my hand upon it, I saw, for one second, in the darkness, a light. It was close beside the coffin. As I looked, it went. The darkness closed over it, and all was still. My heart too stood still. Terror seized me.

"Then I realised that Lady Southover might still be there. Perhaps it was earlier than I thought, for I had not looked at the clock before coming downstairs. It might be an hour when grown-up people were still about.

"Pulling myself together for a supreme effort, I held open the door, and called as loudly as I could:

" 'Is anybody there?'

"The sound of my own voice completed my panic. The vault echoed with the words, the echo coming so close upon them that they were magnified and distorted. A chill silence followed them. But now I could wait no longer. I banged the door, locked it, and fled.

"For a few steps only.

"Then I realised that I had not given time for a reply. In my terror I had locked the door upon the living occupant of the tomb (if living occupant there were), and had left him or her alone for the night in that most gruesome place.

"I know that when I went back, I did the bravest thing of my life, but back I went.

"The pulses in my head were making such a noise that I doubted whether I could hear an answer from within. My own blood deafened me. But I was resolved that, when I called again, it should be with the door shut between me and that hideous black silence.

"I approached the door to find that the initiative was mine no more. From the vault, which a moment before had been so deadly still, there now issued a tumult which filled the churchyard. The door of the crypt was being violently shaken, and voices, many of them, were crying insistently from within. No: this was not Lady Southover.

"I thought the language was not really English, and yet I could make out some meaning in the hasty desperate words. The voices were unlike any that I had ever heard. Were they shrill or deep? I could not say. They were toneless, and yet dominant as the wind, and they were urgent with an urgency I have never before or since imagined.

" 'Open the door! Open the door! They have mixed the bones.'

"With the voices there came a thousand fluttering sounds, as if another host of bats were being driven against the door.

"I was shaking so much that, even had I wished to do so, I could not have put the key into the lock, but I knew that I could never, never open the door upon this unknown horror. I thought I was going to fall to the ground, and to save myself I clutched at the top of the low doorway. It seemed as if the whole church swayed with my weight.

" 'Open the door! Open the door! His bones shall not rest with hers!'

"The agony in that voice was so terrible, so compelling was that cry, that in spite of my terror I found myself fumbling for the lock. The key touched it. Did I turn it? I do not think so, though I cannot say. But at the same moment the frenzied entreaty from within became a violent hurricane, and the door burst open with a crash. I was caught into the

rush of a whirlwind, and the *Something* which came out of the crypt swept me helplessly along. Then the engraved stone at which I had clutched for support came thundering to the ground, bringing with it the sarcophagus behind. It felled me to the earth, and there I lay, helplessly pinned under it. The casket had broken, and the bones were littered all about.

"By this time the driving clouds had almost covered the moon, and it had become much darker. I lay under the fallen stone, my eyes staring into the uncertain twilight. I dared not close them, and I watched, rigid, unable to look away.

"But I could not clearly see the figures, two or three of them, which moved—crouching, bending, turning over the bones. I was aware of their movements, but I could not distinguish themselves. They were so near me that I could feel a little stir of damp, cold air as they passed about, almost treading upon me as they went. I shrank away as far as I could from their wavering uncertain course, but I could not really move, pinned as I was beneath that stone. Perforce I watched their horrible gestures as they handled the bones one by one. Now they would lift one tenderly, fondling it with caresses which seemed indescribably evil; then they grabbed at another with ribald loathing and scorn, tossing it mockingly away, or hurling it brutally to the ground and trampling it underfoot. Sometimes they bent close to the earth near, dreadfully near, to where I lay; and then they whispered furtively, muttering and gibbering. I thought the scene would never end.

"Then the pain in my shoulder became unbearable. I fainted."

My grandmother was silent. I looked anxiously toward her. Was she dead or dying? Surely the telling of this story must have been beyond her failing strength. But no. She lay there quietly, her face less distressed than I had seen it sometimes during her illness, as though by speaking she had eased her memory of a heavy weight. After a few moments she spoke again:

"The sexton found me lying there next morning," she said, "and thought that I had been overtaken by the storm on my way to lock the door of the crypt. I never told my story to anyone, and it was always supposed that only the storm had loosened the sarcophagus."

"And the casket?" I asked. "Were the bones put back, and was it returned to its place?"

"It was not broken when they found it," replied my grandmother.

"Then do you think that the bones are there safely to this day?"

"I know they are not," she answered.

THE THIRD COACH

by

H. R. WAKEFIELD

The only objection I have to the Royal Porwick Golf Club is that the sixth green is only separated by a narrow lane from the Royal Porwick Lunatic Asylum—or rather from its exercise enclosure—the saddest playground I have ever seen. So-called mad people fill me with dread, and yet a certain shamefaced fascination. "There, but for the grace of God, goes Martin Trout"; though why that grace stopped short of these poor lost souls is a curious mystery understood only by reverend gentlemen.

So whenever I was approaching the sixth green—a hole I played by some muscular aberration consistently well—I felt a flickering unease, hoping to Heaven the inmates were locked in their cells; yet if they were out at their pathetic exercises I could not keep my eyes off them.

There was one considerable compensation, however, in this proximity, for it was through it that I made the acquaintance of Lanton, one of the Asylum doctors. I not only took a strong personal liking for him, but he interested me deeply. He is a distinguished alienist, and passionately absorbed in the study of insanity, and yet at the same time he detests his job.

Many a time he has had to cancel a round with me, and nearly always for the same reason, that he has been assaulted by a patient. "Didn't get the hyoscin hydrobromide (or whatever it was) in quite quick enough," he will say, as he surveys me quizzingly yet wearily through a pair of rainbow eyes, "and the Asylum chairs are infernally hard. It took four of our strongest warders to keep him from creating a vacancy on the

staff." As time went on the strain began to tell, and he has lost his resiliency, but he has always remained a charming, and I felt heroic person. He has promised to chuck it if he gets a definite danger signal, for he has the wrong temperament to resist the withering experiences of his day's work much longer.

Those patients who are allowed out take their daily walk along a deserted by-road which runs parallel to the third hole, and one day when I was playing with Lanton, that shuffling, damned parade was passing by just as I hit a quick, short hook into the hedge bordering the road. As I walked towards it my eye was caught by an individual walking alone and writing busily in a note-book. He was dressed in a round clerical hat, a "dog-collar," a clerical frock-coat, a pair of riding breeches, and brown boots. As I approached he looked up at me with an extremely penetrating, cunning, and yet preoccupied expression on his face—and then he went on with his writing.

When we had finished the round I described him to Lanton, and asked who he was.

"The Reverend Wellington Scot," he replied. "And a very curious case. If you would like to know more, come down to my study this evening. That's all about him now."

When I arrived at the asylum, Lanton was just about to set out on his evening round.

He went to a drawer and got out a notebook. "Read this while I'm away. I'll be back in about an hour. There are the drinks and the Goldflakes."

When he had gone I picked up the notebook, and saw that it was filled with a very delicate script. I began to read.

I remember that the reason for my being in the Pantham district that day was that I was paying a visit to a widowed lady of means whom I wished to interest in a benefit scheme. (A benefit scheme is a scheme which benefits me.) I was "Mr. Robert Porter" on this occasion. Ten pounds richer than when I left it, I was approaching Pantham station along a small road which topped the railway embankment. I noticed casually a train approaching—it was too early to be mine—when suddenly I saw sparks flashing up from it. It rocked violently, left the rails, and crashed into a bridge. I saw that the third coach was smashed to matchwood and bodies were hurled from it on to the side of the embankment. I started to run—not for assistance, as you might naturally but erroneously imagine,

but to get the story through to the *Evening News*—which might well result in my returning £20 to the good.

Suddenly I stopped in my tracks, for I subconsciously realised there had been something very peculiar about that accident. What was it? And then I knew. I had not heard a sound. I ran back to the top of the embankment, and there was merely a placid row of metals shining in the sun.

Whereupon I sat down on the grass and thought things over. Like most superior men, I am somewhat superstitious. I was, therefore, convinced that there was some reason why I, alone of all mankind, should have been vouchsafed this vision. The only supernatural personage for whom I have any respect is the Devil, for I believe he looks after his own, which is more than can be said for any of the more reputable deities. I regarded this singular apparition as a hint from him, and carefully recalled the hour of its occurrence in my note-book. I inquired casually at the station, and found there was no train passing Pantham at that time. The vision then probably referred to the future—to some new train not yet in Bradshaw. There were many conceivable ways by which I might benefit by a railway accident. The Editor of *Truth*, for example, might be in that third coach, or various other personages whose demise would not be regretted by me. Pursuing this train of thought I journeyed back to London.

Now I have described myself as a superior man. I had better explain that. A superior man is one who rises superior to his environment. All great moralists from Mr. Pecksniff to the Bishop of London would agree with me there.

Again, a superior man is one who, by grasping some simple principle concerning humanity and acting ingeniously upon that knowledge, makes a satisfactory livelihood. "Ninety-five per cent. of human beings are mugs," for example, which is the one I have acted upon. The Bishop and Mr. Pecksniff might shake their heads over this, but I am convinced it is true.

My father followed a peculiar profession. He conveyed second-rate racehorses from one part of the globe to another. Sometimes he'd be conducting a brace of duds to Jamaica or over to Ireland or France. He received frequent bites and hacks from his charges, but he expected them and, I believe, was invariably kind to these glorified "screws." Consequently he was away a great deal, but, as this traffic was sporadic, had

much spare time, most of which he spent in conveying pints of stout from a pot to his belly.

My mother was a good-tempered slut, and the only quarrels she ever had with the Pater concerned their respective shares of that filthy fluid. Apart from her good temper and her thirst, there is nothing to record concerning her.

My father, a squat, bow-legged little gnome, had that complete, unquestioning belief in the mingled credulity and rascality of his fellow-men which those who are connected professionally with the Sport of Kings invariably share. "Racing," he was wont to declare, "consists of mugs, bloody mugs, crooks, bloody crooks and 'orses."

"And which are you?" asked my mother.

"I ain't neither. I just helps the crooks to skin the mugs by movin' about the 'orses. I've seen too much of it. I've seen blokes who was pretty artful at the doings in the ornery way become just too bloody silly whenever they 'ear the bookie's chorus."

He was so convinced of the peculiar opportunities afforded to bookmakers for plumbing the depths of human simplicity that he suggested having me apprenticed to their profession, but my mother threw a pot at his head for suggesting it. "I didn't bear my boy to be a bookie," was her inflexible decision. All the same, these repeated references to mugs and crooks had the effect of convincing my childish mind that the world was entirely peopled by these two classes. As an example of the lasting effect of those lessons learnt in infancy, I remain of that opinion to this day.

Most of the money for my education went to quenching my parents' thirst, but I was taught to read and write, and acquired the rest myself. In my errand boy days the only literature I could afford was a newspaper, but this was sufficient to enable me to test the truth of my father's generalisation. For the most part it seemed to me triumphantly to support it.

Let me give a few examples. The head of the firm for which I worked was one of the greatest commercial figures in England, and the papers frequently contained articles from his (secretary's) pen dilating on the blessings of thrift, hard work and early marriage to "Miss Right"—yes, he actually used that expression. Yet everyone from the Managing Director to myself knew that he gambled wildly, ill-treated his

wife, and kept a succession of decorative harpies labelled "dancing girls."

Then one of our assistants helped herself to the till and was given three months. She was anaemic, scrawny, middle-aged, yet the papers described her as a "pretty girl." I marked that down; obviously for some obscure reason the populate preferred their minor female criminals to be "pretty," and the papers fostered this harmless inanity. I found eventually that this rule applies to all women under fifty who earn mentions in the Press.

Again. We resided in a semi-slum near the Marylebone Road, and one of our neighbours brought to a close an argument with another of our neighbours with a chopper. The papers described this as a "West-End Chopper Attack," yet anything less "West-End", as I understood the expression, than Milk Row was hard to imagine. I marked that, too. Obviously the populace found something more stimulating in a West End Chopper Attack than in a Chopper Attack in other areas. This extraordinary psychological mystery took me some time to solve, but I learnt to understand it perfectly. And so as I matured and read and read and read, I realised that there is an absolute and comprehensive difference between life as it appears in the Press and life as it really is. I shall not enlarge upon that, for anyone who compares what he reads in the papers about sex, religion, sport, business, the theatre, the many-coloured globe of human activity, with what he experiences himself, knows this to be beyond dispute. When I had proved to my satisfaction that my father was right I thought very hard. Ninety-five per cent. of human beings must *like* to be mugs and mugged, I decided, must prefer soft tales to hard truths; they must find a solace and a stimulant in being incessantly bamboozled by the other five per cent., newspaper proprietors, bookies, bishops, financiers and politicians. Certainly there must be a percentage of mugs amongst these professional men, but roughly they represent my father's "crooks"—in other words, exploiters of the mass credulity of the ninety-five per cent. This is not a thesis on human behaviour, so suffice it to say that I eventually definitely decided the inhabitants of Great Britain were ninety-five per cent. mugs and five per cent. crooks, and I used to find great amusement and instruction in following the workings of this truth down the most obscure and unexpected by-ways of our comic

civilisation. I was then eighteen, a very junior clerk. Not to act upon a profound conviction is laziness and cowardice, so I had to make up my mind which I was to be, mug or crook, exploiter or exploited.

With the necessity for this decision harshly exercising my mind, I went to the White City one evening to observe the reactions of humanity to the spectacle of a succession of thin, rather graceful hounds in pursuit of a metal mechanism, which I discovered about as much resembled a hare as poor Miss Flint resembled a "pretty girl."

As a spectacle it had its points. That deep, dark pool circumscribed by a green and tan track, the focus of the eyes of ninety-five thousand half-wits and five thousand live-by-wits, the curious surging, harsh hum of the Worst Hundred Thousand, the sudden appearance in the distance of a half-a-dozen tiny white two-legged figures with still tinier four-legged figures pacing beside them, wandering round the vast arena till they reached a sort of chickenhouse into which the two-legged hoisted the dangling four-legged, who, stirred by the sound of a bell and the sight of an individual ascending a peculiarly lousy tower, whimpered and grumbled and thrust eager paws through the bars. All this was admirably calculated to put the mugs into the right mood for the crooks' purposes. I wandered about amongst the excited, liquor-sprung horde, fighting their way to rows of leather-lunged sharps who, wedged like unsavoury sardines, bellowed out their inane jargon, and exchanged pieces of cardboard with their lamentable faces gummed upon them for the silver and paper of the Triumphs of Evolution—and I made up my mind.

Some exploiter, a politician as far as I remember, once, in a gust of vote-snatching sentimentality, declared he was on the side of the angels; he would have been hard put to find an ally at the White City, and he would certainly not have found one in me.

It would be humiliating and debasing to be a private in the ranks of muggery, far better to be an officer and a crook. Only so could I keep my self-respect. I consider that this was the decision of a philosopher and a superior man, and I have never changed my opinion.

How to begin? I carefully studied the pages of *Truth*, an organ I have always found most useful; it is an encyclopaedia of muggery. Its editor has kept on my track, but he is at

a hopeless disadvantage, for there is a sucker born every minute and a reader of *Truth* perhaps once a day, odds too great even for a Labouchere. The present editor is a charming personality, and I have to thank his ably conducted periodical for many of my most remunerative conceptions, but I'd have liked him in that third coach all the same.

I decided to make a beginning with a begging letter. It hardly sounded like that, for it was manly, suggesting rows of medals, a patient little wife, and many hostages to fortune. It ended with a pathetic suggestion of suicide, and a defiant repudiation of the dole. I sent this to a carefully selected list, and netted £84 13s. 2d., and then I knew that bounding sense of exhilaration which a man gains from finding that he is desired for success in his life's work.

Shortly after, I noticed one who was clearly a policeman in mufti hanging about, so I changed my address. A week later *Truth* had a paragraph about me, and was good enough to congratulate me on my epistolary skill, which, it suggested, would eventually bring me to a place where I should have few opportunities of exercising it.

My next conception concerned that shocking instance of human callousness, the holiday cat, or rather the cat that doesn't get a holiday, or a square saucer of milk, when its thoughtless owner is at Southend. In a carefully composed epistle I reminded a large number of maiden ladies of this sickening victimisation, and stated that I should devote any funds provided to the cause of feline felicity. I enclosed with it a portrait of a tortoise-shell animal in an advanced state of emaciation. £122 10s. 3¾d. (and another change of address).

This time *Truth* sat up and took notice. By a flash of genius it suggested that the honest victim of circumstances, "Wilfred Town," and the humane Cat Lover, "John Reddy," were one and the same person, and expressed the opinion that this combined individual was well worthy of mention in its Cautionary List.

From these crude beginnings I advanced to far greater subtlety and versatility, till I was making a steady £2,000 a year—sometimes more. But for one thing I could have retired long ago, and that is the scandalous and narrow-minded and anachronistic bar which prevents women from entering the Church of England ministry. Clergymen are no good for charitable schemes, but they are invariably attracted

by possibilities of getting a new suit of clothes by means of a little investment proposition. Maiden ladies, while they like a flutter at times, are splendidly charitable. The combination of these two—a maiden lady parson! Well, it's time our legislators were up and doing.

I was convicted once, but knowing more than a little law got off on appeal, and *Truth* exuberation was short-lived. I have had seventy-four aliases and seventy-four changes of address.

Except in their charitable aspect, I had practically no dealings with women for many years, but then it occurred to me that the right type might be useful to me for business purposes. There are many little jobs for which a woman is better than a man—one of them is getting money out of men. I didn't mean to embark upon blackmail—it earns too long a sentence nowadays—and is extremely hazardous, but it is possible for women to get money from men without going to extreme lengths. I resolved to keep my eyes open. It was about this time that I had that curious experience at Pantham.

I was having tea at an A.B.C. shop one afternoon when the waitress banged down my cup and splashed some of its contents over my spats. I began to remonstrate angrily, and found myself looking into a pair of black indomitable eyes—battle, murder, and sudden-death eyes. So I laughed it off and began watching her as she went from table to table. She was tall and powerfully built, and her face, I was convinced, was that sort which compels men—for some queer reason which has always been a mystery to me—to behave in fatuous, unexpected, and erratic ways. I could see by the expression on it that she was furiously discontented and in the mood to do something drastic and dangerous to improve her lot—in the mood to exploit male mugs, I diagnosed.

I returned to this shop the next day and had a few words with her. But those few words on my part were very carefully chosen, and she agreed to dine with me that night. She was in the mood I had guessed—prepared to slip a double dose of strychnine into every cup of tea, coffee, or bovril in the establishment. She passionately desired pretty clothes, ease, and power. She expressed utter contempt for every member of my sex. I believed her when she said she was a virgin. Very gently and delicately I began to explain my means of livelihood, and suggested she should come into partnership. This

delicacy I found was quite unnecessary, for she agreed with enthusiasm, and like a true enthusiast expressed herself ready to begin work at once.

We started to live together the next day—quite platonically, I may say. I spent £200 on a trousseau for her and carefully instructed her in the technique of her business. She was a wonderfully apt pupil and "quick study."

Within a week she had a wealthy married member of the Stock Exchange neatly on the hook. We had agreed that she should retain 75% of any small sums and the value of any presents she received, and when I say that my 25% represented £84 in five months, the generosity of this expert in American Rails cannot be questioned. But then he began to get a little frightened and rather bored, and he gave Charity to understand that she was about to have a more amenable successor. The critical moment! Now blackmail was barred, so Charity merely rang him up at his home and his office about ten times a day, and he found her waiting for him weeping bitterly every time he entered and left the Exchange, much to his chagrin and the amusement of the men at the door and his fellow-members. There is no law against ringing up business men at home or at the office, or exhibiting all the symptoms of a broken heart in Threadneedle Street, however much susceptible stockbrokers may regret the fact. Charity acted beautifully, and I believe aroused genuine sympathy in the breast of this speculator's solicitor as he handed her a cheque for £2,000, which she and I divided equally as per contract. And she was brilliantly still a virgin!

I grew to admire her greatly, and though we had no sexual relationship whatsoever, sometimes when I heard her turning over in bed, or saw her coming back naked from her bath I knew vague stirrings and excitement. But I repressed them vigorously and, indeed, they were never much more than the ripples on a pond as compared with the combers off the Horn of the average Mug.

Our combined income for the next three years averaged £5,000, not one penny of which went into the coffers of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. By now I was a badly wanted and notorious person, but I have a sixth sense for evading the constable, and I could see retirement and ease before me very soon, when the one thing I had considered inconceivable happened. Charity fell in love with a poor man in the middle

stage of consumption, who most improvidently and prematurely caused her to be with child. After she had told me this she cut short my remonstrances and protests by informing me she must have money to marry on, and that I must supply it to the tune of £2,000 a year for six years.

I replied I would make it £200 a year for three years, and not a penny more.

"In that case," she said, "I go round to the Editor of *Truth* tomorrow and tell him everything."

"And ruin yourself!" I replied. "What's come over you? Be sensible. Have the baby quietly, leave this young dying fool for ever, and concentrate on business. A child might be useful to us. I'll think that point over."

"I shouldn't waste your valuable time if I were you," she answered, "and don't be too sure I *shall* ruin myself. *You're* the big game they are after. If I give you away they won't bother about me, and I doubt if they could convict me, anyway. And I don't mind betting the papers will pay me anything I like to ask for my story after you've been jugged."

"Give me time to think," I said.

Was she bluffing? I didn't believe so. She was probably right. The police would merely use her as evidence against me, and she would be able to get thousands of pounds for her version of the last three years. Yet pay her £2,000 a year for six years! It would *just not* ruin me, and she knew it. The gross ingratitude!

I tried to get her to lower her terms, but she was adamant.

"I don't feel well, and am going down to Folkestone tomorrow for a week. I shall expect your answer directly I return," was her ultimatum.

I spent the most wretched night of my life. I saw all that I had planned for going by the board. Sooner or later I should be forced into extreme recklessness by this dreadful drain on my resources, and then "Ten years' hard labour" at least. This little vixen I had reared! Making her teeth meet in the hand which had fed her, for the sake of some broken-lunged piece of worm-fodder. I'd like to have flung her into a cell full of drunken stokers! And then I dozed off, and woke in the most confident, buoyant mood. That is why I am superstitious, for I have had this experience several times—just when I have felt that I was trapped at last, I have had these sudden flashes of confidence and ease, and always something has happened to

save me. It would come this time! I went to see Charity off, pretending to be in despair, and imploring her to make some concession.

"Oh, shut up!" she said. "I'm not doing this for myself, I'm doing it for Jim. He's sweet and he's straight and I love him. Words you don't know the meaning of, you mixture of dirty crook and frozen fish, so you can work for him or go to clink and work for His Majesty, and you've got a week to choose."

She had just got into a coach about half-way up the train, and I was about to leave when my eye was caught by an individual in clerical attire who was sauntering down the platform and glancing sharply at the people upon it. As he drew near he seemed vaguely familiar to me. Suddenly he saw me, and gave me a quick, meaning look. He passed close to me, and as he went past he said slowly and distinctly: "There's more room in the third coach."

The third coach! The third coach! And in a flash I saw a third coach turn to matchwood.

"There's more room in front, Charity," I said. "Come along!" The compartment was packed, and she came readily. Just as we reached the third coach the whistle went, and I bundled her into a compartment already filled to the brim. She gave me a venomous glance as the train pulled out.

And then I looked round for that slightly familiar individual. He was far down the platform by now, but he turned round, saw me, waved his hand, and disappeared. As the train was passing out I happened to catch my reflection in a window glass, and then I knew why he had seemed familiar, for his face was mine!

I left the station and took a taxi to Pantham station. During the hour's run I was in a state of high excitement.

About a mile from the station we were stopped by a policeman. "You can't go down this road," he said, "there's been a smash on the line."

"What train?" I asked anxiously.

"The down Folkestone express."

"My God!" I cried. "I had a friend in it!"

"Well," he said, "they've got the killed and injured on the side of the embankment. You'd better go down there; anyway, they want help."

It wasn't a pleasant sight. I identified Charity by the

remnant of her watch-garter, which was still hanging to what had been her leg. Then, saying nothing to anyone, I went away. Otherwise she was never identified.

And then, for some reason or other, I became a clergyman. I don't really know why. In fact I think I've become that individual who told me about that third coach.

Here the delicate little script came to an end, and a moment later Lanton came back.

"Finished?" he asked. "Well, what do you think of it?"

"A very rascally and curious tale," I replied.

"But the most curious part of it is," said Lanton, "that there's not a word of truth in it."

"What!"

"The Reverend Wellington Scot was a mild, timid, East End curate. Going down for a holiday to Folkestone he was in the Pantham disaster, and hurled from the third coach on to his head. He was unconscious for ten days, and when he came to he had to come here. He spends every moment writing that story in notebooks. He completes it twice a week. We read it carefully to see if his narrative ever changes, but it is always word for word the same. He is very docile and easy to manage so long as he is allowed to write. For an experiment we took his writing materials away, whereupon he delivered himself of the most appalling filth and blasphemy I have ever heard. He never speaks unless he is spoken to. When he first came in his face was round, chuggy, and ingenuous in expression; it has slowly lengthened, hardened, and its expression has become cunning, watchful and malevolent. That is the story of the Reverend Wellington Scot."

"And the explanation?" I asked.

Lanton shrugged his shoulders.

"How can there be one? I have known somewhat similar cases, though never so perfect, where some injury to the head has changed the disposition and to some extent the memory, but, as I say, never to this extent. As a matter of fact one can find traces of the curate in that narrative. A quotation from Shelley, a familiarity with strange types, a distaste for sex and so on, and, of course, the closing sentences; otherwise he is, as he appears in his story, the precise opposite of what he actually was. Perhaps you may have missed almost the most remarkable thing. His description of the accident, as seen in

his vision, is precisely identical with that of the two eye-witnesses of it, yet, of course, he never could have seen it, and he hasn't read a word since he recovered consciousness. I said just now there wasn't a word of truth in that narrative, but that in a sense is presumptuous and unscientific. The fashionable theory today is that we each one of us create our own particular god and our own particular universe—it is subjectivity's innings. We certainly create our own truths. Fortunately in the case of most of us our truth roughly corresponds with the truth of others. The Reverend Wellington Scot's violently diverges, so we have to lock him up. He has been here a year, and I found he went to a Greyhound Racing Meeting at the White City the night before the accident. Would you like to see him again?"

"Yes and no. On the whole, yes."

Lanton took me along a corridor and unlocked a door. The Reverend Wellington Scot was seated at a table, his face partly shaded by a reading-lamp. He was writing busily, but looked up after a moment and shot that penetrating glance at me.

"I hope you have everything you want, Mr. Scot," said Lanton.

"Yes, thank you, sir," he replied, in the mild, slightly clipped, slightly sing-song voice of a stage-curate, "but I have one little question to ask of you: should the words watch-garter be hyphenated, in your opinion, or not?"

"Hyphenated, I think," replied Lanton.

"I am much obliged to you, and glad to find that we are in agreement. I suppose, sir, I shall be here for some little time yet?"

"Oh yes, just for a little while longer," said Lanton. "Good night."

"Good night, sir," he replied, his pencil already busy again.

"Poor devil," I said, as we walked back to Lanton's study. "Is he happy?"

"Perfectly." replied Lanton. "There ought to be a deep truth hidden somewhere in that fact; and now for a drink."

LAST TIME LUCKY

by

P. M. HUBBARD

I don't believe in trying to horn in on the locals in the public bar of a country pub. Times have changed, even in a village called Fontwell Canonicorum, but the presence of a stranger in an essentially closed community still does not make for immediate enjoyment on either side. So I sat in the saloon, chatting occasionally with the management and for the rest listening with a restful sort of half-attention to the conversation next door. The landlord himself was plainly a Midlander, but wherever he came from and whatever he had been, he was well in with the village. They called him Harry and lost no opportunity of damning him affectionately for a town chap; but they liked him and allowed him to tell them things he knew and they didn't. The contrast of voices was wonderfully entertaining. Neither side modified its dialect at all in deference to the other, as both might have done if they had been talking to someone using what the technicians in these matters now call Received Pronunciation. It was like a real-life version of the story about the Scotsman, the Irishman and the Welshman.

There was some sort of argument going on, with an older man's voice on the defensive and several younger voices, all local, baying him. "I tell you I seen 'un," said the old man. "Twice I seen 'un."

"What did you see, then, Joe?" said one of the younger men. "Go on, tell us, then. What was it you saw, honest?"

"Soldiers," said the old man, "with lights and guns. I see the lights moving, I tell you, down in the bottom, and that made me look. Then I seen the guns."

"Where was you, then?"

"I told you, I was on the road, half way up towards Cranton. Both times it was the same. I was coming down the hill, this way, and I seen 'un down in the bottom, ahead of me. Both sides of the road, they was."

"What was they doing, then?"

"They was along the hedges. Searching, I reckon. Moving along the hedges with lights."

"You didn't see him?"

"Him? No, no one's ever seen him. But there's many seen what I seen. People wouldn't come that way once, not at this time of the year. Of course, with cars it's different."

One of the younger voices said, "There'll be a roadblock next," and there was laughter.

I felt in my pockets for my tobacco and found I had left it upstairs. I got up and went out. It was a horrible pub. It had no right to be, either. When you get a village with a name like Fontwell Canonicorum, all stone and thatch, bedded down in a wooded hollow between the downs and the sea, you'd expect the pub to be all right. Primitive, perhaps, but cosy. The Five Horseshoes wasn't particularly primitive, but it certainly wasn't cosy. It was just uncomfortable and unhappy.

The draughts caught me as I turned up the dark stairs, but for all the movement of air the place still smelt of stale beer. The voices from the bar sounded subdued, as if they were afraid of waking something asleep upstairs. There was someone upstairs, but she wasn't asleep. She was crying. I could hear her. Then I saw her by the front window, looking out over the yard, but as I turned at the top of the stairs, she covered her face and went off down a side passage. I went to my room. It was no business of mine. But I wasn't sorry that I was only going to be there the three nights.

They gave me a ham-and-egg supper by the fire in the parlour. There was nothing wrong with the food, or anything else that you could put your finger on. The girl who brought it I took to be the daughter of the house. She looked wary, but I couldn't swear it was her I had seen by the window. When the landlord came in I said, "What was it old Joe saw? Something in the war, was it?"

He winked. He was a hard-bitten, dapper little man, who might have been a retired engineer's foreman. "Not this war, sir," he said. "Not the last either. It's the story round here. Something about an escaped prisoner. They had French prisoners up in the fort by Cranton. It's ruined now, of course. They say you can still see the troops looking for him. Well, you heard what old Joe said, I dare say. He says he's seen them."

I said, "You haven't seen them yourself?"

He winked again. "Not me. But then I don't reckon I'm what you'd call psychic." I felt sure he was right, and let it go.

Next day I got the car out early and headed southwards for the sea. Every road out of Fontwell Canonicorum runs up-hill before long, but this must be the one for the cliffs. The sign-posts said Cranton. In fact I came to Cranton before I saw the sea. The road climbed all the way, but the sky-line had the blank look of a sky-line with nothing beyond it. Cranton was just this side of the crest and didn't look worth stopping for. I went on up the road, dived between a pair of scrubby hedges and suddenly had half the Channel at my feet.

I was very near the point where the chalk ends and the clay begins. Away to my left were the white cliffs and away to my right the brown, and in front nothing but a cold blue sea whipped patchily into white. It was a comfortless place. I don't think I'd have cared for it even in the summer. To my left a grey rectangular outline broke the green curves of the cliff. I left the car on the roadside turf and went between granite gateposts, lichened and gateless, along a rutted track that ran parallel with the sea.

I have never seen a sadder building. Even when it was new it must have been utilitarian and forbidding. Now the roof was off and the windows gaped. It wasn't very old, as they'd count things round here.

The man came suddenly out of a doorless doorway, saw me and dodged back. He was furtive and fitted the place. Also, when I saw him again I saw he was very dirty and very old. I saw him again at once, because as soon as he'd done whatever he'd dodged back to do—hide something, by the look of him —he came out of his doorway and sidled up to me. You don't see many vagabonds nowadays, not like when I was young, and those you see are mostly vagabonds by choice, what a more earnest and less downright age calls social misfits.

He said, "Come to see the prison, mister?"

I hadn't, in fact, come to see a prison, but I was quite prepared to believe I was seeing one. It was ugly enough and sad enough.

I said, "You the only one left? When do you come out?"

He grinned like a dog and laughed. I thought if I'd had a match handy his laugh would probably have burnt with a blue flame. He wasn't a nice old man at all.

I tried again. I said, "Do you live here, or are you just visiting?"

"Live here?" He looked at me suspiciously, as if he thought

I was making a joke at his expense. "No one wouldn't live here, mister."

So I put it to him direct. I said, "Is this where the prisoner escaped from, then?"

"What prisoner?"

"The one the soldiers look for."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say, "What soldiers?", but something made him change his mind. He licked his lips with a plum-coloured tongue and his little blurred eyes darted to and fro. Finally he said, "Have you seen them, then, mister?"

"Not me," I said, "but a lot have."

Almost visibly, the hope of making something out of it overcame an instinctive reluctance to talk. I put my hand in my pocket. I reckoned five bob was ample. It wasn't his story. I picked two half-crowns out of the loose change in my pocket and brought them out. "You tell me," I said.

He looked at the money and translated it mentally into five shillingsworth of whatever horror it was he fancied. He said, "I only know what I've been told, mister."

I nodded. "Go on," I said.

"Well—he was a prisoner here. A Frenchman, that's what they say. They was all French prisoners here, with soldiers guarding them. Some time back, this was, mind. This one used to get out at night and go and see a girl down in Fontwell. Then one night they caught him and brought him back and put him in solitary. And he swore he'd get out again whatever they did. That's what they say."

"And did he get out?"

He nodded. "That's what they say. Killed his guards. Must have been a dangerous bugger. And they got the troops out between here and Fontwell, because that's where he'd head for, but no one ever saw him. This time of the year it was."

"Did he get to Fontwell, then?"

"I don't know as to that, mister. They never saw him again, do you see? That's why they say he's still trying and the soldiers still out looking for him. At this time of the year, like. No one's ever seen him, of course. Only the soldiers."

"Have you seen them?" I asked.

His eyes were all over the place, but he nodded. "I seen them," he said. He held out an indescribable hand. I gave him

the money. It seemed a good five shillingsworth, and I was not inclined to linger over the bargain.

I got back that evening to a Five Horseshoes that seemed if anything gloomier than ever. I wished I could get away, but I still had people to see in the neighbourhood. As I came downstairs into the beer-stained atmosphere I heard Harry say, "You're early tonight."

"Ar," said Joe's voice, "it's me back."

I hesitated. There didn't seem to be anyone else there, and it might be worth going in, if only to find out why Joe's back made him early. I put my head round the door.

Harry was behind the bar, polishing up. Joe was on the settle near the fire. He was a genuine museum piece. There was no one else.

Harry said, "Good evening, Mr. Marley. Going to join us in here for a bit? The fire hasn't burnt up yet next door."

I observed the formalities and paid for them. I settled in opposite old Joe and said, "I was up at Cranton this morning. That's the old prison, is it, on the top of the cliff there?"

"That's it," said Harry. He almost winked at me. "You ask Joe. He'll tell you."

I looked at Joe. "French prisoners, was it?" I said.

Joe gave me a look curiously like the old horror on the cliff. He wanted to see if I was taking him seriously. I was, in a way. Finally he nodded. He said, "In me great granddad's time."

I was going to say, "What's the story?" but stopped myself. Instead I said, "What happened, then?"

Joe looked at the fire and sucked his lips in. "Well," he said, "there was these prisoners. At the time of the French wars, it was. And one of them. Rowl his name was, he used to climb out at night and see one of the girls here."

"Here?" I said.

He nodded. "Here," he said. "She was the daughter of the chap that had the Horseshoes at the time. A Fontwell chap he was. They was, then." He looked reflectively at Harry, who looked at me. This time he did not wink.

"That I never heard," said Harry. "Used to come here, did he?"

"That's right. Then one night they caught him and shut him in the stable, and the soldiers came and took him off back to Cranton, cursing the place down. Terrible fierce chap, he was,

and very strong. They dragged him off like, with him shouting that he'd come back, whatever they did."

Joe took a pull at his mug and looked first at the landlord and then at me. "Said he'd come back," he said, "if it took him till Judgment Day. And they said they'd see him in hell first. Which they did, in a manner of speaking." He looked into the fire again.

"And did he come back?" This was Harry, absorbed now despite himself. Joe shook his head and spat with perfect assurance into the heart of the fire. "He tried," he said. "He broke out, and killed three of the guards doing it. But he never got here. They had the troops out looking for him, but they never saw him, nor did anyone else. They reckon he must have gone in the bog, with the soldiers on the road, you see. You could then, before they drained the bottom. But they don't know. Only he never come here and never went back there. And the girl drowned herself under the Cranton cliffs. This time of the year, it was."

This time I took the plunge. I said, "And they're still looking for him?"

"Well," said Joe, "it's reasonable, a'nt it? He said he'd come if it took him till Judgment Day and they said they'd see him in hell first. And he a'nt resting, so they can't. They can't give up, neither of them."

Reasonable, I thought. Reasonable was as good a word as any other. It depended on your terms of reference, or something. Harry said, "And you've seen them, but never him?"

"That's right. No one's ever seen him. Speaking for myself, I'd as lief not. He was a terrible fierce chap." He was perfectly serious, and once more I was reminded of the old horror on the cliff. A dangerous bugger, he'd called the long dead Frenchman.

The door swung inwards and three of the younger regulars came in. Old Joe put his nose in his mug and retired almost visibly into his shell. Harry said, "There's a nice fire now, Mr. Marley." I took the hint, said goodnight to Joe and went.

I was tired and went to bed very early. I don't know what time it was when I thought I heard someone crying again. It can't have been late. They were still talking downstairs. I tiptoed to the door and put my head out. It was bright moonlight outside, and she had been by the window over the yard. But she covered her face and went off as I put my head out.

It was the same as last time. I got back into bed but did not sleep much. How long was it, I wondered, since a woman had thrown her apron over her head like that? We had had a cook who used to do it when the situation in the kitchen became intolerable. But she had been in her sixties when I was a child. I couldn't see anyone doing it now, even in Fontwell Canonicorum.

The next day everything went wrong. I could not find the people I wanted, and when I found them we seemed to get nothing settled. I was dropping steadily behind my schedule, and began to face the possibility of having to stay over another day. The thought upset me seriously, and the further I got behind, the more determined I became to finish what I had to do that day. And to crown it all I got lost coming home. My last visit was an isolated farm. I had an A.A. map, but was fool enough to ask the farmer the most direct way to Fontwell. I should have known better, of course. There always is, in fact, a direct way, but even if you can find it, it's slower, and generally you can't. I couldn't this time. I lost my way completely, and it was getting dark. The south-western English countryside is not, after dark, a place of terror, not usually, but it can be extremely confusing.

It was quite dark when I came out of the lane into a slightly more ambitious road, turned sharply up-hill and found, as I had the day before, the whole Channel at my feet. I stopped the car and got out. This time the sea was a gulf of luminous emptiness, with the salt air moving in quietly off it. There was nothing you could call a wind, but the air moved and was cold. There was complete silence. I hadn't much sense of direction left, but I knew that if I followed the coast westwards I must come to the Cranton turning and so down through the valley to Fontwell. I drove on.

I saw the prison suddenly against the sky on my right. There were lights in all the windows. I stopped the car and found a gap in the hedge. It was the sky, of course, luminous and daffodil-yellow, seen through the gaping openings of the ruined building, which now stood in enormous silhouette at the top of the slope above me. The bright wakefulness that had caught my eye was overwhelmed and explained by the place's sheer desolation.

But the illusion would not wholly leave me. The place had been awake. I tried to recapture my vision, and was at once

engulfed by a wave of cold horror such as I have never experienced and could not have believed possible. There was an utter hopelessness in the place, but a hopelessness that could not give up and rest.

I got back into the car and started her up. I was shivering spasmodically. I turned right and found Cranton huddled behind shut doors in the early darkness. I was half way down the hill when I saw the lights. For the third time in perhaps ten minutes I stopped the car and got out.

Down on the dark floor of the valley a faint glow showed where Fontwell waited under its trees. Between, all along the bottom where the stream flowed sluggishly eastwards, the darkness crawled with twinkling yellow lights. They moved purposefully, with a devilish questing intelligence that turned my stomach, though it wasn't me they were after. It was like hounds in a covert, only quite silent. There was nothing to hear and nothing to see at this distance except the lights running to and fro.

The road, of course, headed straight downhill to the valley bottom, where it crossed the soft ground on a built-up causeway, with a bridge spanning the stream in the middle. It was dark all along, but it ran the gauntlet of those eager, devilish lights. Joe had said it was different with cars, and one of the others had laughed and talked of a road-block. I didn't know. There is a place not so far from here where a dismissed and disgruntled servant lies in wait to shoot at his master's coach as it covers the part of the road that was once in his lordship's park. Master and servant have been dead these two hundred years, but I know of two cars that have had their windscreens shattered. I stood on the side of the road, with the engine turning over quietly behind me, and all the time the lights dodged excitedly backwards and forwards in the darkness at the foot of the hill.

I remembered the figure at the yard window, crying there quietly and hopelessly, every spring night, perhaps, for a hundred and fifty years past. I hated their guts.

Damn you, I thought, and heard myself shouting in the silence. "Damn you," I yelled, "damn you for a bunch of bloody-minded dead redcoats, why can't you let him go through and rest, and rest yourselves?"

I turned and ran back to the car, which stood with the door open and the engine turning over quietly in neutral. The lights

still hunted the valley bottom. "Damn you," I screamed at them, "douse your damned torches and let's have some peace."

I got in, slammed the door and set off down the hill. I hadn't gone ten yards before I knew there was something sitting behind me. There is no mistaking it. I once drove across Salisbury Plain by the northern road, that runs past Stonehenge, in the small hours of a summer morning. It was bright moonlight, and almost from the time I left Amesbury I knew I had a passenger. As I say, there is no mistaking the feeling. A car is quite different with someone in the back. The moon was pouring in through the nearside windows, and I had only to turn my head to see him. I never looked, but once out of the corner of my eye I did half see something sitting back, very straight and expressionless, as if it hardly knew whether it liked being driven.

As I say, there is no mistaking the fact, but this was quite different. I had shouted my anger at the lights, but anything I felt was swamped in the appalling flood of pent-up malice that poured from behind me. The lights still clustered on both sides of the road ahead, and I thought I could make out dark figures running. But this was a matter of passive observation. For myself I had no more say in things now than a cavalryman's horse had in the days when they still had cavalry charges. Caught between the accumulated hatreds of a hundred and fifty years, I held the rocking car on the narrow road and put my foot flat down on the accelerator. Headlong, with a little twelve-horsepower engine in front and God knows what forces driving us behind, I and my terrible companion charged the neck of the bridge.

I don't, of course, know what happened. So far as I experienced it, there was a sudden flare of lights. It might have been the car's headlights caught in the stone parapets of the bridge, but I thought I saw faces shouting and white hands grasping metal. There was a shock, cushioned, as though the car had run into deep water or a tremendous gust of headwind, and for a moment everything vibrated and I felt the breath sucked out of me, till I tried to scream but couldn't. Then there was nothing but darkness again and the long pencil-beams already picking out the first houses on the road into Fontwell.

I drove straight on and into the village. As I swung into the Horseshoes yard, the sash of the first-floor window, caught momentarily in the swinging lights of the car, was flung up, but

there was no one inside it. I switched off, jumped out of the stationary car and, leaving the door open, ran into the house.

There were lights everywhere and a lot of singing. I saw Harry for a moment, sweating and enormously cheerful. He said, "Oh hullo, Mr. Marley. We've got a wedding party on."

I got hold of whisky and sandwiches and went upstairs. The old house was full of life. There seemed to be people everywhere. I got to bed early and lay listening to the singing and letting the jubilation lap me round. Even when the singing stopped and the voices died away downstairs, I could not sleep, but lay peacefully, too full of rest to sleep: and no one cried in the night.

COLD IN THE NIGHT

by

MARGUERITE STEEN

It's a tale that loses something in the telling, because most of you don't know Bethell, that little, up-and-at-you North countryman, with just enough Highland blood in him to put a twist in his common sense. A little, pale chap, small and sour-looking, with a soft, biting voice they say he never raised even when he was a sergeant-major—before they forced his commission on him, in the second year of the war. After the Germans had done with him, he simply sat down and waited for the next war. Having left a piece of his skull and a couple of ribs in no-man's land, he was always thinking about going back to fetch them. A man who hunts John Peel's country with a plate in his head and a couple of missing ribs is either a fool or a hero. No one seems to have come to a conclusion about Rory Bethell.

Rory, by the way, tried to put me off telling this tale.

"What's the good of telling a yarn like that to the general public? You've got to be born on this soil, and live on it—and, perhaps, die on it," muttered Rory, "before you get a glimmering of—those things. And besides, it's got no ending. You can't slam that nonsense about the pipe in their faces, and expect them to be satisfied."

I was inclined to agree with him.

"There's an idea now, among editors, that ghost-stories are

—well they're unfashionable," I ended lamely. Characteristically, he chose to take offence at this.

"I suppose ghosts are unfashionable! By James, if an editorial regret could dispose of a few of our local mysteries, I'd agree with them. If some of those Fleet Street fellows had the job of agent in this part of the world for six months, they might have less to say about fashion. Unless they choose to deny the plain evidence of their senses."

My sympathies were with Rory. After the armistice he had fallen—rather luckily, we thought—into the job of agent for the considerable estate of Lamberton, Lord Lowca's place on the Cumberland-Westmorland border. It was a type of work for which, by temperament and ability, he was a pre-eminently fitted. Lowca was by way of being an absentee landlord, which meant that a lot of responsibility fell upon Rory, who had, in the main, a free hand in dealing with it. It looked like money for jam; Rory was the kind of fellow who is constitutionally incapable of working under control other than his own, and to whom difficulties of all sorts are simply welcomed as a challenge to his powers of solving them. On the strength of his appointment he got married, to a very pretty, attractive girl, whose tastes and antecedents were similar to his own. Without bothering to take a look at their barometer, any of the Bethells' friends would have prophesied "set fair" for that couple.

I was a little surprised when I got an invitation to stay with them about a year after they were married, to find them living in a little old foursquare which I knew, having visited Lamberton fairly often in the days of Rory's predecessor, was not the one allotted to the agent. Rory was rather short, I thought, when I commented upon it; but there was not time to go into the matter further, because Stella herself came to the door to welcome us, and it was like paradise, after a fifteen-mile drive in an open tourer on a November afternoon, to see the firelight leaping about one of those beautiful square halls that are a feature of architecture in this part of the world.

By the time we had gathered for pre-dinner drinks, I was definitely prepossessed with my surroundings. My bedroom, although enormous, was well warmed; Stella had found some excellent reproduction stuff to drape the Queen Anne four-poster. The panelled walls had been painted cream, which Rory denounced, rightly as an act of vandalism, but one could not but admit that they, and the white carpet, lent an air of agree-

able lightness to a room which, with its heavy, mullioned windows and uneven oak beams, might have been a trifle forbidding. I complimented Stella when she joined us in the drawing-room, where a log fire was blazing half-way up the old-fashioned wide chimney.

"You've certainly brought civilisation into our barbaric north, Stella!"

"Oh, we didn't put in central heating," she said carelessly, as though she herself did not take much interest in it. "It was the former tenants, who spent on improvements what they saved on the rent."

"By the way," I said, seeing no reason why the subject should be avoided, now we were gathered pleasantly round the hearth, with most other topics of conversation, for the moment, exhausted. It's generally like that, when one has not met people for some time: one rushes at everything to begin with, and then there's a kind of hiatus, until someone starts the real talk, of which the preliminaries are only, so to speak, the froth. "You haven't told me how you come to be settled here, instead of at the Lodge. I thought this was let—some people called Odlam; that's what I had heard."

There was an odd little pause, during which I saw Stella look at him with a flicker of a smile, before Rory replied.

"The Odlams are at the Lodge; they liked it better," he said shortly. Stella laughed outright—I did not blame her; Rory being discreet is like a cow trying to walk across a pile of egg-shells without breaking them.

"Go on, Rory; why shouldn't Simon know? The Odlams got out for—well, for the usual reasons."

"Ghosts?" I said, raising my glass. It is odd how casually one uses words like that up at Lamberton: words which, in town, raise sceptical grins, plain laughter, or cries of "How perfectly too gorgeous! You don't mean *ghosts,* do you?" For us, at Lamberton, all ghosts are real; the unreal things are, more often, the human beings who come in contact with them.

"It's perfect rot!" burst out Rory. "I don't mind telling you, Simon, there's a pretty considerable feud on between me and Odlam on account of it. It's not as if he'd been hoodwinked into taking the place. 'There *is* a ghost,' I told him, when we were talking things over"—Stella gave another hoot of laughter—" 'but it won't give you the least trouble if you take my advice.' In fact, I put it to him plainly that it was sheer

gratuitous prying into the dentistry of a gift-horse, if he turned Byres down for the sake of one second-floor bedroom."

"Which I suppose I'm occupying for the night," I said resignedly.

"Nothing of the sort," cut in Stella. "We've locked the other room up; and if the Odlams had done as Rory told them—"

"Why didn't they?"

"Why are people fools? I wish I'd landed Odlam one good kick in the pants—"

"Didn't you?"—I was surprised, knowing Rory, whose lack of long-suffering where fools are concerned is notorious.

"He would have done," said Stella, "if the Odlams' notice had come at the same time as one of Lowca's snooty letters. I suppose he was feeling cross—Lowca, I mean—because Rory had written him the week before that the Pearsons and the Rabbidges were giving up their houses at the end of the quarter. Rory knew Lowca would go off the deep end if he lost the Byres tenants; so he offered to change houses—he said the Odlams could have the Lodge at the same rent they were paying for Byres. The Lodge is new—at least, it was built in 1860, which is new for these parts. They're quite satisfied with the exchange, aren't they, Rory?"

"What raised the wind on them?" I inquired, thinking that Rory must have had some very good reason for offering his extremely pleasant house, which he had, of course, rent free, in exchange for Byres, which, although picturesque, was old-fashioned in its appointments, and inconvenient in many ways. He turned peevish, however, and, beyond grunting something about "damned nonsense," was not to be drawn. It was Stella who enlightened me, after dinner, when Rory had had to go out to some village committee, and we were left alone.

"It started with their asking a niece to stay with them."

"Not the Blandish girl? The rather good-looking, tall one?"

"Yes; Audrey. Do you know her?" Stella's voice grew warm with curiosity; she is always hopeful when I speak appreciatively—no matter how tepid the appreciation—of any young woman.

"Vaguely. You don't tell me a ghost can put the wind up Audrey Blandish?" I was now completely sceptical. Audrey Blandish is one of those six-foot, modern young women to whom I, as rather an under-sized man, strongly object. I had met her at a hunt breakfast: a big, blonde, cheerful girl, with a

booming laugh and rather good, gingery hair. Not a person to see ghosts, or to fear them if she saw them; insensitive, hearty and good-natured, she would mock to the echoes any one who laid claims to psychic experiences.

"I don't know about putting the wind up. She was cold in the night."

"Why? Hadn't she got an eiderdown?"

"It seems she rushed out on the landing and screamed to Mary Odlam—"

"What? That she wanted some more blankets?"

"They couldn't get her warm," said Stella seriously. "It's not really much of a joke, Simon. She was cold all the next day —I don't mean ordinarily cold; her limbs were quite dead and her teeth chattered. She sat by a fire like this one, with her teeth chattering, and her face quite *blue* with cold. It was in July; they weren't having fires, but they had to light one for Audrey."

"Well, did she go on being blue, and chattering?"

"They sent for the doctor. He said, of course, that she'd got a chill, but she hadn't the vestige of a temperature. She was put into your room—"

"Half a minute: why wasn't she put there to begin with?"

Stella made some gesture of impatience.

"Because she insisted on having the other. She's that kind of fool. They'd told her it was haunted—and, of course, the Odlams are south-country people," she said contemptuously. "It's no use talking to them. It's quite a nice room, you know— they had it redecorated when they came in. It's the only bedroom that has paper instead of panelling—"

"Well, didn't she say anything?" I interrupted. "What made her cold? Didn't she say anything about that?"

"She practically didn't speak for two days. Then she just said she was cold. She had got up and put her fur coat over the eiderdown, but it seemed to make no difference. But she could feel her legs getting numb, and then, suddenly, she was terrified. Can you imagine Audrey Blandish terrified?"

"Not easily. Anything to account for it?"—Rory, I knew, had a complete documentation of all the houses on the estate.

"Nothing whatever, so far as we know. One of the Georgian Lowcas—I forget, which, you must ask Rory—built Byres as a kind of dower-house. There's no record of any unpleasant happening—although, of course," she added, with a laugh, "it

comes under the heading of 'dwellings with inexplicable phenomena.' I wish I knew which of the Lowca agents invented that priceless description! Rory has a list, you know, with particulars of the 'phenomena' all written out in the most beautiful copper-plate hand; but not a word about Byres, excepting 'second-floor bedroom number 3 *possibly* haunted.' Lowca always insists upon tenants being told the worst before letting any of the houses."

"Let's have a look at the phenomenal room," I suggested—partly to see whether Stella was bluffing, but she rose, readily enough, and we went upstairs.

Anything less ghostly than the "possibly haunted" chamber could hardly be imagined. The one in which I was sleeping was much more eerie than the slightly ramshackle chamber into which she ushered me. It was the lumber which had been piled into it which gave it the ramshackle air; actually, it was a room of noble proportions, like the others, but lacking their beamed ceiling, and it was papered in a light modern style, at variance with the odds and ends of furniture. Stella and Rory shared a passion for period stuff. "Of course if we had been using it we'd have had it stripped," she explained. "There's panelling underneath; aren't people criminals?"

I did not offer to occupy it; I had little curiosity about ghosts, having been reared among them, and I liked my present quarters too well. When we returned to the drawing-room Rory had come in. It may have been my fancy, that he gave Stella and me rather a queer look. She told him, carelessly, where we had been. He grunted something, and there was a silence, which Stella broke by suggesting that we should play cards.

"Look here," broke out Rory. "I'm going to sleep up there tonight."

We stared at him.

"I wanted to before," he said, turning to Stella, "but I didn't like to leave you alone on our floor. With Simon here, it's a good opportunity—"

"Don't be silly, darling," said Stella, and, again, it may have been my imagination that detected—well, not a tremor, but an unevenness in her voice. "You know I shouldn't have minded being alone, if I'd known you wanted to sleep up there. But why this sudden interest in Audrey Blandish's ghost?"

"Damn Audrey Blandish. If it was her ghost, she could keep it. It's *my* ghost, in *my* house; and there must be some pretty

good reason why every servant who comes to us refuses to sleep in. If you ask me, that's what cleared Odlam out. His wife was scared of the ghost, but what Odlam minded was having to get his own whisky after eight o'clock at night. Besides," said Rory artfully, "if we are going to have a crowd here for Christmas, we may want to use the room. We can't put guests into it, so I may as well find out if there's any reason for not occupying it ourselves. Any *real* reason," he added, making a joke of it. "I don't see us losing our sleep for any Lowca—deceased—who has a taste for walking about at midnight with his head under his arm!"

To cut a long story short, we helped Stella to clear the bed of the lumber that was piled on it, and Rory himself lit the fire. Besides the blankets, we put a fur rug over the bed, which was amply warmed with five or six hot-water bottles (the mattresses, which were taken from another room, were well aired); and enough fuel was carried up to heat the room until the following midday. Just before he said goodnight, between one and two in the morning—we stayed downstairs until Stella began to yawn —he showed me something which he did not show Stella: the automatic which he had slipped into his pocket. "Damned rot, of course," he said, with the Rory grin, which is half a sneer. "As though a bullet meant anything to *those others!* But one gets a certain amount of self-confidence if one lets fly at something one doesn't understand."

I suppose I ought to have lain awake, in sympathy; as a matter of fact, the strong, northern air and my long journey from town sent me to sleep almost before my head touched the pillow. I awoke to someone shaking my shoulder.

A thin, pale grey of dawn was lying about the room, when I opened my eyes, and, stupidly, did not immediately recognise Stella. "What the devil—" I was grunting, when she gave me another shake. This time I came fully "to," and a glance at her face filled me with the guilty assurance that she, at any rate, had not slept. Her face was thin and grey, with black rings under the eyes.

"Simon! Rory hasn't come down."

"Well . . . was he expected to? I mean—isn't it possible he's asleep—as I was a moment ago?" I said, on a note of mild reproach.

"I've called him," she said, "twice. He hasn't answered."

"My dear! You might have called me fifty times—"

"Rory sleeps like a cat," she said scornfully. "A pin dropping is enough to wake him. I wish you'd go up, and see if he's —all right."

I wondered, a trifle ungallantly, as I fumbled for my dressing-gown, why she hadn't been up herself; then, as I came more fully awake, it occurred to me that Stella, who had had no fears by night, was afraid in the cold dawn to mount the stairs that led to the upper storey. I roared "Rory!" twice as I went up myself, and I will admit to being a little shaken when no answer came back to me save the echo of my own voice, and Stella's whisper from the foot of the stairs: "Take care, Simon! Oh, take care!"

Rory was in bed; at first I thought he was sleeping. Then, for a ghastly moment, I thought he was dead. Only in dead men have I seen that straining of the facial bones, as though they might at any moment break through the thin, translucent web of flesh which appears to be draped across them. His left arm and hand lay out of the coverlet; the right was doubled, and the hand thrust under the pillow in an attitude of rather horrible impotence, as though Rory had, at the last moment, been prevented from doing something he had tried to do. The exposed hand looked queer, flattened, as though a heavy weight had lain on it; the fingers were dead white, as one's fingers go after driving on a cold day. I suppose my voice, when I said "Rory" for the third time, sounded strange: for he opened his eyes, and his lips twisted back from his teeth, which were locked together; one could see the muscles knotted in his jaw.

"Sh-she was r-right—it's d-d-damned cold!"

We got him downstairs, and into my room—Stella's fire was out, but my grate still held a few embers, which were soon coaxed into a blaze. He was incapable of moving, as a man is incapable whose limbs are frozen after a night in the snow. We spent the day in trying to thaw him; but the more hot-water bottles we packed round his back, stomach and sides, the colder he seemed to grow. Stella and I brewed a terrific whisky-toddy, and somehow got a little of it between his teeth. He did not sleep for two nights, and we took it in turns to be with him, renewing the bottles, and giving him hot drinks at frequent intervals.

The only thing he had to add to Audrey Blandish's story, when he recovered enough to talk, which was on the third

day, was that, when the room started to grow cold, he had an idea there was someone there, watching him. He saw nothing, but he could swear the person, whoever it was, was between him and the door. He put up his hand to get the automatic, which he slipped under his pillow, and before he could draw it, a heavy weight had come across his chest and the upper part of his body, pinning it uselessly to the bed. Presently, he said, it dragged itself invisibly across him, and when it was gone, he found himself unable to move, as if the thing had fossilised him with its own ice-cold chill.

A strange yarn; from any one but Rory one would not have accepted it—even with Audrey Blandish's corroborative evidence. Rory and Audrey; a formidable combination. Audrey, because she was the kind of thoroughly unimaginative person who would never admit the existence of anything that transcends normal human experience ("I bet she's invented an explanation of the whole thing by now," said Rory sourly, when I remarked on this. "In six months time she'll have persuaded herself she dreamt it."), and Rory, because that Highland blood of his added to his grim, pugnacious make-up the dubious gift of second sight. His experience had gone a step further than Audrey's; I think, later on, he was a little jealous because my experience went farthest of the lot.

I went to make it perfectly clear that there was not the smallest flicker of heroism in the combination of circumstances which led to my sleeping in what we called "the other room." I had no desire to check up on Rory's account; his word was good enough for me, and Rory himself had had enough at any rate, for the time. They both urged me to extend my visit: Stella's father, for whom I have a weakness, was coming up for a day's shooting. I nobly gave up my room, as most suitable for an elderly and distinguished visitor, and moved into the smaller and less comfortable of the guest rooms, from which the mattresses had been borrowed on the night Rory elected to sleep upstairs.

We had got back after a day's good sport and were spreading ourselves in front of the fire, when Stella called Rory out of the room. A few minutes later, Mr. Squire said he'd go and have a bath, and I wandered into the hall, thinking I'd get out of my wet tweeds at any rate, while waiting for the bathroom to be at liberty—when Rory met me, looking, I thought, a little sheepish.

"I say, Simon; a sickening *contretemps;* the cistern above your room's burst. One of the servants found your things in a devil of a slop, and the bed's soaked through—"

I suppose I murmured some fatuity about "What a bore for Stella": the implications of the business did not immediately strike me.

"I'm terribly sorry, old man. But we've rung up the 'Arms,' and they can fix you quite comfortably for the night," went on Rory. There was a pause, in which we eyed each other.

"I see . . . Well, I suppose that's the only thing to be done; sorry to make trouble," I was beginning, when Rory clapped me on the shoulder.

"I was afraid you'd make difficulties—insist on sleeping upstairs or some such rot." He sounded relieved. I laughed.

"Lord, no! There's none of that brand of heroism about me." I told him. Even as the words left my lips I knew, and Rory told me afterwards that he knew, that for some devilish reason, I'd sleep in "the other room" after all. The Lamberton Arms is at the other side of the park from Byres; you can either drive round by the main road, which is a matter of four or five miles, or there is a complicated system of little footpaths, which will get you there in twenty minutes, if you are sure of your way.

When Mr. Squire, coming into the hall for cocktails, chattily remarked, "A devil of a fog coming up," Rory and I just exchanged glances. He chose a moment when Stella was talking to her father to mutter: "Would you like me to drive you now, before we're landed?" I shook my head, although there was a prickle down the back of my neck. It would have looked ridiculous, and would have meant explanations to Mr. Squire, who, besides not knowing about "the other room," was looking forward to bridge after dinner. "Well, it's your funeral," Rory cheerfully assured me.

"You'll have to sleep on the drawing-room couch," said Stella later on, when the thickening of the fog had confirmed our apprehensions. No one but a fool would have taken a car out, or attempted the footpath across the park. I demonstrated my different brand of folly by saying, "Couch be damned. I hate couches, and I've made up my mind to sample Rory's lodging for tonight."

I do not know what made me say it, or stick to my decision against all her remonstrances. Rory, when she told him, was

furious, but none of us could say much, because of the presence of Mr. Squire. He had to wait for his bridge, at any rate, because Stella went up to get the room ready, and I followed, to help her.

There was nothing about the other room to cause misgivings when I turned in. Rory came up, while I was undressing, and went for me, hammer-and-tongs. We couldn't have a real row, because his father-in-law's room was immediately underneath. Then he announced his intention of keeping me company. I refused—out of bravado, I admit it. I knew I was being a fool, but I was not bound, in my own opinion, to see it through.

"Well, there's the automatic, anyhow," were his parting words, "and, for God's sake, don't be a blithering fool, like I was—keep it in your hand, and try not to go to sleep." I could have laughed at the final injunction. I knew that, whatever else came my way, sleep would not be my visitor—at any rate, until dawn was well in the sky.

The room was very close, the fire having been lit and the windows closed since shortly after dinner. We had played cards until after two. With firelight and lamplight, and Stella's noble efforts to "clear up," it looked really inviting. I had put a couple of books by the bed, which was lavishly heaped with bedclothes—a not too agreeable reminder of what the night might bring forth.

I decided—naturally, I think—not to put out the light. Getting into bed, I lit a cigarette, laid the automatic close to my right hand, and picked up one of the books. I will not pretend that I felt calm, or undisturbed, or anything but most damnably afraid. The best I could do was to put as good a face as possible on the situation. But I could have kicked myself for refusing—out of sheer pig-headedness—Rory's offer to share my vigil.

I must have been reading for nearly an hour, when the first hint of chill came. The fire, which I had banked up when I got into bed, was still roaring up the chimney, and my water bottles were hot, but I myself felt cold. The realising of this set my heart pounding, and for two pins—I am aware I am not displaying myself in a noble light, but the truth happens to be important—I'd have leapt out of bed and yelled for Rory. I was kept there only by my shamed recollection of how different Rory's conduct had been in my place.

It may not strike the reader that there is anything particularly sinister about lying in bed, getting colder every minute. It is not an uncommon experience, in a strange bed on a winter's night. But there was something unholy, almost obscene, about this coldness. It started, not with one's outer person, but within, in one's very entrails; when I felt that my very stomach and intestines were turning, not to the clean coldness of ice, but to some loathsome and clammy plasm that moved about my interior, I received a positive shock to find, on touching my own arm, that the surface of my flesh was still reasonably warm. It did not long remain so, however; and presently the fear laid hold of me, that my fingers were going too dead to control the automatic, which I had picked up as soon as I became aware of the chill.

As though I myself were its generating centre, I could now feel the cold spreading about the room, and presently noticed a curious phenomenon. Everyone has noticed how, on a frosty night, the rays of street lamps are broken into myriads of little sparkling threads that radiate from the core of the light and form a penumbra with an iridescent circle, mainly greenish in colour, at their extremity. When I saw that the lamp was doing this, I knew it was not my imagination: that the room was really very cold indeed, and that the fire leaping in the grate had no power to affect its coldness.

It was at this point that I became aware of something standing on my left. Became aware is the correct expression, because I could not, at first, see it. How much of my imagination gave it, later, its dimensions, I could not say. It dawned upon me, if one may so phrase it, gradually, as a figure about the height of a tallish man, but at no moment did it define itself clearly as a human shape. One might say it was coffin-like, if this were not to call too obviously upon the laws of association to make it acceptable as a definition. As I stared at it, it seemed to move a little towards me.

This was the moment when, if my body had not gone back on me, I should have used the automatic. I had just time to make some movement—heaven knows how feeble—to raise the weapon (let me at least say that, although terrified, it was not fear that weakened me; my right hand was absolutely dead —as it remained for another forty-eight hours), when the thing seemed to topple forward. I heard myself give a squeak as it dropped across me: not, at first, as a dead weight, but

gradually increasing its pressure, so that, through all the coverings which Stella had provided, I could feel, not only its human shape, but its cold. I have no idea how long it remained there before, with a heavy, dragging movement, it drew itself across me and dropped, with a muffled thud, on the floor on the other side of the bed.

That I did not imagine this is proved by an incident of the morning which followed. It appears that when Stella took her father his morning paper (he always breakfasted in bed when he stayed with the Bethells), he remarked testily, "I wish to heaven you'd tell Simon not to read heavy books at night; or at least to put them down before he goes to sleep. I was nearly shot out of my skin when the confounded thing fell down about ten minutes after I'd dropped off."

I don't know how much of me remained to make further observations; some still active lobe of my brain registered the thing's passage across the room until it came to the wall, where, in the traditional fashion, it proceed to vanish. I know now that it wasn't heroism that kept Rory in his bed until I went up in the mornnig. I found myself, when it had gone, incapable of moving a finger. I was no longer locked into immobility with the cold; on the contrary, my body soon ached with the long shivers that rattled the bed under me. After a while, I became too exhausted even to shiver.

I don't remember their finding me; nor do I remember much about the measures they took to revive me. They were both very kind, considering what a fool I'd been, and Rory, at any rate, frankly envious when I was able to tell him what I had seen. Mr. Squire had gone by the time I was about again: very mystified, said Stella, about my "chill," and full of recommendations to take this and do that. "A young fella like that oughtn't to be laid up with an hour or two in the wet," was his covertly contemptuous reference to our previous day's shooting. I have never quite lived this down: Mr. Squire still regards me, I fear, as a weakling.

Frankly, I had no desire to discuss the matter any farther; I was content to write it down as inexplicable—a form of dismissal that comes natural to those born and bred in this strange country. But Rory, somewhat to my surprise, reopened the subject, on an afternoon when Stella had gone up to the golf course.

"Do you know the exact spot where that—er—thing dis-

appeared, Simon? I mean, could you show me just where it happened?"

"I suppose I could." I had no desire to cross the threshold again of "the other room," but, without appearing a poltroon, it was difficult to refuse. We went upstairs, and I showed Rory, as nearly as I was able, where the disappearance, or evaporation, or whatever it was took place. And Rory, of course, started tapping. This, of course, is the place where, if it was fiction, the grand climax would appear. You will, I hope, remember that it is the sober truth, and also my warning, and Rory's objection, that the story has no proper ending.

For a moment it looked as if we were going to have our climax. Rory tapped a bit, tapped again, and cried out to me, "Have you a knife, Simon?" When I produced it, he stabbed it into the wallpaper which gave, as though a space lay behind it; and after about a quarter of an hour's tearing and scratching, we had laid bare a little square cupboard door. We grinned, to think how furious Stella would be, to have missed the moment of discovery, and I, at least, fully expected that we should find part of a skeleton, or a dagger, or some other trifle, witnessing to the deed of darkness which had set a phantom adrift in Byres Hall.

And we found—an old clay pipe!

As an anti-climax to our experience, I think you will agree this could hardly be beaten. It was not thinkable that a ghost would make so much ado about an old church-warden pipe, obviously the property of some peaceful Georgian tenant who, as Rory observed, had probably had to sneak up there to enjoy his harmless vice unbeknown to a censorious lady!

I refused flatly Rory's invitation to sit up another night with him, to see if the spectre was exorcised; but shortly after my return to town I received a note from him:

"All the trouble seems to be over! I've been sleeping in 'the other room' nearly a week now—Stella is paying a visit to her sister. Not a sound, not a sign. So we may take it the pipe was the root of the trouble. I should hate to think of you or me carrying on like that, when we've passed over, because of a stray packet of Player's that one of us had left in a drawer!"

ZARA AND ZITA

by

CHARLES BIRKIN

He was an extremely charming young man. At first Zita had been doubtful about flagging him down, but Zara had told her not to be so idiotic. Two men and one girl—no! That would have been foolhardy. But two girls and one man—yes! And they had been getting pretty desperate.

It was nearly ten o'clock and they had promised to be at Peter Beckwith's party by midnight. They had warned him that they might be late but they must not make too tardy an appearance. Peter's parties always went on for ever, but he was relying on their coming at a reasonable hour to help him get things under way. He had said so and they knew that he meant it.

They were both of them very fond of Peter, Zara especially. In fact, the next time that he proposed to her, and she took it quite for granted that he would do so, and girls always know about such matters, she had decided to accept him.

And then, a few miles from Dorking, they had had a puncture. It had happened on a side road and as far as they knew there was no garage within miles. Anyway, on a Sunday night in mid November they would all have been shut. It had been Zita's fault. Zara had told her repeatedly over the past two weeks to collect the spare tyre from Woodford's, or they might be absolutely stranded, and she had promised that she would, but had she done so? No, she had not!

And they should never have stayed on for dinner with Hugh and Kate Sherwode. They had intended to leave at seven, had declared this resolution firmly even before they had started out, but when seven o'clock came they had been persuaded to remain. The traffic, they had been told, would be far easier later on in the evening.

Their capitulation had been Zita's fault, too. She always enjoyed herself so intensely and would never leave, with the result that she was invariably behind time for the next appointment, and Zara was getting sick of playing nagging secretary to her.

Zara and Zita were devoted to one another as, indeed, identical twins so often are. They were breathtakingly pretty, very gay and greatly in demand. Their male friends were legion and their girl friends numerous. They were quite rich, which was nice for them, and lived happily together in a penthouse in Portman Square which had a roof garden and faced south, a circumstance which was also very nice for them. Their father had given them a seven-years lease of it as a twenty-first birthday present, which had been nice of him.

And so, owing to Zita's sociability and lack of foresight, they had been left cowering in the pouring rain hoping, without much foundation for doing so, that they might get a lift back to London. If they found one quickly they would still have time to bath and change and be at Peter's house in Chester Row by twelve o'clock.

Their car could stay where it was until the morning, and they would telephone the Sherwodes and ask them to arrange to have it collected. People never minded fagging for them, or so they thought, and in the main this was true.

They had been trying to shelter under a slight overhang in the bank of the lane, and had been within a few hundred yards of the main road, when the Bentley had come up the steep hill behind them. It had been one of the beat-up pre-war models with a canvas hood and talc windows, which car-minded enthusiasts still treasure. It had slowed down as Zara had stepped forward and had then come to a halt and a fair-haired young man had stuck his head out of its side, peering at them through the sheeting rain. They had not known until afterwards that he had fair hair as it had been encovered by a battered tweed cap.

"Is that your car which looks so disconsolate about half a mile down the road?" he asked politely. "Can I be of help in any way?"

"I'm afraid not," said Zara sadly. "We stupidly came out without a spare."

"That was most unwise," the young man said rather aggravatingly.

"I know," said Zara.

"Then may I give you a lift?" he asked.

"We're trying to get back to London," Zita said with infinite pathos.

"Well, so am I," he said briskly. "So hop in the back."

They had been grateful to have some protection from the

downpour and had climbed in obediently. At first he had not been very talkative. As they neared Dorking Zara asked: "What part of London are you going to?"

"Chelsea," he said. "And you?"

"Portman Square," said Zita, "but if you'd be sweet enough to drop us in the King's Road we'll get a taxi."

"Nonsense," said the young man in an authoritative voice. "On a night like this you might have to wait hours. I'll take you to your door, although of all the silly coots to start off without a spare tyre . . ."

"We couldn't have changed it even if we had had one," said Zara with a show of spirit.

"That doesn't astonish me at all," he said, and somehow contrived to make it sound like a compliment, so that his passengers could not be annoyed.

His name, they discovered, was Giles Wheatley. He was, by his own account, a portrait painter, not as yet a very good one, but ambitious. He must, they guessed, be in his late twenties. Before he had taken up painting, he told them, he had been a stockbroker but had not cared for the life, which he had compared, with a signal lack of originality, to being a treadmill. When his mother had died he had thrown up the job and had taken a studio in Glebe Place. "Before that," he said, "I, too, used to live in Portman Square, so you don't have to direct me. Mind if I smoke a pipe?"

"Not at all," said Zita.

"How's the time?" asked Zara as they came to the top of Putney Hill.

Giles brought his left hand close to the light on the dashboard. "Ten minutes to eleven."

While they were stationary in a traffic block by Putney Bridge he began to whistle, waving his briar to the rhythm of the tune. He whistled well. Zita recognised it as being one of her favourites, an old number which had recently enjoyed a popular revival. *"I'll get along without you very well."*

"Do you like those dirges?" she asked. "We've got quite a collection of my father's ancient records. He's hoarded them from the year dot. Some of them are absolutely prehistoric."

"Yes, I do," he said. "But that one's not so old!" He sounded faintly indignant. He drove with panache, and rather too fast. As they were circling Marble Arch he inquired: "What number?"

They told him. "That," he said, "is a coincidence. It was my address. Third floor." He turned his head. "Which one is yours?"

"The top," said Zita. She thought that if she said the penthouse it would sound boastful.

They drew up outside the door and the young man got out. "After having been so very kind," said Zita, "and having brought you so far out of your way, won't you come up for a drink?"

"No, really," said the young man. "I don't want to make you late for your date." Under the lights they saw that in a big blond way he was very good-looking.

"You must," insisted Zita, "if only for a minute. It's not payment for our fares! We would honestly like you to."

"Couldn't we make it 'payment deferred'?" he asked.

"Or a first instalment?" said Zita, and then thought that she had been too forward.

They went together through the hall, and he raised an untidy eyebrow. "Do men often behave strangely when they're with you two?" he said.

"Not unduly," said Zita with dignity, to cover up her previous lapse. "Why should they?"

"I thought they might suffer from double exposure!" he said. They stepped into the lift. There was no sign of Coats, the night porter. "Is Chaffey still here?" Giles asked.

"Yes," Zara said. "He keeps on saying that he's getting on and threatens to retire."

"He was always an idle sod!" said Giles amiably. "I beg your pardon," he apologised. "I don't usually use bad language in front of lovely girls. But Chaffey retiring? At his age? Why, he's a mere boy! What, I ask myself, is the world coming to? Of course," he added thoughtfully, "he must have made a packet out of tips."

Zara found her key and they let themselves into the flat. They took him into the large sitting-room which had a dining table and a built-in bar in a recess. Outside the rain was drumming an insistent tattoo. "If you don't mind waiting a minute while I get rid of this soaking coat," Zara said, "I'll get you your drink. Which would you like, gin and tonic or whisky?"

"A small whisky, if I may," he said.

"You can get it for him, Zita," said Zara, "and one for me

as well. It may ward off pneumonia." She disappeared into her bedroom.

"I always wanted to see the inside of this flat," said Giles, "but I had no idea it held such glamorous occupants. But in those days it didn't! It belonged to a rather dreary middle-aged couple who were constantly complaining about the girl on the eighth floor sunbathing on her roof in a 'two-piece.' In a way I sympathised. What she had was much better left hidden!"

"We've only lived here for a year," said Zita. "There was a tenant in between your disapprobants and us. He was a Pole who tried to sting us for his revolting carpets and curtains."

"I am sure there is no such word as 'disapprobant,' " said Giles. "You are trying to make me feel inferior! So now I am going to be impertinent." He gave her an enchanting grin. "I'd very much like to draw you. Would you and your sister sit for me sometime?" He produced his notecase from which he extracted a card. "This is where you can find me." He propped up the little square of pasteboard on the chimney-piece.

Zita smiled. "I don't see why not," she said, "unless it's from 'life'! As a matter of fact I'm a professional model. Fashion."

"I won't expect you to buy the result," he said, "or any nonsense of that sort. It would just give me great pleasure to have a go."

Zara came back. "Zita," she said, "take off those wet clothes or you'll get your death. You can leave Mr. Wheatley to me." She went over to the bar and picked up her drink.

"I've been asking your sister," said Giles, "if you would both be kind enough to sit for me."

"What could be more flattering?"

"You may not feel so flattered when you see the result," he said. "I am regarded as being *avant-garde!*" He laughed, emboldened by her prompt acceptance. "I like to know about my 'subjects'," he went on, "so that I can portray the soul. The aura and all that fallal!" he explained. "Perhaps, to further that end, we could make up a foursome one evening and go on the town? The '400' and Ciro's. Have a gala evening. White tie and tails. How about it?"

Zara was surprised by this proposal. "Isn't the '400' a little staid," she said. "A mite *vieux jeux?* And why in fancy dress? And I've never heard of Ciro's! 'The Potting Shed' would be more fun; and I'll drum up another man. I'm not so keen on blind dates."

" 'The Potting Shed'?" Giles repeated. "I'm not well up in nightclubs except for the normal beat. But we'll go wherever you like. I'll call you." He looked at his watch. "Time I buzzed off, and you'll have to be getting into your party finery." He went towards the narrow hall. As Zara escorted him to the door Zita came out of her bedroom. "Goodnight," Giles said. "Be seeing you. It's all fixed up. A night on the tiles." The lift was still there and he got into it.

"What an unusual and delightful young man!" said Zita when his head had disappeared from sight. "Nowadays they don't often come like that. What a bitch you were to send me away!"

"Only shows the rubbish that is talked about the dangers of pick-ups," said Zara. "Now, for God's sake hurry up and we'll just be able to make it."

Peter Beckwith's party had been terrific fun and they had not got home until well after three. A lot of their friends had been there and he had invited a coloured guitarist who had also sung too beautifully, and they had cooked eggs and bacon and kedgeree in Peter's kitchen.

Zara had enthused about their meeting with Giles Wheatley and Peter had said that he would be delighted to join their outing. It may have been the admiration which she had shown for her new-found friend, or that may not have had anything to do with it, but shortly afterwards Peter had asked her for the third time to marry him, and she had said 'yes.'

In the morning Zara and Zita slept late. They had left a note for their 'daily,' Mrs. McEwan, not to call them before half past ten. Zita's work diary showed no appointments until Tuesday, and as Zara's job in a gift shop was strictly afternoons only, there was really no hurry.

When Mrs. McEwan brought in Zita's coffee and toast and orange juice she announced sourly that one of their guests had not only left his wallet in the sitting-room, but also an untouched whisky and soda, an extravagance which she could only consider to be a wicked waste, although of course some might not see it as such. Some did not have to mind their pennies. She had thrown it away down the sink although it had gone against the grain to do so. The wallet, naturally, she had left where she had found it, never having been one who liked to pry.

When she was dressed Zita went in to the sitting-room, and there it lay on the table near to the spot where Giles's drink had stood. It was made of worn pigskin and had a cut-out gold monogram, G.W., sewn into the upper righthand corner.

She had his address somewhere. She would take the notecase to Glebe Place this afternoon, for he might be needing it. She walked over to the chimney-piece, but there was no card there. Zara must have put it away. No, Zara said, she had done nothing of the sort. Mrs. McEwan had probably thrown it out when she had been tidying up; but there was no trace of it in the dustbin.

They began to discuss the previous evening. It had been fabulous, hadn't it, and how did Zara feel in the cold light of day about being an engaged woman? Panic stricken—or purring? Zara said that she felt wonderful.

Later Zita looked in Giles's notecase to see if there might be another card but, except for a cheque book and some letters, it was empty. No matter, old Chaffey might know, and if he did not, they could ask in Glebe Place.

They had promised to lunch with Peter and his brother, and afterwards the two girls took a taxi to Chelsea, Zara complaining that they had forgotten to telephone the Sherwodes and that the police would have undoubtedly found the abandoned car and by now would have officiously towed it away. In Glebe Place they tried several houses, and also the post office in King's Road, but nobody had any idea where Giles might be living, so they went to a cinema.

When they got back to Portman Square Chaffey, who was about to go off duty, was talking to the night porter who was taking over. Zita stopped him as he moved away. "Oh, Chaffey," she said, "I wonder if you could help us? A friend of ours, a Mr. Wheatley, was having a drink with us last night, and he left his notecase behind. The trouble is that we don't know his address and we don't seem to be able to find it out. He said that it was somewhere in Glebe Place. Do you happen to know the number? He's not in the telephone book. He told us that at one time, before we came, he had a flat here."

"Mr. Wheatley, Miss?" Chaffey puckered up his forehead in an effort to remember. He was grey haired and, in his uniform, impressive. He held himself magnificently, a tribute to his long ago service in the Brigade.

"Yes," Zita repeated. "Mr. Giles Wheatley. A big, tall, fair young man," she added encouragingly.

Chaffey looked at her curiously. "There was a young gentleman of that name here once, Miss," he admitted, "but it was a long time ago. It certainly *was* before you moved in. Why, it must have been before the war."

"He seemed to know you," said Zara. "He asked us if you were still here."

"Did he, now?" Chaffey was puzzled. "It couldn't have been the same gentleman, Miss. Proper lad, he was, always on the go, and hitting the high spots. Nice enough young fellow, mind you, but on the wild side. All the young ladies used to flock around him. Had a finger missing from his left hand, I remember. Told me once he lost it tinkering about with some machinery. They didn't have the safeguards then that they do now. No," he said again, "it couldn't have been the same gentleman. The Mr. Giles Wheatley what had Number Ten died a long while back. He was killed in a car crash . . . must have been in the summer of nineteen thirty-nine. Had two girls with him at the time. Hit one of them there lorries on a skiddy road. A shocking thing, but he did drive too fast. I used to try and reason with him. Mrs. Chaffey was very cut up about it."

"I see," said Zita. She could not meet Zara's eyes. "As you say, it must have been another Giles Wheatley."

They did not speak until they were in the flat. Then Zita took the notecase from her bag and drew out its contents. The first of the remaining cheques was partly made out, but had been left unsigned. "Pay Sylvia Hornby . . . the sum of twenty pounds." It was dated July 18th, 1939.

She pulled out one of the letters. It was a woman's handwriting and it had been left in its envelope. It was addressed to Giles Wheatley, Esq., Flat 10c, and on the next line was the number of the block in which they were themselves living. The postmark was July 16th, 1939.

She handed the envelope to Zara, who opened it. "My darling Giles," she read slowly, "Thursday would be heaven! We might dine at The Wheatsheaf, which is a few miles the other side of Dorking. Do you mind, darling, if I bring my sister, Sylvia, with me? She's up from Cornwall for a day or two and will be staying at the flat until Friday. As you know, she has had a dreadful time with Philip, and has been through hell, and I would so like to give her some fun. She can't afford to do any-

thing. We can meet again on Friday—by ourselves. My love to you, my darling. Rosemary."

White faced, Zita said: "Did you notice his hands?"

"Yes," said Zara, "I did. It was when he looked at his watch in the car. I remember, too, that he kept his left hand in his trousers pocket as much as he could."

"What can it mean?" said Zita. "Come to think of it, we neither of us touched him at all, did we? Never shook hands or anything? And he left his drink." She glanced down at the letter which Zara was holding, and a chill wind seemed to blow around them. "What are we to do with the notecase?" she asked.

Zara moved over to the fireplace. "Rosemary won't want it," she said. She stood weighing the notecase in her hand, and then she dropped it on to the glowing coals. They were both remembering their drive of the night before. The notecase browned and curled and was reluctant to burn.

Zita's eyes were tear filled as she looked at Zara. Oddly enough she felt no fear. "It was kind of him, tho', wasn't it?" she said. "It was so very kind of him, Zara."

"Yes," said Zara, "it was." She watched the flames beginning to curl round the edges of the pigskin. "I think, darling, that he must have been trying to give us a warning. He did not wish to frighten us, and so he left the notecase so that we should find out for ourselves." She smiled a little ruefully. "What he had not allowed for," she said, "was that you might fall in love with him."

The doorbell rang and, without replying, Zita went out to answer it. The night porter was waiting on the landing. "Excuse me, miss, but it's about your car. It's been in the mews all day and there's a fellah wot says it's blocking his entrance."

Zara came along the hallway and stood behind her sister. "I'm very sorry, Coats, I'll come down now and move it."

She did not look at Zita as the man followed her into the lift.

OUT OF THE EARTH

by

FLAVIA RICHARDSON

Antony Wayre felt that he could never forget the horror of that night. Even when the actual experience had been forgotten and lived down, there would be intervals of madness when the whole scene was reconstructed in his memory. What Sylvia, his wife, thought, no one knew, for she kept it closely to herself. All her energies were given to keeping Antony from brooding.

It often happened without any preliminary warning whatever. Antony and Sylvia had bought a small cottage called "Roman's" in Gloucestershire. Since the war, Antony had been indefinite in his plans, unable to get a decent job anywhere that would bring in sufficient for their wants and yet give him time to go on with his own writing. Then, at the end of 1924, his godmother was killed in a motor smash and he found himself the possessor of five hundred pounds a year, long before, in the ordinary course of events, it would have fallen to his lot.

He and Sylvia had at once started to look for a country cottage where they could settle down. With what he expected to make by writing, Antony judged they could manage well on his new income by living quietly. Sylvia, who was fond of gardening and of a country life, planned to breed chickens and ducks for their own use, as well as to grow fruit and vegetables.

After much hunting, they found "Roman's" and knew it was the home of their choice. The cottage was small and compact, built at the top of a hill, two miles from the village but only a quarter of an hour's walk across the fields from a small market town. The nearest neighbour lived at the bottom of the hill.

The first month they were there passed without noticeable event. They were both in love with the house, both busy all day and tired and healthy enough to sleep perfectly at night. Had they not done so, it is just possible they might have had some warning of the horror that was to come upon them.

Shortly after Christmas, Antony Wayre went to dine with the doctor who lived in the house at the foot of the hill. Sylvia

was invited, but there was a thick white mist from the valley which had risen even to their altitudes and as she had a bad cough and cold she decided to stay at home by the fire.

Antony, being a good husband and remembering that his wife was alone in the house—for their daily help went as soon as she had laid the supper—did not stay long with the doctor and was walking up the hill again by half-past ten.

The mist was rolling up in strange white shapes, and by the time he had reached his own garden gate he could not see the lights from the doctor's house, nor any of those from the outlying villas of the town, usually to be seen through the trees. He pulled his scarf up more closely round his throat and shivered a little.

Suddenly he was aware of a strange feeling in the garden; it was hard to define; hard to pin down to anything in the least definite, yet it was strong enough for him to stand still and peer around. He was strangely conscious of the presence of a second person.

The feeling was so strong that Antony called out sharply, "Who's there?" wondering if some thief were hiding in the garden with intent to despoil the chicken run. But there was no answer; the white mist rolled up in deeper waves till it seemed to engulf him. It was becoming hard—with the mist and the darkness—to see even the garden path, in spite of his electric torch.

Shrugging his shoulders, Antony went on to the hall door. Rather to his surprise, it was bolted. He knocked twice, and as he did so the feeling that he was accompanied grew stronger.

A minute later Sylvia opened the door and half dragged him into the hall, shutting and bolting with feverish intensity.

"Hello! What's up?" said Antony naturally surprised. Then, remembering his own sensations, he asked as casually as he could, "Have you been frightened? Did you think you heard someone about?"

Sylvia laughed nervously and backed into the drawing-room. "No, oh no," she said, "only—it's the first time you've been out without me and I suppose I got a little nervous. There's a nasty mist up, isn't there? The house seems full of it."

Antony knew his wife too well to take her words at face value. He could see that she was on the verge of hysteria and cursed himself soundly for having left her alone, even for a few hours. He ought to have remembered that she was not

used to the country and that the silence was bound to affect her nerves.

Very deliberately, with the impression of infusing an air of everyday life into the situation, he divested himself of coat and scarf and put his stick into the stand, then lit a cigarette. Then he went back into the drawing-room where Sylvia was waiting for him, the door wide open so that she could watch him in the hall. The room was, as she had said, decidedly full of mist, but it was not too badly lit for him to see that her eyes were wide with horror and her hands trembling as she sat down and picked up her kitting, making a feeble pretence at normality.

"Sylvia, what is it?" Antony spoke sharply. His own nerve was beginning to falter. "What has happened? Why are you frightened?"

She lifted her eyes from her work and gazed at him.

"Tony, Tony," she began, and her voice held a throb of fear in it. "Tony, I don't know what it is, but there's something dreadful about this house tonight. It—the feeling, I mean—came on about an hour ago; I've been sitting here, praying you wouldn't be very late. I began to think I should go mad."

Antony shook off the creeping horror that was beginning to possess him also. "Nonsense, darling," he said, as cheerfully as he could, "You aren't feeling very fit; your cold's pulled you down and your nerves have given out. I was a fool to leave you tonight; forgive me, dear. I'll make some cocoa, shall I? And we'll have it by the fire before we go to bed."

His effort at normality seemed to pull her together, but she would not leave him alone. Almost clinging to his coat, she went with him to the tiny kitchen and helped to fetch the kettle and the tin of cocoa. Curiously enough, there was hardly any mist in the kitchen; it seemed to have concentrated in the drawing-room.

"Something to do with the aspect of the house," Antony thought to himself, but he did not comment on it to his wife.

Over the cocoa, Sylvia seemed to become happier, though she jumped badly when a log fell out of the fire on to the hearth.

"What did you talk about at the doctor's?" she asked.

Antony shrugged his shoulders. "Everything," he said with a smile. "The birth and death rate of the village, poultry feeding—by the way, he's got some wonderful food mixture he thinks you'd like to try—local history and so on. He told me that there

used to be a Roman settlement here, and that's why this cottage is called 'Roman's.' Apparently at one time it was a pretty big place and then it died out. But every now and then the farmers turn up old weapons and things when they are ploughing."

Sylvia nodded. "I wonder if the hens will scratch up anything," she said. "They work hard enough. I believe they are going to do well. It's a bad time of year to start them, though."

"I suppose so," Antony spoke sleepily. "What about a move upstairs? That fire has almost burnt itself out."

As the words left his mouth he became aware once more of that other presence. For the last few minutes it had left him; now it was back, and even more strongly than before. He glanced at Sylvia. She was looking over her shoulder at the door, and there was fear in her eyes.

"I—I don't think I want to go to bed just yet," she said in a strained voice. "Antony, I'm afraid. It's come back again."

"Don't be silly, dear," he said encouragingly, and all the time knowing that it was he who would be silly if he set foot outside the door. Somehow he knew that It—the Horror—was in the hall—that he himself might have paved the way for its entrance when he came into the house.

The lamp gave a sudden flicker and then went out; the oil had been exhausted. Sylvia gave a little cry of dismay. The room was now only lit by the dying fire. Antony dashed to the window and dragged back the curtains. The mist had lifted and a pale moon shed a gleam on to the floor and the grand piano.

Antony went to the grate and picked up the poker, all the while aware that it was a useless weapon. Then he went towards the door. Whatever It was out there, he meant to face it; he could not endure the thought of being beaten in his own house. But as he laid a hand on the door knob, he drew back. Something was on the other side; something so strong, so definitely evil that every fibre of his soul recoiled by instinct from facing it. He could not co-ordinate his muscles; for a moment he stood still, dumb. Then he pulled his scattered senses together and turned round.

Sylvia was standing behind him, white as the moonlight; her eyes big and dark, her fingers moving tremulously. Antony went up to her and slipped an arm round her waist.

"Darling!" he said, "we've got to see this thing through."

"What is it? What is it, Tony?" she asked, half sobbing.

"God only knows—or the devil," he returned grimly.

His arm round her waist still, they retreated to the far end of the room. Their eyes were seemingly compelled to remain on the door. Would It come in? What did It want? When would It go away?

After what seemed hours of waiting, Sylvia gave a little cry and pointed to the floor. Antony followed the direction of her finger. Over the threshold, under the door, was coming a slow, thick, greenish vapour that rose slightly in the air as it was forced into the room by the pressure of a further discharge behind.

"My God!" gasped Antony. "What's that?"

Clinging to one another, backs against the wall, they watched and waited, while the vapour increased in volume till it seemed to fill a quarter of the little sitting-room. Then they realised that it was, as it were, kept in confines of its own. That was in one way the most horrible thing about it. It did not spread and diffuse as gas would do, but it moved in a solid block with cumulus edges.

For a moment or two nothing more occurred; then Sylvia cried out again. "It's taking shape!" Staring, horror-stricken, they saw that this was indeed the case. Out of that solid wall of greenish gas—a foul, horrible green that reminded them of rotting slime and duckweed—certain portions were moulding together, were becoming a form. And as the Horror did this, so did the foul smell grow greater, till they could hardly breathe the air around them. It was suffocating them.

Antony made a supreme effort and without loosing his hold on Sylvia, jerked his elbow through the window. The raw night air came in with a rush, but it could not dispel the vapour inside. The edges of the block wavered a little for a moment, but that was all.

Sylvia was sobbing quietly, burying her head on Antony's shoulder, trying to shut out the sight. A sudden catch of his breath made her look up again, and she shuddered, sick with fear.

The form was growing clearer now; the central part of the green gas had become a being, an entity such as they had never seen before. Swaying backward and forward, raised slightly above the floor but without visible means of support, was a travesty of a man—grotesquely limbed and featured. But the chief horror lay in the expression. Never had Antony or Sylvia

conceived that such bestiality, such foulness could live in any semblance of the human face. It seemed incarnate evil, and it swayed toward them with a leer, coming imperceptibly closer every moment.

Antony's back was against the wall; he could retreat no further. Sylvia lay on his arm, half fainting with terror.

Somehow, by some strange instinct, Antony knew that he must make no effort to get out by the window; that outside was the creature's own ground; at a disadvantage here, he would be utterly lost if he made any attempt at a fight in the garden. The Thing must be faced here and now. It was coming closer, the fetid smell was overpowering. Helpless, Antony lay splayed against the wall. It could only be a question of minutes, perhaps only a few seconds before he and Sylvia would be engulfed in this ghastly sea of evil that emanated from the foul Horror.

His hand, groping wildly round, touched the poker, but he made no effort to pick it up, knowing that such a weapon would be no good. His eyes roamed, seeking for help. Was there nothing that could save them? Were they to be possessed forever by the Thing, to fall hopelessly, irredeemably into its clutches?

Sylvia gave a little moan and fainted dead away on his arm, her head rolling to one side. The shaft of moonlight caught a ribbon round her neck. Antony saw it unthinkingly, then with a glimmer of hope. With his free hand he jerked at the ribbon and dragged out the little silver crucifix she always wore.

The time for drastic measures had come; the Horror was only a yard away. Antony felt that he himself could not keep his senses much longer; he let his wife slide to the floor and stood in front of her, the crucifix held at arm's length, his eyes on the horrible black depths where the Thing's eyes should be.

For a long minute he stood there, taut as a bowstring, concentrating all that was left of his strength. And the Thing wavered, swayed backward, then forward, while a sudden gush of noisomeness engulfed Antony. Dimly he realised that this was the crucial moment; that It was making its great effort to crush him. With one last supreme gesture he flung the silver crucifix straight into the middle of the mocking bestial face, crying "In the name of Christ, be gone!"

There was a sound of rushing wind, a cry so terrible that it rang in his ears for weeks, and the Horror disseminated and

disappeared, leaving the room filled with the raw night air from the broken window.

Then Antony fainted also.

The doctor was already in bed and asleep when he was roused by the pounding of his knocker and the pealing of the night bell and, looking out, saw two figures at the door. He hurried down and, to his surprise, Antony and Sylvia tottered into the hall. He dragged the story from them by dint of close questioning.

"What is it, doctor?" pleaded Sylvia. "Will it come again?"

"I don't know," he said. "Honestly I don't know. But I should not stay at 'Roman's' if I were you."

"What was it?" reiterated Antony.

The doctor moved his hands deprecatingly. "A Roman encampment and settlement," he said. "It has been considered by many experts that the hill is not a natural one but was originally used as a tumulus, perhaps also as a barrow. And it is a well-known fact among occultists that such places are favourite haunts of elementals."

He paused. "Mrs. Wayre, indeed both of you—have had a fortunate escape. Something unknown to us, some natural cause, perhaps some hidden attraction in one or other of you had let it loose and sent it like the devil its master 'seeking whom it may devour.' It is only by the grace of God that either of you can tell me the tale."

SOPHY MASON COMES BACK

by

E. M. DELAFIELD

"Have you ever, actually, seen a ghost?"

It wasn't, as it is so often, a flippant enquiry. One was serious, on that particular subject, with Fenwick. He was keen on psychical research, although it was understood that he took a line of his own, and neither accepted, nor promulgated, arbitrary interpretations of any kind.

He answered cautiously:

"I've been what the French call a *revenant,* undoubtedly."

"Was it frightening?" asked one of the women, timidly.

Fenwick shook his head.

"I wasn't frightened," he admitted. "Not by the ghost or spirit—whichever you like to call it. Still less have I been so by so-called 'haunted rooms' with mysterious noises and unexplained openings of doors, and so on. But once, in the house where I saw the *revenant*—I was frightened."

"Do you mean—wasn't it the ghost that frightened you, then?"

"No," said Fenwick, and his serious, clever face wore a look of gravity and horror.

We asked if he would tell us about it.

"I'll try, but I may have to tell the story backwards. You see, when I came into it, everything was over—far away in the forgotten past, not just on the other side of the war, but right back in the late eighties. You know—horse-drawn carriages, and oil-lamps, and the women wearing bonnets, and long, tight skirts, all bunched up at the back. . . . In a French provincial town, naturally, things were as much behind the times then, as they are now. (This happened in France, by the way—did I tell you?) It isn't necessary to give you the name of the town. It was somewhere in the *midi,* where the Latins are . . . very Latin indeed.

"Well, there was a house—call it Les Moineaux. One of those tall, narrow French houses, white, with blue shutters, and a straight avenue of trees leading to the front steps, and a formal arrangement of standard rose-bushes on either side of the blue front-door.

"It was quite a little house, you understand—not a *château.* It had once belonged to a very small community of contemplative monks—they'd made the garden and the avenue, I believe. When the monks became so few in number that they were absorbed into another Order, the house stayed empty for a bit. Then it was bought by a wine-merchant, as a gift for his wife, who used it as a country villa for herself and her children every summer. This family lived at—well, in a town about twenty kilometres away. They could either drive out to Les Moineaux, or come by the *diligence,* that stopped in the village about half a mile away from the house. Most of the year, the house remained empty, and no one seems to have thought that a caretaker was necessary. Either the peasants round there were very honest, or there was nothing worth taking in the house. Probably the thrifty madame of the wine-merchant brought down whatever they required for their summer visits,

and took it all away again when they left. There were big cupboards in the house, too—built into the wall—and she could have locked anything away in those, and taken the key.

"The family consisted of Monsieur and Madame, three or four children, and an English girl, whom they all called 'Mees,' who was supposed to look after the children, and make herself generally useful.

"Her name was Sophy Mason; she was about twenty when she came to them, and is said to have been very pretty.

"One imagines that she was kept fully occupied. Madame would certainly have seen to it that she earned her small salary, and her keep; and, as is customary in the French middle-class, each member of the household was prepared to do any job that needed doing, without reference to 'my work' or 'your work.' Sophy Mason, however, was principally engaged with the children. Quite often, in the spring and early summer, she was sent down with them to Les Moineaux for a few days' country air, while Monsieur and Madame remained with the business. They must have been go-ahead people, by the way, far in advance of their time, for 'the Mees' seems to have been allowed to keep the children out of doors, quite in accordance with the English traditions, and entirely contrary to the usual French fashion of that date and that class.

"The peasants, working in the fields, used to see the English girl, with the children, running races up and down the avenue, or going out into the woods to pick wild strawberries. Sophy Mason could speak English quite well, but she was naturally expected to talk English with the children, and, except for a word or two with the people at the farm, from which milk and butter and eggs were supplied to Les Moineaux, there was in point of fact no one for her to talk to, when Monsieur and Madame were not there.

"Until Alcide Lamotte came on the scene.

"All I can tell you about him is that he was the son of a farmer—a big, red-headed fellow, of an unusual type, and certainly possessing brains, and a compelling personality.

"When he and Sophy Mason met first, he was in the middle of his compulsory three years' military service, and home at the farm *en permission.*

"One can imagine it—this English girl, who'd been in France over a year without, probably, exchanging a word with anyone but her employers, their children, and perhaps an occa-

sional old *curé* coming in for a game of cards in the evening —left to her own devices in the more or less isolated villa— and late spring, or early summer, in the vine country. What happened was, of course, inevitable. No one knows when or how their first meetings took place, but passions move quickly in that country. By the time Monsieur and Madame did appear, to inaugurate their usual summer *vie de campagne,* the neighbouring peasantry were perfectly aware that *le roux,* as they called him, was Sophy Mason's lover.

"Whether they betrayed her to her employers or not, one doesn't know. Personally, I imagine they didn't. In that country, and to that race, neither love nor passion appears as a crime, even when marital infidelity is involved, and in this case it was merely a question, for the girl, of deceiving her mistress, and Lamotte—also a free agent—was one of themselves. Almost certainly, Madame found out for herself what was going on.

"There must have been a crisis—*une scène de première classe.* Perhaps Madame kept watch—was peeping through the crack of a door just left ajar, when 'the Mees' stole in—noiselessly, as she hoped—from a moonlight tryst in the woods where the wild strawberries had grown a few weeks earlier.

" 'What! Depraved, deceitful creature, to whom I have entrusted my innocent children! . . .'

"The French are nothing if not dramatic.

"I suspect that Madame enjoyed herself, making the most of the scene, whilst poor Sophy Mason, ashamed and guilty, was frightened out of her wits. Perhaps she saw herself sent back to the Bloomsbury boarding-house of the aunt who was her only living relation, disgraced, and with no hope of ever getting another situation.

"As a matter of fact, Madame forgave her. Sophy Mason was useful, the children liked her, she was very cheap— and perhaps, at the bottom of her heart, Madame was not very seriously shocked at Sophy's lapse from virtue.

"At all events, after extracting a promise that she would never meet Alcide again, except for one farewell interview, Madame told Sophy that she might stay.

"The farewell interview, I believe, took place in Madame's presence—she'd stipulated for that. Something—one can only guess that it may have been some pathetic, scarcely disguised hint from the girl—indicated to Madame's acute perceptions

that if Alcide had proposed marriage Sophy would have been ready, and more than ready, to have him. But Alcide, of course, did nothing of the kind. He accepted his dismissal with a sulky acquiescence that he would certainly not have shown if Sophy Mason—more astute and less passionate—had not so readily yielded to him every privilege that he chose to demand.

"There was an unpleasant and humiliating moral to be drawn from his attitude, and it may safely be presumed that Madame did not hesitate to draw it, probably in forcible language. Sophy Mason, poor child, was left to her tears and her disgrace.

"But those pangs of shame and disappointment were to give place to a much more real cause for distress.

"In the autumn, Sophy Mason discovered that she was going to have a baby.

"It is, given her youth and probable upbringing, quite likely that the possibility of such a thing had never presented itself to her. But that Madame had apparently not foreseen such a contingency is much more difficult to explain.

"It may, of course, be that she attributed more sophistication to the girl than poor Sophy Mason actually possessed, and that she asked a leading question or two that Sophy answered without really understanding.

"One thing is certain: that Sophy Mason did not dare to tell her employer of her condition. She had recourse, instead, to a far more hopeless alternative.

"She appealed to her lover.

"At first, by letter. She must have written several times, if one draws the obvious inference from the only reply of his that was seen by anyone but the recipient. It is an illiterate, ugly scrawl, evidently written in haste, telling her not to write again, and concluding with a perfunctory endearment. It was probably those few, meaningless last words that gave the unfortunate Sophy courage for her final imprudence. It seems fairly certain, that she was, actually, imaginatively in love with Alcide, whereas with him, of course, the attraction had been purely sensual, and had not outlasted physical gratification. In fact, I have no doubt, personally, that the usual reaction had set in, and that the mere thought of her was probably as repellent to him as it had once been alluring. Sophy, however, could not, or would not, believe that everything was over, and that she was to be left to confront disgrace and disaster alone.

Under the pretext of meeting some imaginary English friends, she obtained leave of absence from Madame, and went down to Les Moineaux on a day in late October.

"Either she had made an assignation beforehand with Alcide, or, as seems a good deal more probable, she had learnt that he was home again, on the termination of his military service, and counted on taking him by surprise. She must have made up her mind that if only she could see him again, and plead with him, he would, in the phrase of the time, 'make an honest woman of her.'

"The interview between them took place. What actually occurred can only be a matter of conjecture.

"That it took place at Les Moineaux is a proved fact, and I—who have seen the house—can visualise the setting of it. They would have gone into the living-room, where only the bare minimum of furniture had been left, but from the ceiling of which dangled, magnificently, a huge candelabra of pale pink glass, swinging from gilt chains. The gaudy beauty, and tinkling light music of the candelabra have always seemed to me to add that touch of incongruity that sharpens horror to the unbearable pitch. Beneath its huddled glitter, Sophy Mason must have wept, and trembled, and pleaded, in an increasing terror and despair.

"Lamotte was a southerner, a coarse, brutal fellow, with the strong animal passions of his years, and of his race. Whether what followed then was a premeditated crime, or a sudden impulse born of violent rage and exasperation, will never be known. With apparently no other weapon than his own powerful hands, Alcide Lamotte, probably by strangulation, murdered Sophy Mason.

"When the girl failed to return home, her employer, apparently, neglected to make any serious enquiry into her fate. Madame, who had perhaps suspected her condition, affected to believe that the girl had run away to England, in spite of the fact that her few belongings had been left behind.

"Possibly they were afraid of a scandalous discovery, but more probably, with the thriftiness of their class, they dreaded being put to expense that would, they well knew, never be made good by Sophy's only relation, in distant England.

"The aunt, in point of fact, behaved quite as callously as the French couple, and with even less excuse. Sophy Mason was the illegitimate child of her dead sister, and when, eventu-

ally, she learnt of the girl's disappearance, she is said to have taken up the attitude of asserting: 'Like mother, like daughter,' and declaring that Sophy had certainly gone off with a lover, like her mother before her.

"Conveniently for Madame, if she wanted to convince herself and other people of the truth of that theory, Alcide Lamotte suddenly made off, towards the end of the same month, and was reported to have gone to America. Of course, said Madame, they had gone together. Sophy had been traced as far as Les Moineaux without the slightest difficulty, and where she had spent the intervening weeks between that visit and her alleged departure to America with her lover, no one seems to have enquired.

"The only clue to the mystery was that last letter, written by Lamotte, that Sophy had left behind her, and that was found and read by her employers, and in the fact that when, in the summer following her disappearance, the wine merchant and his family went as usual to Les Moineaux, they found unmistakable evidence, that the house had been entered by a back door, of which the lock had been picked.

"Nothing else seemed to have been tampered with, or disturbed in any way, and the whole affair was allowed to drop in a fashion that, in this country and at this date, appeared almost incredible."

Fenwick paused for a while, before resuming.

"My own connection with the story, came more than forty years later. All that I have told you, was conjectured, or found out many years after it happened. I warned you that I might have to tell the story backwards.

"The wine-merchant of Sophy Mason's story was the connecting link. During the war, I came to know his son—a middle-aged man, once the youngest of the children in the avenue of Les Moineaux.

"I need not trouble you with any account of how we had come to know one another well—it was no stranger than the story of many other relationships established during the war-years.

"We met from time to time, long after the Armistice had taken place, and in the summer of 1925, when I was in France, Amédé, my friend, invited me to pay him a visit, in the midi. He had quite recently married a girl many years younger than himself, and in accordance with French provincial custom,

was living with her in the house of his parents—or rather, of his father, for the mother had been dead for some time.

"The wine-merchant himself was over seventy—a hale and hearty old man, well looked after by an unmarried daughter, and still in perfect possession of all his faculties.

"Whilst I was with them, an observation on my part as to the facility with which all the family spoke English, occasioned an allusion to Sophy Mason—the English 'Mees' of forty-five years earlier.

"The old man, I remember, referred to her mysterious disappearance, but without giving any great importance to the story, and attaching to it, as a mere matter of course, the old explanation of the flight to America with Lamotte.

"In that light one would doubtless have accepted, and then forgotten it, but for two things. One of these was something that was told me by Amédé, and the other the coincidence—if you like to call it so—that forms the whole point of the story. Amédé's revelation, that was purposely not made in the presence of his father, was as follows:

"About fifteen years previously, shortly before the death of his mother, she had made over to him Les Moineaux, the little country villa that had belonged to her.

"Amédé was fond of the place, although he had no intention of ever living there, and long after the other brothers and sisters had scattered, when their mother was dead, and their father no longer cared to move from home, he continued to visit it periodically.

"It was, therefore, to Amédé that some peasants one day came, with an account of a gruesome discovery made in the wood near the house—that very wood where Sophy Mason used to take the children of her employers to pick wild strawberries.

"In a deep ditch, under the leaf-mould of more than a quarter of a century, had been uncovered, by the merest chance, the skeleton of a woman. Curiously enough—or perhaps not so curiously, taking into account the mentality of the uneducated—the older generation of villagers viewed the discovery with more horror than surprise, and displayed little hesitation in identifying the protagonists of the tragedy. The story of Sophy Mason's disappearance had survived the years, and Amédé's enquiries brought to light a singular piece of evidence.

"A woman was found who remembered, many years before, a revelation made by a servant-girl on her death-bed. This girl—a disreputable creature—had declared that on a certain October afternoon she had been in the wood, with her lover, and that, from their place of concealment, they had seen something terrible—a gigantic youth, with red hair, half-carrying and half-dragging the body of a woman, whom he had subsequently flung into the ditch, and covered with earth and stones from the hedge.

"Neither the girl, nor the man with her—who was, incidentally, married to another woman—had dared reveal their horrible discovery, fearing lest their own guilty connection should thereby come to light. This girl, in point of fact, died shortly afterwards, and her story, told on her deathbed, had actually been disbelieved at the time by her hearers, because the narrator was known to have the worst possible reputation and to be a notorious liar.

"The woman to whom it was told swore that she had never actually repeated the story, but that rumours of it had long been rife and that the wood, in consequence, had been shunned for years.

"The name of Alcide Lamotte, curiously enough, seems not to have been directly mentioned. The Lamotte family were the chief land-owners in the place, and were accounted rich and powerful, and *le roux* himself had never been heard of since his disappearance to America.

"My friend Amédé, hearing this strange echo of the past, doubted greatly what course to adopt. It is easy to say that an Englishman, in his place, would have doubted not at all. The Englishman has a natural respect for the law that is certainly lacking in the Latin. Remember, too, that it had all happened so long ago—that the only known witness of the crime was a woman of ill-repute, long since dead—that poor Sophy Mason—if it was indeed she who had been done to death—had no one to demand a tardy investigation into her fate—and finally, that by the law of France, a man cannot be brought to trial for a crime that is only discovered after the lapse of a certain number of years. Amédé, contenting himself with giving the minimum of the information in his possession—all of which, it must be taken into account, depended upon hearsay—to the authorities, saw to the burial of the unidentified remains.

"There the story would have ended, so far as such things

can ever be said to end, but for the coincidence of which I spoke.

"Fifteen years later, whilst I was on my visit to Amédé's old father, and just after Amédé had told me of this strange and hidden postscript to the mystery of Sophy Mason, after an absence of close on forty-one years, Alcide Lamotte returned to the neighbourhood.

"And here, at last, is where such first-hand knowledge as I possess, begins. It is here that I, so to speak, come into the story.

"For I met Alcide Lamotte.

"He had come back—but, of course, he was not the wild, half-civilised lout—*le roux*—of a lifetime ago. He was actually, a naturalised American, and a rich and successful man.

"There was no one left to recognise him, and, indeed, he now even called himself by a different name, and was Al Mott, from Pittsburgh.

"You understand—I am not telling you a detective story, and trying to make a mystery. It *was* Alcide Lamotte, but when he came to the old wine-merchant's house, Amédé and his father didn't know it. That is to say, the old man certainly didn't—and Mr. Mott called, the first time, with a business introduction, in regard to a sale of land. Amédé, when he found that, in spite of his Americanised appearance, the visitor was not only a Frenchman, but also conversant with the immediate neighbourhood, connected him with the district of Les Moineaux, but only in that vague, unemphatic fashion that just fails to put two and two together until, or unless, something happens that produces a sudden, blinding flash of illumination.

"There was certainly nothing about Al Mott, from Pittsburgh, to recall the half-legendary figure of *le roux*.

"He was a big corpulent man, perfectly bald, with a hard, heavy face, and great pouches below his eyes.

"His manners were not polished, but noisy and genial.

"Neither Amédé nor his father took a fancy to him, but they were *hommes d'affaires,* there was a transaction to be concluded, and one evening he was asked to supper, and came.

"It was an evening in late October.

"The old man, of course, was there, and Amédé and his young, newly married wife. The aunt—the one that lived with them—had gone away for a few days.

"The evening, from the beginning, did not go very well. Madame Amédé, the bride, was an inexperienced hostess, and the guest was not of a type to put her at her ease.

"Amédé, who was madly in love with his wife, kept on watching her.

"For my part, I felt an extraordinary uneasiness. You all know, I believe, what is usually meant by the word 'psychic' applied to an individual, and you know, too, that it has often been applied to me. I can only tell you that, in the course of that evening, I knew, beyond any possibility of doubt, certain things not conveyed to me through the normal channels of the senses. I knew that the other guest, the man sitting opposite to me, had, somehow, some intimate connection with tragedy and violence, and I knew, too, that he was evil. At the same time I was aware, more and more as the evening went on, that something which I can only describe as a wave, or vibration, of misery, was in the atmosphere and steadily increasing in intensity.

"Afterwards, Madame Amédé told me that she had felt the same thing.

"She and her husband, it is worth remembering, were in the keyed-up, highly wrought state of people still in the midst of an overwhelming emotional experience. That is equal to saying that they were far more susceptible than usual to atmospheric influence.

"The old wine-merchant, Amédé's father, was the only person beside Mott himself unaware of tension.

"He made a casual allusion to the countryside, and then to Les Moineaux—but not referring to it directly by name.

Mott replied, and the conversation went on.

"But in that instant, without any conscious process of reasoning or induction, the connection was made in my mind.

"I knew him for Alcide Lamotte, and I saw that Amédé did too. My eyes, and those of Amédé met, for one terrible second, the knowledge flashing from one to the other.

"Both of us, I know, became utterly silent from that moment. Alcide, of course, went on talking. He was very talkative, and under the influence of wine, was becoming loud and boastful. He began to tell the old man, who was alone in paying attention to him, about his early struggles in America, and then his increasing successes there.

"He spoke in French, of course, the characteristic, twanging

drawl of the *midi,* and with, actually a queer kind of American intonation, noticeable every now and then. I can remember very vividly the effect of relentlessness that his loud tones, going on and on, made in the small room.

"He was still talking when—the thing happened.

"You can, of course, call it what you like. An apparition—a collective hallucination—or the result produced by certain psychological conditions that are perhaps not to be found once in a hundred years—but that were present that night.

"The feeling of unease that had been with me all the evening was intensified, and then—it suddenly left me altogether, as though some expected calamity had taken place, and had proved more endurable than the suspense of awaiting it. In its place, I experienced only a feeling of profound sadness and compassion.

"I *knew,* with complete certainty, that some emanation of extreme unhappiness was surrounding us. The Madame Amédé, who sat next to me, spoke, just above her breath:

" *'What is it?'*

"There were two sounds in the room . . . One was the excited, confident voice of Alcide, now in the midst of his triumphant story, the other was a succession of sobs and stifled, despairing wails.

"The second sound came from the corner, exactly facing the place where Lamotte was sitting.

"There was a door there, and it opened slowly. Framed in the doorway, I saw her—a young girl, in the dress of the late 'eighties, with a scared, pitiful face, sobbing and wringing her hands.

"That was my *revenant*—Sophy Mason come back.

"I told you, when I began the story, that the—the apparition had not frightened me. That was true.

"Perhaps it was because I knew the story of the poor betrayed girl, perhaps because I have, as you know, been interested for years in psychic manifestations of all kinds. To me, it seemed apparent, even at that moment, that the emotional vibrations of the past, sent out by an anguished spirit all those years ago, had become perceptible to us because we were momentarily attuned to receive them.

"In my own case, the attunement was so complete that, for an instant or two, I could actually catch a glimpse of the very form from which those emotional disturbances had proceeded.

"Amédé and his wife—both of them, as I said before, in an unusually receptive condition—heard what I did. Amédé, however, saw nothing—only an indistinct blur, as he afterwards described it. His wife saw the outlines of a girl's figure. . . .

"It all happened you understand, within a few minutes. First, that sound of bitter crying, and then the apparition, and my own realisation that the Amédés were terror-struck. The old man, Amédé's father, had turned abruptly in his chair with a curious, strained look upon his face—uneasy, rather than frightened. He told us afterwards that he had seen and heard nothing, but had been suddenly conscious of tension in the room, and that then the expression on his son's face had frightened him. But he admitted, too, that sweat had broken out upon his forehead, although it was not hot in the room."

"But Alcide Lamotte?"

"Alcide Lamotte," said the narrator slowly, "went on talking loudly—without pause, without a tremor. He perceived nothing until Madame Amédé, with a groan, fell back on her chair in a dead faint. That of course, broke up the evening abruptly. . . .

"You remember, what I told you at the beginning? It wasn't the poor little *revenant* that frightened me—but I *was* afraid, that evening. I was afraid, with the worst terror that I have ever known, of that man who had lived a crowded lifetime away from the passionate, evil episode of his youth—who had changed his very identity, and had left the past so far behind him that no echo from it could reach him. Whatever the link had been once, between him and Sophy Mason—and who can doubt that, with her, it had survived death itself—to him, it now all meant nothing—had perished beneath the weight of the years.

"It was indeed that which frightened me—not the gentle, anguished spirit of Sophy Mason—but the eyes that saw nothing, the ears that heard nothing, the loud, confident voice that, whilst those of us who had never known her were yet trembling aware of her, talked on—of success, and of money, and of life in Pittsburgh."

THE HAUNTED DANCERS

by

ARTHUR MAYSE

The holly crop paid off extra well last winter, so after Christmas we parked the kids with the grandparents and pointed our noses south, spending New Year's in San Francisco, then dropping down to Los Angeles and putting in at Vegas on the way home. Our second night there we managed to snag a table at the Twin Palms, a high-class spot that featured a dance team called The Belancas. Even though what stepping Vera and I do is pretty well confined to Chellan Golf and Country Club, we appreciate good dancing when we see it, and I tell you those Belancas were a lot better than just good.

They were into their third number—a tango, but not the kind we learned at Miss Harper's School of the Dance—when Vera said to me, "Jim, I know that girl!"

"Honey," I said, "the closest you've been to the Latins is Nick Servos's tamale parlour on Front Street. "You couldn't know her."

"I couldn't," Vera said, "but I do." She had set her daiquiri down and was leaning forward with both hands clasping the new evening bag I'd given her, this being a sort of anniversary for us. "Let me think." Her voice climbed, as it does when she's excited. "Yes, of course! Jim, that's Nancy Drummond. You remember her—the gawky girl who used to live with her rich old aunt." Vera was speaking so loudly now that people had begun to stare. I shushed her, but it did no good. "And that boy is from Chellan too. Oh, dear, what was his name—"

"Hopper," I told her. "Hopper MacCutcheon." The sideburns and slicked-back hair and fancy Spanish getup changed his looks; but Vera, by golly, was right. This was the big, clumsy strawhead we'd nicknamed Clodhopper at school, shortening it to Hopper after he beat up several of us, me included.

I looked around for our waitress, feeling the need of a bracer. "Vera," I said to my wife, "there's something almighty funny about this."

"More than funny," Vera said. "It's—it's fantastic. Nan Drummond was the only girl ever to be dropped from Miss Harper's dance classes. Why, Jim, she was absolutely hopeless! She couldn't do a simple Rocking Chair without tumbling over her feet."

"She could now, you bet!" I muttered, watching those two in their cone of golden light while I did some remembering on my own account. The one time Hopper MacCutcheon had shown up at a high-school dance—stag, of course—Vera made the mistake of feeling sorry for him and let him stomp her through a slow fox trot. She had to junk her new gold sandals and was lame for a week.

The band lit into a red-hot *rumba.* The way that pair handled it made you want to hop on a chair and holler *"Ole!"* I waited till they spun close to our table, then pushed my voice under the music. "Hopper," I said. "Hey, Hopper."

For a minute I thought we must, after all, be wrong. But next time around, the girl gave us a quick little smile and the tall fair-haired guy winked at me.

They ran off hand in hand, the spot tagging them. Although I hadn't succeeded in catching the waitress, she showed up with a fresh daiquiri for Vera and a double rye for me.

"Compliments of The Belancas," she told us in a tone that made it plain our rating had gone up a good few points, "and they ask may they join you at your table, Mr. Avery."

"Tell them we'd be honoured," I said, and meant it.

They showed in about five minutes, in street clothes. I had a queer feeling that they'd shed some sort of magic along with their costumes and make-up because, except for being seven years older and a heck of a lot better dressed, Nancy and Hopper were the same awkward, odd-ball pair who had dropped out of Chellan High in their senior year. Nan crunched a fellow's foot as they edged between tables. As she stopped to apologise, Hopper bounced off her hip and spilled the champagne cocktail the fellow's girl was nursing. The way they looked at us was the same too—as if I were still the big football wheel and Vera the most popular girl in school. Anxious, if you follow me. Not too sure of their welcome.

We brought Nan and Hopper up to date on the hometown news, and learned they were married and had two children, a boy and a girl, the same as we. New York would be their next stop, and their agent was kicking a Hollywood deal around. It

was plain they were big league, headed for the top of the tree.

I'd got to gabbing about our holly farm and was telling Hopper how we keep a flock of geese to take care of the weeds when Vera's curiosity reached flash point. "How on earth," she burst out, "or off it, did you two learn to dance like that? You must have sold your souls to the devil!"

Hopper glanced at his watch, managing at the same time to knock an ash tray off the table. His voice came to us muffled as he scrunched to grope for it.

"Souls," he said, "are a glut on the market these days." He came up with his hair mussed and his tie crooked. "I doubt you could give one away, much less sell it." He looked at Nan, and the magic that had been on them while they danced seemed to touch them again, turning them into a downright handsome couple.

"Very well, darling," Nan said, "tell them if you like. Only don't expect Vera and Jim to believe you."

"Certainly we will!" Vera said.

"Oh, no, you won't!" Nan answered, with her green-blue eyes smiling.

"How can you believe it," Hopper said quietly, "when we've never been able to ourselves?"

The way they laid it out for us, Nan and Hopper got their feet untangled the same night Vera and I became engaged, which was at the midwinter prom seven years ago exactly. Hopper had meant to go to that dance, but felt his courage drain away while he was still jolting along River Road in the farm jeep.

He parked a couple of blocks from Legion Hall and leaned against the jeep in his shiny blue-serge suit and thick-soled black shoes. Dance music drifted down to him from the hall; couples were passing the windows, kids he had gone to school with half his life, and he yearned so hard to be among them, be one of them, that the wanting dried his mouth. It wasn't just the clumsiness which went with a loose-coupled frame and outsize hands and feet that kept him away. His dad was Prophet MacCutcheon, a wild-eyed stump rancher who raised his family on a diet of belt leather and wrath-to-come. At eighteen turned, Hopper was too big for the Prophet to push around, and had long ago decided that dancing was no sin. But the twig had been bent. The minute he set foot on that Legion Hall floor, Hopper MacCutcheon would feel his dad's eyes drilling

him, and he'd stiffen as if the Prophet's belt were about to crack across his shoulders.

Finally the pull of the music became more than flesh could stand. Hopper trudged down the empty street to the hall, eased around back and climbed the rail of the old-fashioned veranda that boxed the place. Down near the end, deep in the shadows, he spotted a shape which turned out to be Nan Drummond standing on a bench with her arms crossed on a window still.

"You, huh?" Hopper greeted her.

"Any law?" Nan came back at him.

Hopper didn't need to ask why she wasn't inside. The girl's aunt was one of those who are happiest when they have a young, helpless creature to torment. Other girls wore skirts and sweaters or blouses to school. Nan Drummond, at seventeen, was forced into dresses—frocks, her Aunt Bess called them—the like of which hadn't been seen on mortal back in fifty years. The only boys who ever asked Nan to a party were those whose folks owed her aunt money, and at the moment the old miser's account book must have been clear.

"Shove over," Hopper said and hoisted himself on to the bench beside her.

They peered in at the dancers, Hopper cussing himself for a coward, Nan busy with her own bitter thoughts.

"Nice band," Hopper said once, feeling he ought to make conversation for politeness's sake.

"Shut up," she told him. "I'm watching Jim Avery and Vera Hubbard. Trying to learn how they make those turns."

Hopper watched too, elbow to elbow with Nan at the window. Inside was a world they both longed to be part of. He twisted around toward Nan. The bench jiggled, and she said, almost snarling, "Careful, you ox!"

"Well," Hopper said, "we owe but one death, as Sir Philip Sidney said, or maybe it was Sir Walter Raleigh. No point in freezing here. You want to go in and stumble around?"

The bench teetered again as Nan faced him. "Gallantly put," she said. "Sir Philip couldn't have done better." She was crying, the tears making her plain face plainer. "Thanks, Hopper. At least I can tell Aunt Bess a boy asked me without his arm being twisted. But will you please look at me? Take a *good* look!"

She flung her pinch-waisted coat wide. What Hopper saw

was a frilly white dress that might have been cute, in a quaint way, on a child of eleven.

"A blue sash goes with this little number," Nan said. "The finishing touch. I have it wadded down inside." The tears were flowing faster. "If I let you take me in, do you know what would happen?"

"I can guess," Hopper mumbled.

"In ten minutes," Nan told him in a shaking voice, "ten horrible minutes of tramping your feet and bumping other couples, my stomach, if you'll pardon a word Aunt Bess considers unladylike, would have tied itself in a knot. I'd retreat to the powder room and throw up. So you see—"

Their bench, at that point, decided to fight back. It flipped them to the veranda floor. They rolled under the rail in a tangle of arms and legs to land in an inch of January slush.

"So you see why I won't accept," Nan said drearily, as Hopper helped her to her feet. She stared at him, soaked and muddy, weeping still. "Oh, Hopper," she sobbed at him. "Clowns like us! Why don't they just take us out and shoot us!"

A long haul from Las Vegas and a feature spot at the Twin Palms. Our waitress was beside me in her little red skirt. I ordered, while Vera dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"You poor, poor kids," she said. "How cruel we all were to them, Jim. Believe me, if we'd had the least idea you were out there—I'm so glad things have turned out wonderfully for you!"

"It's as well you didn't come out," Hopper said, with his farm boy grin. "I'd probably have picked a fight with Jim and spoiled his suit out of pure meanness. But no one came out."

They stood with the music taunting them, the jive of seven years ago, Hopper mad at himself, mad at Nan in her silly dress, at the lucky ones in the hall and the whole uncaring world. "I'm still asking you to dance," he growled at Nan, and caught her by the wrist and started off with her down the street.

"Let go!" she snapped at him. "Where do you think you're taking me?"

"To a place I know," Hopper told her, "with a better dance floor than the Legion Hall." He was striding so fast the girl had to trot or be dragged. "And this I promise you," he said, as he boosted Nan into the jeep. "No one will bump us there!"

The jeep lacked top and heater, since Prophet MacCutcheon didn't hold with luxury. Hopper endured Nan's shivering till they were several miles out on River Road, then reached an arm and fetched her across the seat to huddle against him.

Dully, as if she didn't much care any more, Nan asked him again, "Where are you taking me?"

Hopper didn't answer till they were past his dad's stump ranch, off the blacktop and jouncing fast over pot-holed gravel. Then he said, "Did you ever hear of the Altenschloss?"

Nan gave him a sullen "No."

"It's a log house, a lodge I guess you'd call it, in the woods west of Black Lake. My grandpa bossed the crew that built it in 1911. I happened on it a few years ago while I was gathering cascara bark."

"Who owns it?" Nan asked without interest. But she had stopped shivering, and was fixing up her tear-streaked face from her handbag.

"Nobody, now. Count Wilhelm and Countess Maritza von Altenberg used to. He was German, an army type with a monocle and a sabre scar. She was Viennese, grandpa told me. The count killed another officer in a duel over her, and they had to skip Germany with only a very few million marks for pin money."

"Romantic," Nan said, applying lipstick as best she could in the bouncing jeep. "What a nice comic opera touch you have. So they fled to the woods and lived in a log cabin with a ballroom—happily ever after, no doubt."

"Just for two years," Hopper told her. "They'd have fifty guests at a time, mostly titled. Grandpa used to take them in by sleigh or buckboard. The parties they threw, he said, you'd have to see to believe. Dance bands from Seattle. Drinkables by the cases. Caviar and that sandwich spread they make from goose livers. Even when the Count and Countess were alone in the Altenschloss, life was a ball."

The gravel tongued out from under the tires. A side road bored into a black wall of timber. "Rough from here on," Hopper said, and put the jeep at the tunnel mouth. "Did I tell you they loved to dance? When I stumbled on the Altenschloss that day, their phonograph was still in the ballroom, the biggest you ever will see, an old-timer with cylinder records and a morning-glory horn." He chuckled, steadying Nan with

an arm tight around her waist. "So I oiled the phonograph," he said, "swept the floor and set out to learn to dance with the broom for a partner."

"A pillow's better," Nan said. "It doesn't trip you." Her head stirred against Hopper's shoulder. "Now that you mention it, I do seem to recall something about your Prussian and his Maritza. They went home to Germany just before the First World War, didn't they? And showed up here again around 1920?"

"Uh-huh." Hopper skidded the jeep to a halt, climbed out and set to with jack and chains. When he swung back in, his suit was muddier and he sucked a skinned knuckle. "They'd lost just about everything. Crossed the Atlantic steerage and came west by day coach. Von Altenberg hoped to find work in the district, but what Chellan gave them was rotten eggs."

"And tomatoes," Nan said. "My aunt was one of the children who threw them, and how she must have enjoyed it!" She sounded almost interested now. "At least they still had each other. What happened to them, Hopper?"

"Grandpa took them out to the Altenschloss," Hopper said. He shifted on the seat, frowning into darkness that bent the headlight beams back on themselves. "Look, Nan, maybe I'd better keep my mind on the driving."

Their side road dwindled to a trail that dipped into an alder swamp and laboured over a ridge. Brush flogged the jeep sides, the wheels churned unbroken snow. The track branched, then forked again. Twice, Hopper winched the jeep through stretches too tough even for chains and four-wheel drive.

"You can see why people leave the Altenschloss alone," he said after another half hour of bushwhacking.

"One reason," Nan said. She gave him an uneasy side glance. "Are you sure there isn't another?"

"You mean the yarn those deer hunters brought out seven years back?" Hopper spared the girl's grin. "What happened, they found the hidden stairs to the Count's wine cellar. The shape they were in by midnight, they were ready to see anything you care to name."

Ahead, the woods thinned. Of a sudden Nan jerked erect with her spine gone broom-handle-stiff. "Hopper MacCutcheon," she squalled at him, "you turn this car around and take me out of here! I remember the rest of that story now! I'm not dancing where people have committed suicide!"

Hopper made no move to swing the jeep, although there was room and to spare on the wide, winding driveway under the wheels. "Let me tell you something, Nan," he said. "When I step on to that dance floor, something happens that doesn't anywhere else. The music moves out of my head and into my feet. All right, suppose it did end that way? There's not a thing in the Altenschloss to harm you. Just a darn good old wind-up phonograph and the best sprung maple floor in the country." His arm tightened protectively. "You're not stupid enough to believe in ghosts and stuff like that, are you?"

"Of course not," Nan said. She ran her tongue over dry lips. The jeep was plowing through wind-drifted snow toward a great log house lovely as a fairy tale or a dream. Snow blanketed the angles and slopes of its roof. Giant icicles hung from carved gables. Moonlight turned the windows to watching eyes as the jeep laboured on to the terrace that fronted the lodge.

But friendly eyes, Nan decided. "All right, Hopper," she said, "if you can take it, I can." Her mouth quirked in a bitter smile. "At least I might be an improvement on your broom!" And he—although she didn't tell him this—would be a better partner than a pillow, which was dandy to cry into, but less comforting than a husky blue-serge shoulder.

The brass-studded log door creaked open to Hopper's push. "Better stay here," he told Nan, "till I light us some candles."

Waiting, with the frost nipping at ears and nose and her nerves taut as fiddle strings, Nan heard an owl call from deep in the woods. "Oh-no . . . no-no . . . oh-no!" the owl seemed to be warning her, and she felt her courage ooze. But deep inside the house Hopper was whistling. "This way," he called, his voice booming, hollow. Nan breathed deep, swallowed twice and stepped into the Altenschloss.

The ballroom was exactly as Hopper had described it to her. The hardwood floor under her shoes was smoother than any she had ever trod. She saw the huge old phonograph with its morning-glory horn, the candles burning yellow in wall sconces and the dusty wine-red curtains drawn back from tall windows. A chandelier hung by chains from the ceiling. On the floor under it was a cross-shaped splotch, a stain too dark for any shadow. Nan, guessing what that mark was, allowed herself a shudder. Then she crossed to Hopper with her wet shoes squishing, but never a creak under her feet.

Hopper turned from cranking the phonograph. He said to her, loud and cheerful, "That crystal chandelier used to hold a hundred candles. Grandpa found the Count and Countess lying under it when he drove in next day with a quarter of beef and a sack of carrots and spuds. The Countess wore a white coloured gown with a low neckline and no back at all. Von Altenberg was in his dress uniform of the Black Uhlans. The way it looked, he had shot her while they were dancing —through the heart with a Luger—then killed himself." Hopper blew dust from an ancient record. "Grandpa told me the sight of them brought tears to his eyes. Even with a hole in his forehead the Count was a mighty fine-looking man, and the Countess Maritza had never looked more beautiful. She died smiling."

Music, thin and scratchy, seeped into the room. *"Blue Danube,"* Hopper told Nan. "Same record that was on when Grandpa found them." He clumped forward on size-12 feet. His hand splayed against the small of Nan's back, large, warm and reassuring.

"O.K.," he said, "latch on." His left foot thumped heavily. "Let's try to hop off on the big beat."

The floor shone, the prisms of the chandelier caught the light and shattered it in diamond twinkles. They moved in a mist of moonlight and candle glow, to *The Blue Danube* and their own loud breathing and the scuff and shuffle of their shoes.

"Loosen up, will you?" Hopper said crossly in Nan's ear. "You're stiff as a mummy."

She snapped back at him through set teeth, "Lead with your left foot, dope."

They tackled a turn, and it came off, after a fashion.

"Listen," Hopper said, "you're all swelled out like a pouter pigeon. Why don't you haul that sash out and put it on? I could get a proper hold on you, your dress wouldn't slither."

Nan obliged. They resumed, becoming bolder, attempting variations they would never have dared in Legion Hall.

"Hopper," Nan said, "I do believe you're right! It's different here. The music does get into one's feet!"

"Sure," Hopper grunted. "But how do we break out of progressive? Tell me before we crash the wall."

They pulled off several waltz boxes without stumbling, a series of left turns and an almost creditable hesitation. Hopper

was screwing up his nerve for a shot at a conversation corkscrew when he saw Nan's lips part and her eyes open wider and wider, until the white showed. At the same time her fingers dug at his collarbone and her other hand gripped his in a clutch gone clammy.

"Take it easy," he told her. "It's only the grandfather clock in the hall." Except it did strike him odd that the clock should be chiming like that, spaced and solemn, when the deer-hunting vandals of seven years ago had riddled it with .30–30 slugs.

He counted twelve strokes, Nan all the time gaping over his shoulder and trying to find a voice. When it came it was a rusty squeak. "Hopper. Behind you. It's them." He had a confused impression she was about to climb him like a tree. "It's the Count and Countess."

"Nan," Hopper said, nape prickling, "you're nuts." He bullied her into a lurching left turn. In his ears, as he finished his ragged swing, a light, amused voice made music of its own.

"Willi," it asked, charmingly puzzled, "what is it these children do?"

The answering voice was a man's, clipped and slightly guttural. "Who can say, *Liebchen?* One of the barbarous new American steps, perhaps. It seems vaguely related to the waltz."

They poised under the glittering chandelier on the dark stain which was their heartblood, arm linked through arm, a tall, scarred, monocled officer in a dress uniform all midnight black and red and a slender woman in a white ball gown that curved from her hourglass waist in a cascade of looped flounces. Her high-piled hair was the bronze of an autumn chrysanthemum, and her eyes under arched flyaway eyebrows were the green-blue of a mountain pond. And even with his heart pounding sick and slow in his throat and Nan's wet hand crushed in his, Hopper MacCutcheon knew the Countess Maritza, or her ghost, was the loveliest creature he had seen in all his life.

"What can we do?" Nan breathed at him.

"How would I know?" Hopper croaked. The record should have played itself through long ago, the phonograph spring run down. But the horn was still giving out with Strauss; in fact it had picked up volume and a mellowness he wouldn't have believed possible from the warped old cylinder.

He muttered to Nan, "Maybe if we shifted into progressive, and danced our way to the door——" And seconds later,

savagely, "Get with it, Nan! For cat's sake, will you let me lead?"

"I can't!" It hit him in an agonised whisper. "Oh, Hopper, I've forgotten the step, I can't do anything but the Rocking Chair."

They joggled to and fro, trapped and helpless. Over the top of Nan's head, Hopper saw the Countess smile at her husband.

"Ah, the poor darlings," she said in her voice that was silvery music. "Willi, come. We must introduce ourselves." They advanced from under the chandelier, the Countess's hand light on the Count's arm. "I," she said, "am the late Maritza von Altenberg, and with me is my dear departed husband, Count Wilhelm Gustavus Holtzwig-Cassen von Altenberg." The turquoise eyes hinted of laughter, the rich mouth gave name and titles a dancing lift. "You may call him Willi."

The Count bowed from the waist with a soundless click of heels. Hopper ducked his head; Nan, he saw, was bobbing like a goose in a weed patch, doing her darnedest to curtsy.

"And now," the Count said briskly, "since you appear to be in error on certain minor points, perhaps you will allow us to repay the honour of this visit with a—shall we say, a demonstration?"

He bowed again with the noiseless heel click, this time to his wife. Hopper watched, Nan's hand still in his, both of them enchanted beyond fear. This they were witnessing, this waltz in a mist of moon and candlelight, was perfection. It was lovelier than a flight of sea gulls, as intricately faultless as the courting play of swallows.

At the end Nan spoke to the Countess with her face all aglow. "I'd sell my immortal soul," she cried, "and I know Hopper would, too, if we could dance like that!"

Maritza von Altenberg smiled at her. The chrysanthemum head nodded. "So? Then, my dear, let us change partners."

This part of it, his waltz with the beautiful ghost, Hopper MacCutcheon could never clearly remember. He only knew he was caught up in that same perfection, one with it and part of it, and that he could have cried like a baby when the music whispered off into silence.

He realised they were alongside the black stain under the chandelier.

"Warm work," the Count said. "My man does not seem to be about. Pray excuse me."

He dimmed away, but only for a minute. Then he was standing tall at his wife's side with the monocle screwed into his eye, holding a cobwebbed enormous bottle under his arm and four crystal glasses between spread fingers.

"The best in our cellar," he said, and shot the cork so that it set the chandelier pendants tinkling. "Even for a vintage year, Maritza, it has kept its life remarkably."

They waltzed the night away, in the misted light, with vintage champagne to refresh them. Toward dawn they toasted one another in the last of the magnum.

In a gesture all grace the Countess stooped to upend her glass beside the bottle. She straightened, gazing at Nan with her smile gone wistful and a brightness in her eyes that might have been tears.

"How sweet," she said through a sigh, "to be *jeune fille* once more in a pretty white frock with a blue sash, in a warm, mortal body. To be dancing with one's first love, and hoping, knowing that after the last waltz. . . ." Her words were lost in a blush and a murmuring. Her upward glance at the Count was sheer bewitchment; he cleared his throat twice, and spoke a trifle stiffly.

"In friendship," he said, "and to oblige my wife, a romantic as is every Viennese, may I prevail upon you to lend us yourselves for one waltz?" He added with the merest hint of a smile in his cold blue eyes, "I assure you we will return you unharmed."

What took place then, Nan and Hopper could remember hardly at all. Except that they were no longer an awkward stump-ranch boy and a clumsy, lonely girl but two other people —dancers with feet that moved light to the music as drifting leaves and hearts that glowed with a joy and a hope and an eager yearning they had never felt before.

Far away on River Road, a rooster-crowed to the morning star, and they were Nan Drummond and Hopper MacCutcheon, waltzing together, themselves again, more or less.

"How marvellously you have improved, *mes petits,*" the Countess told them. "But it is always so where love is, or the seeds of love."

"Come, Maritza," the Count said. "Our ball ends. A stupid convention, this of cockcrow, but rules are rules and must be obeyed."

"One moment first," the Countess said gravely, but with the

smile lingering. "There is the matter of two souls deeded to us, Willi."

"Return them," the Count told her, with a glance at the graying windows. "Have we become—how is it said in America?—mere hucksters?"

"Very well," Maritza von Altenberg agreed. "But allow me one last small pleasure, Willi. We shall give each to the other. 'My true love hath my soul, and I have his,' as the English poet, Sir Philip Sidney, puts it."

"Heart, dearest," the Count corrected her indulgently, his sabre-scarred face turning again to the windows. "Heart, not soul. You're forever misquoting."

"Heart, soul," his wife said, "it makes no matter." She began to dim out like mist dissolving—eyes, smile, slim body and chrysanthemum head. Her voice touched them sweetly across a widening distance. "Not to dance for seven more long years, Willi. So stern a penance! But perhaps at the end we shall find our young friends and waltz again."

"And that," Hopper MacCutcheon said, heaving up from our table with a lurch that sent a glass rolling, "was that. Nan and I never did go home. We hocked a case of the Count's Napoleon brandy to a bootlegger down the line—we knew the von Altenbergs wouldn't mind—and took a bus to Reno and got married."

"And here we are," Nan said brightly. . . . "Hopper, we're almost on. We'd better hurry!"

They blundered off between tables to change for their second show. After a considerable silence Vera said in a testing voice, "Quite an account, Jim."

"Sure," I said. "One for the book, huh?"

"Dancing with ghosts in a haunted house," Vera said. "I suspect that bottle of champagne was tapped rather earlier than Hopper claims."

"Quiet, hon," I told her, for the music had started, *The Blue Danube*, it was, and The Belancas were waltzing in a circle of amber light. At least I guess it was they, although Hopper in the black-and-red dress uniform and Nan in a frothy white ball gown with her hair bronze in the spotlight looked—well, like two other people. But this I was sure of as we watched them dip and whirl and glide like swallows in a mating flight—we'd never seen waltzing to match that before, and wouldn't again.

Vera didn't speak till The Belancas had gone on to their

Latin numbers. Then she said all of a rush, "I don't care, I still won't believe it. Why, Jim, if I did, it would shatter me. I'd be a changed person."

I don't want my wife to change; I like her as she is. So I saw no point in telling Vera how I happened on the Altenschloss while grouse hunting last fall and found, plunk in the middle of that fine sprung-maple floor, on the cross-shaped stain under the chandelier, a champagne bottle—magnum—and four glasses.

THE YEW TREE

by

SHAMUS FRAZER

When Martin was passing through Singapore last week *en route* to Australia, I took him to the Botanical Gardens. It is a practice of mine to show off the Botanical Gardens to visitors from England; they feel at home there. It is Kew all over again without the glass.

But in Martin's case our visit was very far from being a success. At first I put his queer behaviour down to fear of snakes. When we were skirting the top end of the lake he kept to the centre of the narrow path, glancing uneasily at the great tongues of foliage that fringe the borders and treading as delicately as Agag. Once he shied at a root that lay twisted like a snake across his path.

"I've been here a hundred times," I said, "and I've never seen a snake yet. It's as safe as Ireland." He pulled himself together and stepped over the root, but I noticed his hands were shaking and his face had the look of a cheap soap-stone carving—a greenish pallor on which the features seemed tenuously and grotesquely scratched.

You know that great banyan tree by the wooden bridge at the farther end of the lake—a grotto of knolled roots and python thick columns formed by the fibres coiling down from the branches like Rapunzel's hair to root in the soil? Well, nothing could induce Martin to go past that tree. He stuck on the edge of the lake, looking ghastly. We had in the end to retrace our steps.

If only I'd not thought of bringing him up by the terraced pergola, the evening might have ended less embarrassingly for us both—but at the same time I should possibly have missed a very strange story.

We were going up the steps under the arch of creepers when I heard a gasp from Martin. "Good God!" he cried. "Don't tell me there are yew trees in Malaya." He was looking at a tree on the terrace a few yards to our left—a tree which does, in fact, bear some resemblance to the yew.

"I think that's a *sintada,*" I said. "There's certainly a likeness . . ." Then I noticed Martin's expression. He was staring in horror at that *sintada* tree, and he was positively tottering on the edge of the steps as if he were going to faint. I caught him by the arm, helped him down the last flight of steps and steered him to the car. He was pale and dazed as a zombie, and I half feared he was suffering from heatstroke.

By the time we reached home he had recovered—more or less; but his teeth clinked like ice against the rim of the tumbler as he drank off the double whisky I poured for him.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "I made an awful ass of myself just now. I ought never to have gone into the beastly place. But I didn't expect . . . You see, though it happened a good many years ago, I suppose I've not got over it yet. I wonder if I ever shall."

"Don't tell me if it'll upset you again," I said with revolting hypocrisy—for I am curious by nature, and nothing is more distasteful to me than unresolved mysteries.

He was silent for a while, and I thought he was going to take me at my word. I poured him a stiffer drink.

"They do say these things are sometimes better for a father confessor," I said. A sudden sigh of wind stirred a rustling from the trees in the garden, and Martin shivered and pulled his chair round with a creak to face the sound.

"You won't believe the tale," he said; "nobody does. Sometimes I try to kid myself it was a dream. But that's no use. It wasn't, you see." He hesitated again. Then he asked, "Do you know Darkshire?"

"I stayed near Doomchester once. It's a pretty place."

"If you like trees . . ." he said, without any particular expression, "there's the remains of Robin's forest, and those great feudal estates, the Princedoms."

"All sold up now," I said.

"I used to spend holidays there when I was a child," said Martin. "I loved the place. Trees, too. But I didn't know the western side until a few years ago, when I was sent up there on a job. Do you know that side at all?"

"Vaguely. Bleak and hilly—full of limestone caverns and lead-workings and streams spilling over boulders."

"It's an evil place," he said, and relapsed into silence.

"But there are few *trees,* Martin," I said, keeping him to the point.

"Oh, the forest creeps up into those Pennine valleys. The hills are bare enough, but you get those beastly secretive valleys. Like Hallowvale, for instance."

"Never been there."

"You can be thankful you won't have a chance. It lies under several million gallons of water now. I was sent up to report on the place. You know that group of great reservoirs there that feed Sheffield and several of the Yorkshire industrial towns? Well, they were planning an extension of the Tarnthorpe Reservoir, and Hallowvale seemed a likely place to meet requirements. For one thing, no one lived there. No one had lived there for well over a hundred years. So I was sent off to make a preliminary survey.

"I put up first at Baronsbridge—a pleasant pub there; but it was rather far from the valley, and as the work progressed I looked around for some place nearer at hand.

"There was a deserted farm cottage overlooking the western end of Hallowvale, and the firm had it put in order for me. My early reports had convinced them that the Hallowvale plan was feasible, and they decided I should stay and hunt around for snags, especially over the winter months. Snow and winter rains can upset the finest paper calculations as far as my survey work is concerned.

"Well, the cottage was snug enough: a honeymooner's dream but lonely for a bachelor. A path led from it round the neighbouring hill and so descended abruptly into Baronsbridge on the other side. This was the path I liked to take, especially as the evenings were drawing in. There was another path which led into Hallowvale itself—through the woods—but I didn't much care for it. It was gloomy and dark, and about a quarter of a mile beyond the cottage you passed the skeletons of a church and some derelict cottages, all that was left of the old

village of Hallowvale. I'm not . . . I wasn't anyway a very imaginative sort of person, but there was a kind of desolate knowingness about the place, and I avoided this path when I could.

"Blasting had begun at the eastern end of the valley, and an army of woodcutters was at work cutting down the fir and sycamore plantations, under the stern eye of old Wyke who had sold us the valley but kept a retainer on the timber. My work, now that winter was setting in, consisted of checking and revising my earlier calculations, and it involved a good deal of field-work, wriggling down pot-holes, plumbing underground waterways, testing the altered direction of streams with fluorescein powder and so on. Often I didn't get back till night-fall, and I found it sometimes convenient to take the path through the woods and past the old village of Hallowvale. I never enjoyed the walk, though. The plantation stopped before you got to the village—but there was a lot of undergrowth among the ruins . . . and . . . and things on the path, brambles, I suppose, that caught the ankles and made walking difficult. The ruined church tower made . . . made noises in the moonlight . . . Owls I imagined . . . Then about a hundred yards on there was a kind of . . . of open place . . . *beastly* . . . a sort of crossroads with the roads vanished, if you see what I mean. And the path sloping up very steeply to my own cottage below the brow of the ridge. It was this open place I loathed in the daylight and could hardly bring myself to pass at night. You see, there was growing there . . . a yew tree."

That soap-stone look again. I pushed him over another drink.

"A yew tree," he repeated, "largish, black as a hearse-plume, and in winter dotted all over with blood-drops of berry. Perhaps it had been clipped by a topiarist a century or more ago—but whatever shape it had once was lost. It had the suggestion of some kind of bird, though; yes, an owl or a bat, some flying nocturnal thing with ragged wings and a shapeless, swollen body. I thought it might have marked the limit of an old graveyard—but it would have to have been a very spacious graveyard, and would have needed to fill it more dead than even the hamlet of Hallowvale could have provided in a thousand years, I should have thought. Perhaps it may have belonged to the garden of a long vanished house

—but whoever lived in that house must have been damnably wicked, I felt.

"I asked old Wyke about the place once, and he wasn't reassuring. 'When you wanted the cottage, I told you as you'd be happier below in Baronsbridge,' he said. 'Don't say I didn't warn you. What've you been hearing, lad? About something that flies in the night, I know. Them's all old-wives' tales—but I won't say but it's lonesome up here.'

"I'd heard nothing about the place, and Wyke couldn't be persuaded to say another thing. But after he'd gone I thought over that phrase of his about something that flew in the night. During the autumn gales I had often fancied I'd heard a sound like beating wings, a flapping below in the valley as if some gigantic thing had gone to roost there. I had put it down to the wind playing tricks in the broken plantations at the foot of the valley. On one very gusty night the flapping had seemed to sound just outside the walls of the cottage, and I was woken from sleep by a slithering and tapping at the cottage door and a scratching at the shutters.

"One late November day my work took me to a cavern on the northern ridge of the valley; a matter of testing how much strengthening would be needed there if the waters of the proposed reservoir reached a certain level. I'd taken a haversack lunch with me; but the job took longer than I'd thought, and the winter sun was flattening itself like a great red leech among the peeks beyond my distant cottage when I set off on my return journey. It was quickest to return by the valley —though I could not hope to make the cottage before nightfall.

"At first it was easy going. Soon I reached the bulldozer, its silhouette like an antediluvian monster's in the dusk. It marked the limit of the woodcutters' work for the day. One of the men—a little grey-haired chap called Whittaker from Sheffield—gave me good night; he'd evidently stayed behind to set rabbit snares, for wires were dangling from his pockets, and he stuffed something inside his jacket and was pretending to adjust the set of his red bandana neckerchief as I approached. I think I must have taken a wrong path in the steep plantation beyond, for by the time I reached the first of the ruined houses of Hallowvale there was a bright frosty moon which made indescribably horrible the gaping window sockets and the leprous tuft-eared church tower.

"The brambles were particularly obstructive after I'd passed the church, and once or twice I fell headlong in the path. When I reached that open space, the crossroads you know . . . well, the yew tree wasn't there. I mean simply that. It just wasn't there. There was a great hole, like an open grave ragged at the edges where it had stood—but not a sign of the tree. I told myself that the woodcutters must have uprooted it with the winch—though there was no evidence of any such activity: only that great crumbling gap in the soil. It was a horrible tree, and I should have been glad it had gone, if only the hole it had left behind were not inexpressibly worse, a horror of horrors. I thought I saw something white at the bottom of the pit, and was just stepping forward to the brink when I heard again that monstrous flapping in the valley behind me and, it seemed, a thin, inhuman, far-off cry. I didn't stay to hear more, but set off almost at a run on the last breathless climb to my cottage.

"I made up a roaring fire and toasted cheese at it, and after supper read until eleven. I don't think I concentrated much on my thriller. I was straining my ears into the silence for that monstrous sound of wings. Once or twice I thought I heard it —but it might have been a falling branch.

"I slept that night uneasily. About two I was woken by a rattling and shaking of the cottage door. The wind, I thought; yet when I sat up in bed I realised it could not have been so: the night was quite still.

"There was a rustling flap, like an enormous bird settling itself on its perch: the sound you hear when you pass a fowl-house at night, but grotesquely magnified. I lit the lamp at my bedside and waited. There was the familiar slithering sound; it seemed this time to come from above me, from the roof. Then I heard a sliding in the chimney, and I saw something snakelike writhing in the grate, something yellowish moving across the floor to my bed. It stopped half-way, writhing frustratedly, trying to flatten itself a little further, trying to gain an extra inch. The thing was a tree root—a root with the earth still clinging to it. The whole room stank of the graveyard. For a moment the tip of the root quivered and writhed and beckoned; then it was slowly withdrawn, and I heard it coiling itself back up the chimney.

"After that I just went out like a blown match.

"I'd have thought it a dream in the morning—but the lamp

had burnt itself out at my bedside, and there were bits of earth in the grate and on the hearth-rug.

"There was a hard frost outside, and there were strange marks in the silver as though snakes had drawn themselves over the turf. On my doorstep there was a scattering of scarlet berries—and a sprig, I'd almost said a feather, of yew.

"The sound of woodcutting came from farther down the valley. I wanted human company desperately just then, so I set off the shortest way. And there was no gap at the crossroad place; the yew tree stood where it had always been, black and secretive and malignant.

"I found Wyke with the group of men round the bull-dozer. He was in a growling rage.

" 'One of the fellows has cleared off. Whittaker, the chap who's the best hand at the winching. You can't rely on these Sheffield chaps. Just taken his hook and gone. But it's causing no end of trouble with the men here. They been listening to stories, too. Want to knock off an hour early.'

"I said I sympathised with them, and I suggested they should start the morning's work on the yew tree at the head of the valley.

"The men murmured among themselves, and 'Yew tree, indeed!' said Wyke. 'Pack of old wives' tales.'

" 'Old wives tales or not, Mr. Wyke,' I said. 'I'll bet you ten guineas you wouldn't spend tonight in that cottage with me.'

"Wyke loved guineas—but he hesitated and tried to bluff it out.

" 'It's all stuff. And I won't have you upsetting my men with your tales, neither.'

"But the men were on my side. 'It's a fair wager, Mr. Wyke.'

" 'Ten guineas,' I said, 'take it or leave it. If you come, bring one of those axes with you. I'll borrow this one if I may. We can start work on the yew tree tomorrow!'

"When Wyke came to my cottage at about four in the afternoon, he brought the axe and a clergyman with him. Mr. Veering, the rector of Baronsbridge, was a white-haired man with a thin, intelligent face and pleasant manners.

" 'Rector's interested in these tales, so I've brought him, too.'

" 'Hallowvale used to be a part of the parish of All Souls, Baronsbridge, Mr. Keith. I have at home a journal kept by one of my predecessors, a Mr. Endor. He was rector here forty years—and died in 1810. Hallowvale was abandoned at

the end of the eighteenth century, and Mr. Endor's account of what caused it . . . well, he was an old man, and it is charitable to suppose that his wits were beginning to wander.'

"I told them what I had seen and heard during the night. Veering looked at me sharply once or twice, and Wyke muttered uneasily, 'He's been listening to gossips' tales, rector, that's what it is.'

" 'The last rector did, I believe, rather indiscreetly speak about the . . . matters contained in Endor's journal.'

" 'The only gossip I've heard has come from Wyke,' I said; 'about something that flies in the night.'

" 'Quite, quite. Well, we shall see.'

"We did. The Thing came flapping about the cottage just after midnight. This time is tried out new tactics. It loosened a couple of tiles, and the roots came coiling down like snakes through the gap and gripped Wyke by the ankle. He yelled fearfully, while Veering and I slashed at the tentacles that held him with our axes. They were horribly tough, and when we had cut through them, the severed tendrils writhed like worms on the floor. The weight on the roof shifted, and we heard it flapping off dismally into the valley.

" 'It'll come back again,' Wyke cried hoarsely. 'It'll come back and widen that hole.'

" 'The Thing keeps to the valley,' said the rector. 'Endor said it kept to the valley. It came like this, and people disappeared from their homes.'

" 'It'll come again,' Wyke wailed, 'once it's found a way in it'll come again.'

" 'We could get to the top of the ridge,' I said, 'and over it to Baronsbridge.'

" 'It'll swoop on us before ever we can get to the top. We're done for.'

" 'I don't relish the idea of waiting for it to come back,' said Veering. 'Outside the valley, we are in God's hands. Here . . . we can pray at least.'

" 'And then make a dash for it,' I said.

"The valley was quite silent. We knelt—keeping as far as possible from those still writhing root tips on the floor—while Mr. Veering prayed that we might be delivered from the Powers of Darkness. Then we let ourselves out of the back door and scrambled up the hill. The Thing scented us and came hawking after us. We heard it flapping behind us, and

sometimes glimpsed a shape like a huge bird with ropes instead of talons circling over the tree tops or sprawling ungainly on the valley slope. We kept as best we could to cover, but the trees thinned out as we neared the summit of the ridge, and in our last wild scramble to the top it sighted us. I heard a whistling noise as it swooped and a cry from Veering. He had tripped and fallen, and behind him I could make out a great dim mass, slithering and moving over the turf.

"At first I thought him lost; the Thing had only to pounce again and . . . and then I understood. It *could* fly no higher: it was caged in its evil valley; it had come to roost below the ridge, and was sending up those long yellow tentacles of roots to take its prey.

" 'Get up!' I shouted. 'For God's sake, Veering. A few more steps and you're safe.'

"Already a thin loop had coiled round one foot, and thicker coils wriggled obscenely towards him over the grass.

" 'Use your axe, parson,' cried Wyke. 'Your axe.'

"Veering heard us: there was a thud, an angry whistling, and the next moment we had pulled him to safety beside us.

"For a while we lay all three exhausted on the ridge path, listening to the slithering of those roots as they sought blindly the victim that had escaped them. Then we turned our backs on Hallowvale, and took the steep path down the other side to Baronsbridge.

"When we reached the rectory, Mr. Veering handed me a quarto volume bound in green morocco leather, and I sat up all the night reading old Endor's spidery script in the faded sepia ink; while Wyke huddled in a seat by the fire with a Bible on his knees. The trouble, according to Endor's account, had begun when the yew tree bore its first berries. There was a legend current in his day that in the early seventeenth century a woman from Hallowvale was hanged for witchcraft, and was buried at the crossroad with a stake, a yew stake, through her heart. On the scaffold she vowed that she would come back, flying in the night, and exterminate the village. The last words she spoke before the hangman pulled the noose were: 'When the first drop of blood shall be sprinkled on his feathers the owl will go a-mousing.'

"In the morning we brought several cans of petrol and a stick or two of gelignite to that yew tree above the ruined

village of Hallowvale, and we blew the accursed thing up. It screamed as it fell.

"There were things tangled among its roots, skulls and bones, a rusted sword, an old flint-lock pistol and a gold chain—some rabbit snares, too, and a red bandana handkerchief quite unrotted. But the most awful thing was a great pink slug, cocooned in grey hair—a palpitating, bloated thing that suggested a woman hideously swollen with a dropsy. We poured petrol among the roots and into the vile pit, and set fire to it. The fire burnt all day—and not much remained of the tree or the things . . . the Thing in its roots.

"When I last looked down into Hallowvale, it was a great tarnished-looking glass of water. All the same, when the firm offered me a job boring for water in the great Dust Bowl of Australia, I jumped at it. You can travel for miles, they tell me, without seeing a single tree."

NO SHIPS PASS

by

LADY ELEANOR SMITH

"I am glad," thought Patterson, "that I've always been a damned good swimmer . . ." and he continued to plough his way grimly through the churning, tumbled argent of the breakers. It seemed hours, although it was actually moments, since the yacht had disappeared in one brief flash of huge and bluish flame; now the seas tossed, untroubled, as though the yacht had never been; and the boat containing his comrades had vanished, too, he noticed, glancing over his shoulder—had vanished with such swiftness as to make him think that it must have been smudged by some gigantic sponge from the flat, greenish expanse of the ocean. The strange part was that he was able, as he swam, to think with a complete, detached coherence; he was conscious of no panic; on the contrary, as he strove with all his might to gain the strip of land dancing before his eyes, his mind worked with a calm and resolute competence.

"I always thought we'd have a fire with all that petrol about. . . . Curse all motor-yachts . . . I wonder if the others

have been drowned? . . . Good job I gave the boat a miss. . . ."

He was not even conscious of much regret as he thought of the probable fate of his comrades—his employer, his employer's son, the members of the crew. Already, as he swam on and on through gently lapping waves, the yacht and those who belonged to it had become part of the past, remote and half-forgotten. The present and the future lay ahead, where a long line of sand shimmered like silver before his eyes. Yet it was funny, he mused; there had been no sign of land seen from aboard the yacht, and it was not until the actual panic of the fire that he had noticed the dim shape of this island, "near enough to swim to," as he had cried to the others, but they swarmed into the boat, taking no notice of his cries. And so he had embarked alone upon this perilous adventure.

He was a strong swimmer, but he was growing tired. Were his limbs suddenly heavier, or had the sea become less buoyant? He clenched his teeth, striking out desperately, then floated for a while, lying on his back, the huge arch of the sky towering a million miles above him like some gigantic bowl, all fierce hydrangea-blue. When he turned to swim again, he was refreshed, but more sensible of the terrors of his situation. And yet, was it his fancy, or had the shores of the island loomed nearer during the moments of this brief rest? At first he believed himself to be suffering from hallucination, then, as he looked again, he realised that he was making remarkable progress. . . . He was now so near that the beach glittered like snow in the tropical sunshine before his eyes, and the sands dazzled him, yet he could perceive, lapping against them, a line of softly creaming surf, and above the sands there blazed the vivid jewel-green of dense foliage. The gulls wheeled bright-winged against the brighter silver of sea and sand. Then he was prepared to swear that his ears distinguished, sounding from the shore, a harsh and murmurous cry that might have been—for he was very weary—something in the nature of a welcome for the creature trying so desperately to gain this sparkling and gaudy sanctuary.

And then exhaustion descended upon him like a numbing cloak, and his ears sang and his brain whirled. His limbs seemed weighted, and his heart pumped violently and he thought he must drown, and groaned, for at that moment life seemed sweet and vivid, since life was represented by the island, and the seas were death.

"Well, now for death," he thought, and as he sank, his foot touched bottom.

He realised afterwards that he must have sobbed aloud as he staggered ashore. For a moment, as he stood ankle-deep in warm, powdery sand, with the sun pouring fiercely upon his drenched body, the surf curdling at his feet and the cool greenness of a thickly matted forest cresting the slope above his head, he still thought that he must be drowning, and that this land was mirage. Then the silence was shattered by a shrill scream; and a glowing parrot, rainbow-bright, flew suddenly from amidst the blood-red shower of a tall hibiscus-bush, to wheel, gorgeous and discordant, above his head. Beating wings of ruby and emerald and sapphire. Dripping fire-coloured blossom. Loud, jangling, piercing cries. The island was real.

Patterson fainted, flopping like a heap of old clothes upon the smooth, hard silver of the sand. . . .

When he came to himself, the sun was lower and the air fragrant with a scented coolness that seemed the very perfume of dusk itself. For a moment he lay motionless, his mind blank, then, as complete consciousness returned to him and he rolled over on his face, he became aware of a black, human shadow splashed across the sands within a few inches of where he lay. The island, then, must obviously be inhabited. He raised his eyes defiantly.

He could not have explained what he had expected to see —some grinning, paint-riddled savage, perhaps, or else the prim, concerned face of a missionary in white ducks, or, again, a dark-skinned native girl in a wreath of flowers. He saw actually none of these, his gaze encountering a shorter, stranger form—that of an elderly, dwarfish man in what he at first supposed to be some sort of fancy dress. Comical clothes! He gaped at the short, jaunty jacket, the nankeen trousers, the hard, round hat, and, most singular of all, a thin and ratty pigtail protruding from beneath the brim of this same hat. The little man returned his scrutiny calmly, with an air of complete nonchalance; he revealed a turnip face blotched thick with freckles, a loose mouth that twitched mechanically from time to time, and little piggish, filmy blue eyes.

"Good God," said Patterson at length, "who are you, and where did you appear from?"

The little man asked, in a rusty voice proceeding from deep in his throat:

"Have you tobacco?"

"If I had it'd be no use to you. Do you realise I swam here?"

"You swam? From where?"

There was silence for a moment, a silence broken only by the breaking of the surf and by the harsh cry of birds, as Patterson, more exhausted than he had first supposed, tried idiotically to remember to what strange port the yacht *Seagull,* had been bound.

He said at length:

"I—we were on your way to Madeira. The Southern Atlantic. The yacht—a petrol-boat—caught fire. And so I swam ashore."

"Petrol?" the man replied, puzzled. "I know nothing of that. As for the Southern Atlantic, I myself was marooned on these shores deliberate, many and many a year ago, when bound for Kingston, Jamaica."

"Rather out of your course, weren't you?"

The little man was silent, staring reflectively out to sea. Patterson, naturally observant, was immediately struck by the look in those small, filmy blue eyes—a singular, fixed immobility of regard, at once empty and menacing, a glassy, almost dead expression in which was reflected, all the vast space of the ocean on which he gazed, and something else, too, more elusive, harder to define, some curious quality of concentration that, refusing to be classified, nevertheless repelled. He asked:

"What's your name?"

"Heywood. And yours?"

"Patterson. Are you alone here?"

The narrow blue eyes shifted, slipped from the sea to Patterson's face, and then dropped.

"Alone? No; there are four of us."

"And were they also marooned?"

As he uttered this last word he was conscious that it reflected the twentieth century even less than did the costume of his companion. Perhaps he was still light-headed after his ordeal. He added quickly:

"Were they also bound for Jamaica?"

"No," Heywood answered briefly.

"And how long," Patterson pursued laboriously, "have you been on the island?"

"That," said his companion, after a pause, "is a mighty big question. Best wait before you ask it. Or, better still, ask it, not of me, but of the Captain."

"You're damned uncivil. Who's the Captain?"

"Another castaway, like ourselves. And yet not, perhaps, so much alike. Yonder, behind the palms on the cliff, is his hut."

"I wouldn't mind going there. Will you take me?"

"No," said Heywood in a surly tone.

"Good God!" exclaimed Patterson. "I shall believe you if you tell me they marooned you for your ill-manners. I've swum about eight miles, and need rest and sleep. If you've a hut, then take me to it."

"The Captain'll bide no one in his hut but himself and one other person. That person is not myself."

"Then where do you sleep? In the trees, like the baboons I hear chattering on the hill?"

"No," Heywood answered, still looking out to sea. "I've a comrade in my hut, which is small, since I built it for myself. A comrade who was flung ashore here when a great ship struck an iceberg."

"An iceberg?" Patterson's attention was suddenly arrested. "An iceberg in these regions? Are you trying to make a fool of me, or have you been here so long that your wits are going? And, by the way, tell me this: how do you try to attract the attention of passing ships? Do you light bonfires, or wave flags?"

"No ships pass," said Heywood.

There was another silence. It was almost dark; already the deep iris of the sky was pierced by stars, and it was as though a silver veil had been dragged across the glitter of the ocean. Behind them, on the cliffs, two lights winked steadily; Patterson judged these to proceed from the huts mentioned by his companion. Then came the sound of soft footsteps, and they were no longer two shadows there on the dusky sands, but three.

"Hallo, stranger!" said a casual voice.

Patterson turned abruptly to distinguish in the greyness a sharp, pale face with a shock of tousled hair. A young man, gaunt-looking and eager, clad normally enough in a dark sweater and trousers.

"And this is a hell of a nice island, I don't think," the stranger pursued, thrusting his hands into his pockets. He had a strong Cockney accent. Patterson was enchanted by the very prosaicness of his appearance; he brought with him sanity; walking as he did on faery, moon-drenched shores he was blessed, being the essence of the commonplace.

"Name of Judd. Dicky Judd. I suppose you're all in. Been swimming, ain't you?"

"Yes. And this fellow Heywood won't take me to his hut. Says it's full. Can you do anything about it?"

"You bet," said Judd. "Follow me, and I'll give you a bite of supper and a doss for the night. This way—the path up the cliff. We'll leave Heywood to the moon. Come on."

Ten minutes later, Patterson was eating fried fish and yams in a log-hut, wtih an open fireplace and two hammocks swung near the rude doorway. He had noticed, as they climbed the slope together, a grander, more commodious hut built a few hundred yards away amongst some shady palms. This, he surmised, must be the home of the elusive Captain. No sound came from it, but a light burned in the narrow window. As he ate his food he speedily forgot the existence of these fellow-castaways. He asked instead, gulping down water and wishing it were brandy:

"How did you come here, Judd? With the others?"

Judd eyed him swiftly. For one second Patterson imagined that he detected in the merry greenish eyes of his companion the fixed, almost petrified expression that had so much perplexed him in the gaze of Heywood. If he was right, this expression vanished in a flash, yet Judd seemed to withdraw himself, to become curiously remote, as he answered coolly:

"Not I. I came here after them—some time after."

"Do you mean that, like me, you were the only survivor from your ship?"

"That's about it," Judd answered, with his mouth full.

"Tell me about it."

"Oh . . . there's nothing much to tell. She was a great liner —I had a berth aboard her—and she struck an iceberg in mid-Atlantic. There was not room for me in the boats, so I jumped. . . . But she was a lovely ship, and big as a city. *Titanic,* they called her."

"You're pulling my leg. And for Heaven's sake chuck it —I've had about enough for one day."

"S'trewth, I'm not!" Judd told him energetically. "But no matter. You don't have to believe it."

And he whistled, picking his teeth.

Patterson asked with a shiver:

"Look here, joking apart, do you mean to tell me that you honestly believe you were cast ashore here from the wreck of the *Titanic*?"

"On my oath," said Judd. He added, jumping up: "Bugs is bad here tonight. Wait while I swat a few."

"Just answer this," Patterson interrupted. "Why in Heaven's name, when you think you were wrecked in mid-Atlantic, should you have landed here on a tropical island off the African coast? Bit of a miracle that, wasn't it?"

Judd was silent for a moment, flicking at the mosquitoes with a palm-leaf fan. He said at length, sucking his teeth:

"Not being a seafaring man, I take it, you don't happen to have heard a fairy-story told among sailors-boys all the world over—story of a mirage island that floats about the seas near wrecks bent on collecting castaways?"

Patterson thought desperately.

"This man's as mad as Heywood, and that's saying a lot. . . . And I've got to live with them. . . ." Aloud he said: "No, I've never heard that one. But there's one other thing I want to ask you. . . . Who's this Captain that Heywood was talking about? Has he been here for many years?"

"I'll give you this goatskin for a blanket," said Judd, "and you can doss near the doorway, where it's cooler. So you know about the Captain?"

"I've only heard his name. I asked you, has he been here for very long?"

"Many years," answered Judd, with a peculiar inflection.

"Tell me more about him."

Judd laughed.

"You don't half want to know much, do you? You'll clap eyes tomorrow on Captain Thunder, late of the barque, *Black Joke*, well known (he's always boasting) from Barbadoes to Trinidad and back again. But you may whistle for the Captain tonight!"

Patterson was sleepy.

"Sounds like a buccaneer," he muttered into the goatskin, and was soon unconscious, oblivious even of Heywood's noisy entry into the hut.

By early morning the island's beauty seemed more exotic even than the radiant plumage of the parakeets darting to and fro in the dim green light of airy tree-tops. Patterson was refreshed after a good night's sleep, and consequently less depressed. He bathed with Judd, leaving Heywood snoring in his hammock. The beach was a shining snowdrift, the sea a vast tapestry of hyacinth veined and streaked with foam, glowing, glittering in the brilliant sunlight.

They swam for twenty minutes and then lay basking on the sands.

"Hungry?" Judd inquired.

So delicious was the morning that Patterson had quite forgotten the eccentricity manifested by his comrades the previous evening. Rolling over on his stomach, he was about to reply in an enthusiastic affirmative, when he surprised once more in his companion's gaze that bleak, fey look that had already disconcerted him. He could not understand it, yet it was as though a sombre shadow fled across the beach, obscuring this gay and vivid world of amber sunshine, creaming surf, tossing sea and glowing, brilliant blossom. Beauty was blotted out when Judd, the commonplace, looked like that; he felt suddenly lonely, humble and scared.

"Judd," he said suddenly, and Judd wrenched away his eyes from the horizon.

"Judd, listen and please tell me the truth. Just what are our chances of getting away from here?"

Judd eyed him thoughtfully.

"If you want the truth, we haven't any. Sorry, and all that, but there it is."

"Rubbish!" said Patterson. "A ship will surely pass one day. Just because you've had bad luck . . ."

"No ships pass," Judd told him.

"Rubbish again! Look how close mine came yesterday. The trouble with you, Judd, is that you've been here too long, and got into a rut. I don't believe you care much whether you're rescued or not. Now, I do. And I'll tell you my plans—"

"Listen a minute," said Judd. He propped himself up on his elbow, avoided his companion's eyes, and resumed: "You might as well hear it now. No sense in keeping it from you, although you'll think I'm nutty. Listen, then, Patterson. We're here for keeps. Get that? Look at the Captain and his friend; look at Heywood. If I told you how long they'd been here

you wouldn't swallow it, and I'd not blame you. But you've got to know some time—we're here for *ever*. Now I feel better."

Patterson shuddered in the blazing sunlight.

"Do you really think we've got to stick this until we die?"

Judd flung a pebble at a pearly cloud of seagulls.

"Worse than that, Patterson. Worse by a long chalk. I told you last night this island was mirage, magic. Stands to reason it is, floating round the world picking survivors from shipwrecks in all the Seven Seas. Well, there's something worse than that—much worse—and I'm going to tell you what it is. There's no death on this island. Death forgets us. We're here for all eternity."

Patterson laughed nervously.

"You should be in Bedlam, Judd. I suppose a few years' desert-island does that to one. But look here, now I've come to join you, we'll get away somehow, I promise you that."

Judd slipped on his trousers.

"You don't believe me, and small blame to you. I was like that once. But it's true. I swear to God it is. There's no death here. For the animals and birds, yes, or we should starve. But not for us. We're here for all eternity, and you may as well make the best of it."

Patterson, trying to dress himself, found that his hands were trembling. Yet he tried to be reasonable.

"Look here, Judd, what put this crazy idea into your head?"

"Do you know," Judd replied, "how long Heywood's been here? Of course you don't; I'll tell you. He was marooned here in eighteen twenty-five. It's nineteen thirty-two now, isn't it? Add that up for yourself. As for the Captain, he's had a longer spell. He was a pirate, one of those Spanish Main fellows I read about when I was a kid. His crew mutinied in July, seventeen ninety-five. Another sum for you, if you're quick at figures."

"Very interesting," Patterson commented idiotically.

"Don't you imagine," Judd continued, "that we haven't all of us tried to escape in the past. We've built rafts and boats —they've always been chucked back here on the beach by mysterious tidal waves or tempests. Then we've tried to kill ourselves and one another—we've been wounded and lain sick for weeks with mosquitoes battening on our wounds, and our wounds have festered, but we've pulled through. Now we don't do that any more. Too much pain for nothing. You always pull

through in the end. We've tried to drown, and swallowed quarts of water, but always we've been flung back on the sands here. Death's not for us—we've jolly well found that out. And so we make the best of it. It's all right after a time. You live for eating and sleeping, and you blooming well don't think. Sometimes you go mad, but in the long run you get sane again. And you kowtow to the Captain, who's got twice the guts of anyone. And, oh, yes, your clothes last just as you last. Funny, isn't it?"

"What about breakfast?" suggested Patterson.

"I knew you'd think me loopy," said Judd. "All right, come on back to the hut."

They scrambled to their feet, and there was an awkward constraint between them. Then Patterson pulled Judd's arm.

"What's that? Look, over there! Is that another confounded mirage?"

Judd screwed up his eyes. Beside the rocks, where seaweed flourished like green moss, a woman stood, skirts kilted in her hand. She was barefoot, and sprang from one rock to another, with the grace and agility of a deer. She was gathering mussels. As she worked she sang, and the drowsy, bell-like sweetness of her voice was wafted faintly to their ears all mingled with the cry of seagulls.

"Oh, that," said Judd. "Well, you'd better remember to act respectful when she's about. That's Doña Inés, the Captain's girl. She was his prisoner; he had her with him on his boat when the crew of the *Black Joke* mutinied, and they were cast up here together. At least, they both say so. First she hated him, then loved him for forty years or so, and since then, for about a hundred years, she's been fed up, but he's still keen on her. So keep away, that's my advice. Once Heywood went snooping after her, and the Captain cut his throat. He'd have died elsewhere, of course, and he suffered the tortures of hell, he told me. He'll show you the scar if you're interested."

"Wait," said Patterson, "you've given me a turn with your crazy talk, and she's coming towards us. There's no harm, I suppose, in speaking to her?"

"None, as long as you're respectful."

They waited there on the beach while the woman approached them. She was young, about twenty, and extremely handsome. She wore a stiff, flowing skirt of burning crimson, and a little jacket of orange. Her dark, rippling hair hung like

a black plume down her back, and her oval, vivid face was delicately modelled, with high cheek-bones, a mouth like red blossom, and immense velvety-brown eyes. She was Spanish, of course, and well bred; her wrists were fragile, exquisite, her bare feet slender and arched. Her body was lithe, graceful and voluptuous; she moved swiftly, as though she danced, and as she drew near to the two men, a sudden soft breeze blew a lock of floating ebon hair across the fire and sweetness of her mouth.

Patterson was dazed; he had encountered much superstition during the course of the morning, his stomach was empty, and he was but ill-prepared for such beauty. Doña Inés said gaily, speaking fluent, attractive English:

"Good morning to you, *señor*. I heard last night of your arrival, but was not allowed to greet you, as I so much desired. Please forgive my execrable manners. We shall see so much of one another that it would be as well to start our acquaintance on friendly terms."

Patterson pulled himself together and kissed her hand, a long, delicate hand all dusky-tanned with the sun. A huge diamond glared from the third finger.

"Morning, Inés," said Judd casually. "Where's the Captain?"

"Micah?" She became suddenly indifferent. "Waiting for his breakfast, I suppose. I must go to him. Shall we walk up the hill together?"

And so they went, and the Doña Inés moved lightly between them, all bright and flaming in her gaudy clothes, and told Patterson that he must accustom himself to this idea of eternity. After the first hundred years these things mattered little enough.

"As well be here, laughing and walking in the sunshine, as in our graves. Don't you think so, *señor?* And I, who am talking to you, have so much experience of these things. Why, haven't I lived here with Micah Thunder for near on a hundred and forty years? And it might be yesterday that he sacked Santa Ana, he and his fleet, and took me prisoner when I was on my knees at Mass, and swore that I should be his woman. And so I was, both here and on his ship. But I have almost forgot the ship, and Santa Ana, too. Now there is only the island, and yet I am not a stricken woman, am I, nor yet a day older than when cast up on these shores?"

And so she prattled, her dark eyes flashing like jewels, until

she and the two men came to the clearing where were the two huts, and there, in front of the smaller one, sat Heywood, surly as ever, eating.

"Good-bye, *señor*," said Doña Inés. "We will meet later, when I have fed my Captain."

Patterson sat down on the ground and said nothing.

"Here's orange-juice," said Judd, "and custard-apples, and some corn-bread I baked myself. No butter—we don't rise to that—but, all the same, we'll dine on oysters."

Patterson ate in silence. He supposed himself to be hungry. And he thought that he was in a nightmare, and would wake soon with the steward shaking him, and find himself once more in a gay, chintz-hung cabin of the *Seagull*, with bacon and eggs waiting in the dining-saloon. But he did not wake.

"I'll help you rig up a tent after breakfast," said Judd. "I've got some sailcloth. It'll last you for a few days, and then you can build a hut for yourself."

Heywood, eating ravenously, said nothing, but eyed him in silence.

"I wish," he thought desperately, "they wouldn't stare like that."

And suddenly he knew of what their fixed eyes remained him. They were like dead men in the way they gazed. Glassy and vacant, their eyes were as the eyes of corpses. Perhaps their fantastic stories were true, and he had in reality been cast for all eternity upon a mirage island.

"Oh, Lord," he thought, "I'm getting as crazy as the rest of them. And yet the woman, the Spanish woman, seemed sane enough, and she believes their tales."

After breakfast he worked at putting up his tent, sweating in the copper glare of the sun, while Heywood went fishing and Judd vanished into the woods with a bow and arrows. No sound came from the other hut. When he had finished erecting his tent, Patterson lay down in the shade inside it, and found himself craving for a cigarette with a passionate, abnormal longing. It was stuffy in the tent, and mosquitoes clustered round his hot face. He shut his eyes and tried to sleep, but sleep evaded him. And then, as he lay quietly in the oppressive darkness, his instincts, already sharpened by twenty-four hours' adventure, warned him that someone was watching him. He opened his eyes.

Outside, regarding him impassively, stood a small, slim man

in dainty, dandified clothes of green-blue shot taffeta. These garments, consisting of a full-skirted, mincing coat and close-fitting breeches, were smeared with dirt, and seemed to Patterson highly unsuited to desert-island life. The little man wore cascades of grubby lace dripping from his wrists, and rusty buckles on his pointed shoes. He bore himself like a dancing-master, and had no wig, which seemed odd to Patterson, who gaped at a gingery, close-shaven head revealing glimpses of bare skull like pinkish silk. The face of this man was long and narrow and candle-pale, with thin, dry lips and pointed ears. His flickering, expressionless eyes were green as flames; he blinked them constantly, showing whitish, sandy lashes. His hands were long, blanched, and delicate, more beautiful than a woman's, and he wore on one finger a huge diamond ring, the twin to that other stone blazing upon the finger of Doña Inés. Patterson, disconcerted by the cold, unwavering eyes, scrambled to his feet and held out his hand. It was ignored, but the Captain bowed gracefully.

"Captain Micah Thunder, late of the *Black Joke,* and at your service."

He spoke in a high, affected, mincing voice.

"I have already," Patterson told him, "heard talk of you, Captain Thunder, and am, therefore, delighted to have this opportunity of meeting you."

"You're a damned liar," replied Captain Thunder, with a giggle. "My fame, I understand, has not, through some absurd mischance, been handed down throughout the ages, or so Judd informs me. They talk, I hear, of Flint and Kidd—even of Blackbeard, most clumsy bungler of all—but not of Thunder. And that, you know, is mighty odd, for without any desire to boast, I can only assure you, my young friend, that in the three years preceding the mutiny of my crew I was dreaded in all ports as the Avenger of the Main, and, indeed, I recollect taking during that period more than thirty merchantmen."

He sighed, giggled once more, and shook out the lace ruffles on his cuffs.

"Indeed, sir?" said Patterson respectfully. To himself he thought, in a sudden panic: "I must humour this man; he's worse than any of them."

For the Captain, with his conical, shaven head, his long, pale face, his deprecating giggle, his cold, greenish eyes and high, affected voice, seemed as he minced there in the sunshine most

terribly like an animated corpse coquetting, grotesquely enough, in all the parrot-sheen of silken taffetas and frothing lace. This creature, this little strutting jackanapes, so bleached and frozen and emasculated, looked, indeed, as though a hundred and more years of living on this island had drained away his very life-blood, leaving a dummy, a vindictive, posturing dummy, clad in fine raiment, staring perpetually out to sea with greenish, fishy eyes. And something, perhaps the very essence of evil itself, a breath of cold and effortless vice, emanated from him to stink in Patterson's nostrils like a rank and putrid smell. The odour of decay, perhaps; the very spirit of decay, for surely, in spite of sanity and common sense, this man should long ago have rotted, not in a coffin, but rather from a gibbet on Execution Dock.

And Doña Inés, creeping up softly behind him, seemed brighter, gayer, than a humming-bird, in contrast to her pale pirate. Receiving a signal from her eye, he knew that he must make no mention of an earlier meeting.

"My mistress, Doña Inés Samaniégos, of Santa Ana," announced the Captain, with a flourish.

"Your servant, madam," said Patterson formally.

And the lady, very grave and beautiful, ran her hand lightly over the Captain's sleeve and swept a curtsey, deep and billowing. She was not merry now, neither was she barefoot; she seemed haughty, and had shod herself in high-heeled, red shoes.

"This flower," said Captain Thunder casually, indicating his paramour with a flick of white finger, "springs from a proud and splendid Castilian family. Is it not so, my heart? I took her when my fleet sacked Santa Ana, finding her myself, when my hands were steeped in blood above the wrists, praying in terror before a waxen, tinselled image of the Virgin. She was sixteen, and very timid, being fresh from convent. Before I wooed I was forced to tame her. When I had tamed her, I was still enamoured, and for four years she sailed the Main as queen of my fleet. The *Black Joke,* my ship, and the Black Lady, as they called my woman (being accustomed to flaxen peasant maids from Devon), those were all I prized in life. My ship they took, my woman I have kept, and will continue to keep whilst we remain here."

The drawling voice was icy now, and the light eyes had

become green stones. Patterson realised that he was being warned. He answered lightly:

"And may I congratulate you, Captain, upon a lovely and most glorious prize?"

"Do you mind," said the Captain to Doña Inés, "when that little ape, Heywood, tried to take you, and I slit his throat?"

She nodded, her eyes very dark and lustrous.

The Captain turned to Patterson.

"There is no death on this island, sir, as you will discover for yourself, but it is possible to fight, and, fighting, to inflict wounds. A sorry business, very. I declare I regretted it, when I saw the poor creature gurgling in mortal agony. He was sick for many days. But, sooner or later, we all heal. However, I'm soft-hearted, once my rage is appeased. And now you will pray excuse me, while I seek the shade. I'll leave madame here to entertain you for ten minutes. A change for her, a pleasant interlude for yourself. In ten minutes, then, my dove?"

Bowing, he retreated, walking away with pointed toes, more like a dancing-master than ever.

When he was out of earshot Patterson said impulsively:

"I'm not enamoured of your Captain!"

"And I," she said thoughtfully, "was once enamoured of him for forty years."

"And now?" Patterson wanted to know.

"Now?" She scooped up some sand and let it sift through her fingers. "Oh, my poor young man, does anyone remain in love for all eternity? Do you really believe that pretty legend?"

"Then you hate him?"

"Hate? No. You can neither hate nor love for a hundred years. I have suffered both, so I know, and tried to kill myself three times. Oh, yes, there is not much that I cannot tell you about love. One does not live as long as I have lived without learning wisdom."

"And please tell me, Doña Inés," begged Patterson, "what you have learned about life in a hundred and forty years."

"A hundred and sixty," she corrected. "I was twenty when cast up here. What have I learned? One thing above all—to live without emotion. Love, hate, tedium—those are all words, very unimportant words. They are nothing. I like to eat when I am hungry, sleep when I am tired, swim when the sun is hot. All that is good, because it is just enough. I used to think—I never think now. I was mad, you know, for a little time, five

years or so, because I thought too much. But soon I was cured. That was when, having loved Micah and hated him, at last he sickened me. I imagined I could not bear that. But you see I was wrong."

She laughed, shaking back a tress of hair, and he knew that, with death, she had also lost her soul and her humanity. She was, as she had said, empty, drained of all emotion; she was as sterile mentally, this lovely lady, as the parakeets chattering above her head. But she was very beautiful.

"And the Captain?" he inquired. "Is it rude to ask what are his feelings towards you?"

"Indeed, no!" And she laughed again. "The Captain is still a man, although he should have been dead long ago. Being a man, he has need of a woman sometimes. Being a man, he is determined that other men shall not take that woman. That is all. Apart from that, like us all, he is petrified."

And then, although the ten minutes were not up, she heard Judd coming up the hill and slipped like a bright shadow to her own hut.

Days passed slowly on the island. One day was like another. Always the sun poured brilliantly upon sapphire seas, gleaming sands, jewelled foliage. Macaws flashed like darting rainbows through the dusky green of jungle arches, the fruit hung coral-bright from trees whose blossoms flung out trailing creepers gayer, more gaudy, than the patterns of vivid Spanish shawls. And yet it seemed to Patterson after two months that all this radiant beauty was evil and poisoned, like a sweet fruit rotten at the core. What should have been paradise was only a pretty hell. Slowly, reluctantly, he had been forced to accept the island for what it was according to his comrades. He now believed, although shamefacedly, that Thunder and Doña Inés had lived there since the mutiny of the *Black Joke*, that Heywood had been marooned in the last century for insubordination, that Judd had emerged from the wreck of the *Titanic*. And yet, obstinately, he still clung to the idea of escape. One day he would escape. And then, once away from the island's shores, he would regain mortality, he would wrap mortality about him like a cloak.

Meanwhile, he noticed one or two curious facts. His clothes, after eight weeks' rough living, were almost as good as new. It was no longer necessary for him to shave more than once a week. And, once, Judd, climbing a palm in search of coco-

nuts, had slipped, crashing on his head to what seemed certain death fifty feet below and had been picked up suffering from nothing worse than slight concussion. This accident shook his faith more than anything else that he saw.

They lived comfortably enough on fish, home-baked bread, fruit, coco-nuts, and the flesh of young pigs found in the jungle. Patterson learned to shoot with a bow-and-arrow, and to tell the time by the sun and stars. He learned to be patient with Heywood, who has half-witted, and he learned to search for turtles' eggs in a temperature of ninety-nine in the shade. He learned, too, to treat Captain Thunder with respect and Doña Inés with formality.

Sometimes, the Captain, a reserved, sour-tempered man, would unbend, and, fingering his cutlass, tell stories of his life as a buccaneer on the Spanish Main. Terrible stories, these, vile, filthy, sadistic stories of murder and vice, plunder and torture, and fiendish, cold-blooded, ferocious revenge. Told in his drawling, affected voice, they became nauseous, and yet Doña Inés listened peacefully enough, her dark eyes soft and velvety, her red, silken mouth calmer than an angel's. Sometimes she would look up and nod, and say:

"Oh, yes, Micah; I remember that, don't I? I was with you then, wasn't I?"

"You were, my dove, my heart. If you remember, I burnt your hand in the flame of my candle until you swooned, because you affronted me by asking mercy for those dogs."

And she would laugh.

"I was foolish, was I not, Micah? For what did it matter?"

Patterson, loathing these conversations, was, nevertheless, forced to listen because at night there was really nothing else to do. Always before in his life he had accepted books without question as being quite naturally part of his life; now that he had none, the lack of them appalled him. He tried to write, scratching a diary on strips of bark, but the effort was not successful. Nor did his companions do much to ameliorate the loneliness of his situation. He preferred Judd to the others because Judd was young and gay, and comparatively untouched by the sinister, dragging life of the island, yet there were times when even Judd seemed to withdraw himself, to become watchful, remote, secretive. Patterson learned to recognise these as the interludes when his friend, pitifully afraid, thought in a panic of the future that lay ahead for him.

Heywood was sulky and monosyllabic. The Captain, so cynical and depraved, with his vicious mind, his giggle, and his will of iron, had revolted Patterson from the first. Only Doña Inés, with her vivid face and her beautiful empty, animal mind, seemed to him restful and gracious, like some handsome, well-behaved child, in this crazy world of sunshine and plenty and despair. For this reason she began to haunt him at night, so that he was unable to sleep, and he longed, not so much to make love to her as to rest his head against her and to feel her cool hand upon his forehead, soothing him, that he might forget for a few hours. But Doña Inés was watched so carefully that it seemed impossible to speak to her alone.

And then one day, when he had been on the island for more than three months and was in a mood of black depression, he encountered her in the woods.

He had wandered there in search of shade, aimless, solitary, and discontented. She was gathering moss, on her knees, her bright skirts kilted. Stars of sunlight, dripping through the green and matted tent of foliage, cast flickering dappled shadows upon the amber of her neck and arms. When she heard his footsteps, she turned to look at him, smiling very wisely, her head turned to one side.

"May I speak to you," he asked her, "without being snarled at by the Captain?"

"But of course," she said. "Micah and Heywood went out an hour ago to fish on the other side of the island."

He sat down beside her on the green froth of the moss.

"Inés," he began, and he had never called her by her name before, "I wonder if you will be patient and listen to me for a moment?"

She nodded, saying nothing; she was never very glib of words.

"It's this," he said, encouraged; "perhaps, being so much wiser, you can help me. . . . It's a bad day with me; I've got the horrors. Today I believe all your crazy stories, and, try as I will, I can't escape from them . . . today I feel the island shutting me in, and I want to run away from the island. What am I to do?"

"You must begin," she told him, "by making yourself more stupid than you are. Oh, it was easy for Heywood, more easy even for Judd. For you it is very difficult. Can you not think only of today? Must you let your mind race on ahead?"

Her voice was murmurous and very soft. He said, after a pause:

"It would be easier, I think, if I might talk to you more often. Time, the time of the island, has touched you scarcely at all. With you one almost ceases to feel the horror."

"If it were not for Micah I would talk to you, yes, whenever you want. But you know how I am situated."

"Oh, don't think I'm trying to make love to you," he told her impatiently, "it's not that. It's only that you bring me peace—you're so beautiful, so restful."

Doña Inés was silent. He said, after another pause:

"Perhaps that wasn't very polite of me. In fact, it was clumsily expressed. Let me try once more—listen, Inés, you're sanity, loveliness, a bright angel in a mad world. I respect you as I would respect a saint. But I want to be with you, I want to talk to you. I'm lonely when you're not there—I need your protection."

Doña Inés looked away from him towards the green twilight of the trees. His eyes devoured her dark clear-cut profile. She said at length, speaking very slowly in her grave, beautiful voice:

"Mi querido, I can't grant your request. I am too afraid of Micah, and perhaps I am afraid of something else. . . . Listen, if I saw much of you I might forget that I should be a dead woman. I might forget that my heart is cold and my mind empty. I might wake up again, and I don't want to wake up. I am afraid of life, after so many years. And already you are making my sleep a little restless."

She turned her face towards him and he saw that the red flower of her mouth was trembling. A bright drop, that might have been a tear, save that she never wept, hung like a jewel upon the shadow of her lashes. Yet her face was radiant, transfigured, more sparkling than the sunshine.

Straightway, Patterson forgot about respect and saints and Captain Thunder, and kissed her on the lips.

For one enchanted moment she was acquiescent, then pushed him away, hiding her face in her hands. And he, realising the horror that lay ahead for both, felt more like weeping then rejoicing.

"Go away," she whispered, "go away before you make me hate you for what you are doing. A moment ago you talked of peace: do you realise that you are stealing mine?"

He stammered, scarcely knowing what he said:

"There are better dreams."

"Not here," she told him; "here there are no dreams but bad ones, and so it is safer not to dream at all. Please, please, go away."

"Inés," he said eagerly, "I *will* go away—we'll both go away. If I build a boat, or a raft, and provision her, will you trust yourself to me? We'll escape—we may drown, but I promise you—"

He stopped. In her tired yet vivid eyes he had suddenly surprised, for the first time, the dead, haunted look that so much disconcerted him when he glimpsed it in the others' gaze. It was as if she retreated very far away, drawing down a blind.

She said, patiently, as one speaking to a child:

"Oh, my friend, please don't be so foolish. . . . I have tried, we have all tried, so many times. And it hurts, to fail so often."

"Then you won't come?"

She climbed slowly to her feet, brushing moss from her bright skirts. Then she shook her black, silken head twice, very emphatically.

"No. I will not come with you."

"Then," said Patterson, "since I can't stay here to watch you with the Captain, I shall escape alone. Won't you change your mind?"

She came near to him and put her hand for one moment upon his shoulder.

"No. I'll not change my mind."

And with a swishing of silk, that sounded strange enough in that tropical, emerald glade, she left him to his thoughts, and his thoughts were agony.

For weeks he slaved in secret to build a great rakish-looking solid raft that grew slowly into shape as it lay concealed amid the dusky green of overhanging branches. He had told no one save Doña Inés of his resolution to escape. The reason was simple; in his heart of hearts he dreaded their bitter mockery, their cynical disbelief in any possible salvation from the trap of the island. Yet he still had faith; once aboard his raft and he would be for ever borne away from those perilous and beckoning shores; he might find death, but this he did not really mind, although he much preferred the thought of life, human life, life with Inés. And then he had to remind himself that the Spanish

woman was a thing of dust, to crumble away at the first contact with normal humanity, and that he would, in any event, be better without her, since she meant another mouth to feed.

But he still desired her, and it was as though the Captain knew, for she was very seldom left alone. And so he toiled in secret, and in his spare time nursed Judd, who lay sick of a poisonous snake-bite that swelled his foot, and turned it black, and would have meant death in any other land.

Once, when his raft was nearly completed, he caught Inés alone in the beach, where, against a background of golden rock, she fed a swirling silver mass of seagulls. The birds wheeled, crying harshly, and Doña Inés smiled. She wore a knot of scarlet passion-flowers in the dark satin of her hair. Patterson, determined not to miss a second alone with her, advanced triumphantly across the lands. The seagulls scattered.

"Look, you've frightened my birds," she complained indignantly.

"Never mind the birds—they can see you whenever they want. I can't. Inés, haven't you changed your mind about coming with me?"

She shook her head.

"Inés, please, *please* listen! Even if we drown out there together, wouldn't it be better than this?"

"Oh, yes, if we drowned. But we should not drown. We should come back here—to Micah—and then our lives would not be worth living."

"My life," he said, "isn't worth living now, not while I have to see you with that creature night and day."

"Be quiet," she warned in a low voice.

Patterson turned, following her eyes. Behind, only just out of earshot, stood the Captain, watching them sardonically. The breeze lifted the skirts of his green taffeta coat, ballooning them about his slender body. The green, too, seemed reflected in his face, so pale was it; paler, more waxen, even, than a corpse-candle.

"Are you also feeding the birds, Patterson?" inquired the Captain softly.

"No. I am looking for turtles' eggs."

"How many have you found?" the Captain wanted to know.

Patterson felt rather foolish.

"None—yet."

"Then you had better make haste, unless you wish to fast for dinner. Come, my rose."

And Captain Thunder turned away indifferently, followed by Doña Inés, who walked behind him obediently, her head bent, with no backward look.

That night Patterson thought he heard weeping in the hut that lay only a few hundred yards from his own, and he crouched, perspiring, sleepless, for many hours, until it was dark no longer, and bars of rose and lemon streaked the sky. Then he got up and went forth to the woods to complete his preparations for escape.

He had rigged up a sail upon his raft and had already floated her on a narrow lagoon that led towards the sea. He was taking with him three barrels of water, a barrel of bread, his fishing-tackle, a blanket, and a flint and tinder. He knew he would not starve, since fish were plentiful, but he was aware that he would, probably, unless he were fortunate enough to end in a shark's belly, die of a thirst that must endure for many days of torment in a pitiless and scorching heat.

Yet he could not wait; he must start at once, before the sun was up, before the first sign of life from that hut nestling on the cliffs behind him. And so, at a moment's notice, he took his departure, nervous and weary and taut with anxiety, drifting with his raft like some dark bird again the misty violet-blue of the lagoon at dawn.

Everything was silent; trees and cliff and sky, the limpid reflection of these in the glassy waters of the lagoon; even the monkeys and the chattering parakeets, all were frozen into a breathless silence that seemed to watch, aghast, the reckless departure of this creature determined at all costs to break away from their sorrowful eternity.

Soon it was daylight, and the sun beat gilded wings, and Patterson drew near to the sea. A curve in the lagoon showed him the tawny cliff, and above it the huts. From the Captain's hut came a finger of blue smoke that climbed, very straight, into the bright clearness of the air.

"Good-bye, Inés."

And he was surprised to find how little pain there was for him in this parting. He reminded himself once more that she was a ghost, a creature of dust.

He passed the rocks and was soon outside, away from the island, on the sea itself. The ripples danced, white-crested, as

though laced with silver. Patterson fished with success. He tried to fry his breakfast and, failing, devoured it half-raw, with a hunch of bread. It was very appetising. After breakfast he lay watching, with ecstasy, a stiff breeze swell his sail.

Already the island seemed to have receded. Patterson gazed with exultation at the coral-whiteness of its strand, the radiant green foliage of its trees. An hour before, and these had been loathsome to him; now that they belonged to the past he grimaced at them and waved his hand.

The raft drifted on.

The sea was kind to him that day, he thought, so innocent and gay and tinted like forget-me-nots. Despite himself, despite his almost certain death, he found his mind flitting towards England, and his life there, as though he were fated to be saved.

He turned towards the island, gleaming in the distance.

"Farewell!"

It was a cry of defiance.

And, then, in a moment, like thunder splintering from the sky, came sudden and shattering catastrophe. He was never very clear as to what actually occurred. All he knew was that from peace and beauty there emerged swift chaos. A wall of water, all towering solid green and ribbed with foam, reared suddenly from the tranquil seas to bar his path like some great ogre's castle arisen by magic, huge, destructive, carven of emerald. Then there was darkness and a tremendous roaring sound, and the raft seemed to buck like a frightened horse. He heard the ripping of his sail and then he was pitched through the air and something seemed to split his head and he knew no more.

When he awoke, the sun beat hot upon his temples. He felt sick, his limbs ached, and he groaned. He lay still, his eyes closed, and tried to remember what had happened. And then he heard a sound that might have been some dirge sighed by the breeze, a soft murmuring music that seemed to him familiar. The song of the island. He knew, then, that he was back upon the island. He had no need to open his eyes.

"Oh, God," he sighed.

And the sweat trickled down his face.

And then, inevitably, sounding close in his ear, the sneering, hateful voice of Captain Thunder.

"Home so soon, my young friend? No, you would not believe, would you? You know too much . . ."

Patterson made no sign of life. Back once more on the island. For all eternity . . . the island . . . and then the murmuring song swelled louder, louder, mocking him, laughing a little, as Inés had laughed when he had told her he was going to escape. The song of the island! And he must hear it for ever! He opened his eyes to find the Captain looking at him cynically.

"Now that you understand there is no escape," said the Captain, "perhaps you not take it amiss if I venture to criticise your manner towards Madam Inés. . . ."

But Patterson was not listening.

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