GERALD

Men Without Bones

KERSH

GERALD KERSH

MEN WITHOUT BONES

and other stories

12s 6d

NET

MEN WITHOUT BONES AND OTHER STORIES

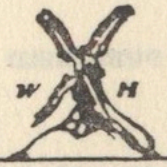
Books by Gerald Kersh

THEY DIE WITH THEIR BOOTS CLEAN
THE NINE LIVES OF BILL NELSON
THE DEAD LOOK ON
THE HORRIBLE DUMMY AND OTHER STORIES
BRAIN AND TEN FINGERS
FACES IN A DUSTY PICTURE
AN APE, A DOG AND A SERPENT
THE WEAK AND THE STRONG
NEITHER MAN NOR DOG
CLEAN, BRIGHT AND SLIGHTLY OILED
I GOT REFERENCES
NIGHT AND THE CITY
SAD ROAD TO THE SEA
PRELUDE TO A CERTAIN MIDNIGHT
THE SONG OF THE FLEA
MEN ARE SO ARDENT
CLOCK WITHOUT HANDS
THE THOUSAND DEATHS OF MR. SMALL
THE BRAZEN BULL
THE GREAT WASH
THE BRIGHTON MONSTER
GUTTERSNIPE
MEN WITHOUT BONES AND OTHER STORIES

MEN WITHOUT BONES AND OTHER STORIES

by

Gerald Kersh



WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD
MELBOURNE :: LONDON :: TORONTO

FOR CYRIL KERSH

FIRST PUBLISHED 1955

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE WINDMILL PRESS
KINGSWOOD, SURREY

Contents

Men Without Bones

WE were loading bananas into the *Claire Dodge* at Puerto Pobre, when a feverish little fellow came aboard. Everyone stepped aside to let him pass—even the soldiers who guard the port with nickel-plated Remington rifles, and who go barefoot but wear polished leather leggings. They stood back from him because they believed that he was afflicted-of-God, mad; harmless but dangerous; best left alone.

All the time the naphtha flares were hissing, and from the hold came the reverberation of the roaring voice of the foreman of the gang down below crying: "Fruta! Fruta! *FRUTA*!" The leader of the dock gang bellowed the same cry, throwing down stem after stem of brilliant green bananas. The occasion would be memorable for this, if for nothing else—the magnificence of the night, the bronze of the negro foreman shining under the flares, the jade green of that fruit, and the mixed odours of the waterfront. Out of one stem of bananas ran a hairy grey spider, which frightened the crew and broke the banana-chain, until a Nicaraguan boy, with a laugh, killed it with his foot. It was harmless, he said.

It was about then that the madman came aboard, unhindered, and asked me: "Bound for where?"

He spoke quietly and in a carefully modulated voice;

but there was a certain blank, lost look in his eyes that suggested to me that I keep within ducking distance of his restless hands which, now that I think of them, put me in mind of that grey, hairy, bird-eating spider.

"Mobile, Alabama," I said.

"Take me along?" he asked.

"None of my affair. Sorry. Passenger myself," I said. "The skipper's ashore. Better wait for him on the wharf. He's the boss."

"Would you happen, by any chance, to have a drink about you?"

Giving him some rum, I asked: "How come they let you aboard?"

"I'm not crazy," he said. "Not actually . . . a little fever, nothing more. Malaria, dengue fever, jungle fever, rat-bite fever. Feverish country, this, and others of the same nature. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Goodbody, Doctor of Science of Osbaldeston University. Does it convey anything to you? No? Well then; I was assistant to Professor Yeoward. Does *that* convey anything to you?"

I said: "Yeoward, Professor Yeoward? Oh yes. He was lost, wasn't he, somewhere in the upland jungle beyond the source of the Amer River?"

"Correct!" cried the little man who called himself Goodbody. "I saw him get lost!"

Fruta!—Fruta!—Fruta!—Fruta! came the voices of the men in the hold. There was rivalry between their leader and the big black stevedore ashore. The flares

spluttered. The green bananas came down. And a kind of sickly sigh came out of the jungle, off the rotting river—not a wind, not a breeze—something like the foul breath of high fever.

Trembling with eagerness and, at the same time, shaking with fever chills, so that he had to use two hands to raise his glass to his lips—even so, he spilled most of the rum—Doctor Goodbody said: "For God's sake, get me out of this country—take me to Mobile—hide me in your cabin!"

"I have no authority," I said, "but you are an American citizen; you can identify yourself; the Consul will send you home."

"No doubt. But that would take time. The Consul thinks I am crazy too. And if I don't get away, I fear that I really will go out of my mind. Can't you help me? I'm afraid."

"Come on, now," I said. "No one shall hurt you while I'm around. What are you afraid of?"

"Men without bones," he said, and there was something in his voice that stirred the hairs on the back of my neck. "Little fat men without bones!"

I wrapped him in a blanket, gave him some quinine, and let him sweat and shiver for a while, before I asked, humouring him: "What men without bones?"

He talked in fits and starts in his fever, his reason staggering just this side of delirium:

". . . What men without bones? . . . They are nothing to be afraid of, actually. It is they who are

afraid of you. You can kill them with your boot, or with a stick. . . . They are something like jelly. No, it is not really fear—it is the nausea, the disgust they inspire. It overwhelms. It paralyses! I have seen a jaguar, I tell you—a full-grown jaguar—stand frozen, while they clung to him, in hundreds, and ate him up alive! Believe me, I saw it. Perhaps it is some oil they secrete, some odour they give out . . . I don't know . . ."

Then, weeping, Doctor Goodbody said: "Oh, nightmare—nightmare—nightmare! To think of the depths to which a noble creature can be degraded by hunger! Horrible, horrible!"

"Some debased form of life that you found in the jungle above the source of the Amer?" I suggested. "Some degenerate kind of anthropoid?"

"No, no, no. *Men*! Now surely you remember Professor Yeoward's ethnological expedition?"

"It was lost," I said.

"All but me," he said. ". . . We had bad luck. At the Anaña Rapids we lost two canoes, half our supplies and most of our instruments. And also Doctor Terry, and Jack Lambert, and eight of our carriers. . . .

"Then we were in Ahu territory where the Indians use poison darts, but we made friends with them and bribed them to carry our stuff westward through the jungle . . . because, you see, all science starts with a guess, a rumour, an old wives' tale; and the object of Professor Yeoward's expedition was to investigate a series of Indian folk tales that tallied. Legends of a race

of gods that came down from the sky in a great flame when the world was very young. . . .

"Line by criss-cross line, and circle by concentric circle, Yeoward localised the place in which these tales had their root—an unexplored place that has no name because the Indians refuse to give it a name, it being what they call a 'bad place'."

His chills subsiding and his fever abating, Doctor Goodbody spoke calmly and rationally now. He said, with a short laugh: "I don't know why, whenever I get a touch of fever, the memory of those boneless men comes back in a nightmare to give me the horrors. . . .

"So, we went to look for the place where the gods came down in flame out of the night. The little tattooed Indians took us to the edge of the Ahu territory and then put down their packs and asked for their pay, and no consideration would induce them to go further. We were going, they said, to a very bad place. Their chief, who had been a great man in his day, sign-writing with a twig, told us that he had strayed there once, and drew a picture of something with an oval body and four limbs, at which he spat before rubbing it out with his foot in the dirt. Spiders? we asked. Crabs? What?

"So we were forced to leave what we could not carry with the old chief against our return, and go on unaccompanied, Yeoward and I, through thirty miles of the rottenest jungle in the world. We made about a quarter of a mile in a day . . . a pestilential place! When that stinking wind blows out of the

jungle, I smell nothing but death, and panic. . . .

"But, at last, we cut our way to the plateau and climbed the slope, and there we saw something marvellous. It was something that had been a gigantic machine. Originally it must have been a pear-shaped thing, at least a thousand feet long and, in its widest part, six hundred feet in diameter. I don't know of what metal it had been made, because there was only a dusty outline of a hull and certain ghostly remains of unbelievably intricate mechanisms to prove that it had ever been. We could not guess from where it had come; but the impact of its landing had made a great valley in the middle of the plateau.

"It was the discovery of the age! It proved that countless ages ago, this planet had been visited by people from the stars! Wild with excitement, Yeoward and I plunged into this fabulous ruin. But whatever we touched fell away to fine powder.

"At last, on the third day, Yeoward found a semi-circular plate of some extraordinarily hard metal, which was covered with the most maddeningly familiar diagrams. We cleaned it, and for twenty-four hours, scarcely pausing to eat and drink, Yeoward studied it. And, then, before the dawn of the fifth day he awoke me, with a great cry, and said: 'It's a map, a map of the heavens, and a chart of a course from Mars to Earth!'

"And he showed me how those ancient explorers of space had proceeded from Mars to Earth, via the Moon. . . . To crash on this naked plateau in this green hell of

a jungle? I wondered. 'Ah, but was it a jungle then?' said Yeoward. 'This may have happened five million years ago!'

"I said: 'Oh, but surely! it took only a few hundred years to bury Rome. How could this thing have stayed above ground for five thousand years, let alone five million?' Yeoward said: 'It didn't. The earth swallows things and regurgitates them. This is a volcanic region. One little upheaval can swallow a city, and one tiny peristalsis in the bowels of the earth can bring its remains to light again a million years later. So it must have been with the machine from Mars . . .'

" 'I wonder who was inside it,' I said. Yeoward replied: 'Very likely some utterly alien creatures that couldn't tolerate the Earth, and died, or else were killed in the crash. No skeleton could survive such a space of time.'

"So, we built up the fire, and Yeoward went to sleep. Having slept, I watched. Watched for what? I didn't know. Jaguars, peccaries, snakes? None of these beasts climbed up to the plateau: there was nothing for them up there. Still, unaccountably, I was afraid.

"There was the weight of ages on the place. *Respect old age*, one is told. . . . The greater the age, the deeper the respect, you might say. But it is not respect; it is dread, it is fear of time and death, sir! . . . I must have dozed, because the fire was burning low—I had been most careful to keep it alive and bright—when I caught my first glimpse of the boneless men.

"Starting up, I saw, at the rim of the plateau, a pair of eyes that picked up luminosity from the fading light of the fire. *A jaguar*, I thought, and took up my rifle. But it could not have been a jaguar because, when I looked left and right I saw that the plateau was ringed with pairs of shining eyes . . . as it might be, a collar of opals; and there came to my nostrils an odour of God knows what.

"Fear has its smell as any animal-tamer will tell you. Sickness has its smell—ask any nurse. These smells compel healthy animals to fight or to run away. This was a combination of the two, plus a stink of vegetation gone bad. I fired at the pair of eyes I had first seen. Then, all the eyes disappeared while, from the jungle, there came a chattering and a twittering of monkeys and birds, as the echoes of the shot went flapping away.

"And then, thank God, the dawn came. I should not have liked to see by artificial light the thing I had shot between the eyes.

"It was grey and, in texture, tough and gelatinous. Yet, in form, externally, it was not unlike a human being. It had eyes, and there were either vestiges—or rudiments—of head, and neck, and a kind of limbs.

"Yeoward told me that I must pull myself together; overcome my 'childish revulsion,' as he called it; and look into the nature of the beast. I may say that he kept a long way away from it when I opened it. It was my job as zoologist of the expedition, and I had to do it. Microscopes and other delicate instruments had been lost with

the canoes. I worked with a knife and forceps. And found? Nothing: a kind of digestive system enclosed in very tough jelly, a rudimentary nervous system, and a brain about the size of a walnut. The entire creature, stretched out, measured four feet.

"In a laboratory I could tell you, perhaps, something about it . . . with an assistant or two, to keep me company. As it was, I did what I could with a hunting-knife and forceps, without dyes or microscope, swallowing my nausea—it was a nauseating thing!—memorising what I found. But, as the sun rose higher, the thing liquefied, melted, until by nine o'clock there was nothing but a glutinous grey puddle, with two green eyes swimming in it. . . . And these eyes—I can see them now—burst with a thick *pop*, making a detestable sticky ripple in that puddle of corruption. . . .

"After that, I went away for a while. When I came back, the sun had burned it all away, and there was nothing but something like what you see after a dead jellyfish has evaporated on a hot beach. Slime. Yeoward had a white face when he asked me: 'What the devil is it?' I told him that I didn't know, that it was something outside my experience, and that although I pretended to be a man of science with a detached mind, nothing would induce me ever to touch one of the things again.

"Yeoward said: 'You're getting hysterical, Goodbody. Adopt the proper attitude. God knows, we are not here for the good of our health. Science, man, science! Not a day passes but some doctor pokes his

fingers into fouler things than that!' I said: 'Don't you believe it. Professor Yeoward, I have handled and dissected some pretty queer things in my time, but this is something repulsive. I have nerves? I daresay. Maybe we should have brought a psychiatrist . . . I notice, by the way, that you aren't too anxious to come close to me after I've tampered with that thing. I'll shoot one with pleasure, but if you want to investigate it, try it yourself and see!'

"Yeoward said that he was deeply occupied with his metal plate. There was no doubt, he told me, that this machine that had been, had come from Mars. But, evidently, he preferred to keep the fire between himself and me, after I had touched that abomination of hard jelly.

"Yeoward kept himself to himself, rummaging in the ruin. I went about my business, which was to investigate forms of animal life. I do not know what I might have found, if I had had—I don't say the courage, because I didn't lack that—if I had had some company. Alone, my nerve broke.

"It happened one morning. I went into the jungle that surrounded us, trying to swallow the fear that choked me, and drive away the sense of revulsion that not only made me want to turn and run, but made me afraid to turn my back even to get away. You may or may not know that, of all the beasts that live in that jungle, the most impregnable is the sloth. He finds a stout limb, climbs out on it, and hangs from it by his twelve steely claws; a tardigrade that lives on leaves. Your tardigrade

is so tenacious that even in death, shot through the heart, it will hang on to its branch. It has an immensely tough hide covered by an impenetrable coat of coarse, matted hair. A panther or a jaguar is helpless against the passive resistance of such a creature. It finds itself a tree, which it does not leave until it has eaten every leaf, and chooses for a sleeping place a branch exactly strong enough to bear its weight.

"In this detestable jungle, on one of my brief expeditions—brief, because I was alone and afraid—I stopped to watch a giant sloth hanging motionless from the largest bough of a half-denuded tree, asleep, impervious, indifferent. Then, out of that stinking green twilight came a horde of those jellyfish things. They *poured up* the tree, and writhed along the branch.

"Even the sloth, which generally knows no fear, was afraid. It tried to run away, hooked itself on to a thinner part of the branch, which broke. It fell, and at once was covered with a shuddering mass of jelly. Those boneless men do not bite: they suck. And, as they suck, their colour changes from grey to pink and then to brown.

"But they are afraid of us. There is race-memory involved here. We repel them, and they repel us. When they became aware of my presence, they—I was going to say, ran away—they slid away, dissolved into the shadows that kept dancing and dancing and dancing under the trees. And the horror came upon me, so that I ran away, and arrived back at our camp, bloody about the face with thorns, and utterly exhausted.

"Yeoward was lancing a place in his ankle. A tourniquet was tied under his knee. Nearby lay a dead snake. He had broken its back with that same metal plate, but it had bitten him first. He said: 'What kind of a snake do you call this? I'm afraid it is venomous. I feel a numbness in my cheeks and around my heart, and I cannot feel my hands.'

"I said: 'Oh, my God! You've been bitten by a jarajaca!'

" 'And we have lost our medical supplies,' he said, with regret. 'And there is so much work left to do. Oh, dear me, dear me! . . . Whatever happens, my dear fellow, take *this* and get back.'

"And he gave me that semi-circle of unknown metal as a sacred trust. Two hours later, he died. That night the circle of glowing eyes grew narrower. I emptied my rifle at it, time and again. At dawn, the boneless men disappeared.

"I heaped rocks on the body of Yeoward. I made a pylon, so that the men without bones could not get at him. Then—oh, so dreadfully lonely and afraid!—I shouldered my pack, and took my rifle and my machete, and ran away, down the trail we had covered. But I lost my way.

"Can by can of food, I shed weight. Then my rifle went, and my ammunition. After that, I threw away even my machete. A long time later, that semi-circular plate became too heavy for me, so I tied it to a tree with liana-vine, and went on.

"So I reached the Ahu territory, where the tattooed men nursed me and were kind to me. The women chewed my food for me, before they fed me, until I was strong again. Of the stores we had left there, I took only as much as I might need, leaving the rest as payment for guides and men to man the canoe down the river. And so I got back out of the jungle. . . .

"Please give me a little more rum." His hand was steady, now, as he drank, and his eyes were clear.

I said to him: "Assuming that what you say is true: these 'boneless men'—they were, I presume, the Martians? Yet it sounds unlikely, surely? Do invertebrates smelt hard metals and——"

"Who said anything about Martians?" cried Doctor Goodbody. "No, no, no! The Martians came here, adapted themselves to new conditions of life. Poor fellows, they changed, sank low; went through a whole new process—a painful process of evolution. What I'm trying to tell you, you fool, is that Yeoward and I did *not* discover Martians. Idiot, don't you see? *Those boneless things are men. We are Martians!*"

The Hack

"THE doctor told me that if I keep on drinking sherry early in the morning, I am not long for this world," said the old theatrical man, filling his glass with an unsteady hand. " 'You have been warned,' he said, 'it is *felo de se*, self-destruction, suicide!'

"So I said to him: 'I am not a very religious man, sir. A priest once told me that suicides go to hell. Well,' I said, 'I wish the devil joy of me. I am already burnt out.'

"He is one of those canting, ranting fellows that make a song and a sermon of every sentence—and, at that, sing it through their noses. 'You have lived a sinful life,' he has the temerity to tell me, 'and are paying for it.'

"Did you ever hear of such a thing? Sinful life—me? I ask you, old friend, what time have I had to sin? God is my judge that I scarcely found time to beget my family —and never quite enough time to be a father to the poor girls . . . or a husband to my poor wife," he added as an afterthought. "For God's sake, Benjamin, *you* know show business?"

The other man nodded so vigorously that his heavy purple jowls shook and quivered. "To my cost, brother, to my cost," he said. "And yet you don't seem to have come too badly out of it all. You are envied, in fact.

Here you sit like a gentleman in your own house, bought and paid for, in the bosom of your family, with plenty of money put aside, and servants to wait on you; while, in London, a good half of the profession is sponging for something to eat——"

"And who worked harder for it? And who paid more and got less for it?" cried his host, with an actor's gesture expressive of tragic despair.

"I set out with a soul full of hope and a high heart," he said. "Now I am empty. I had it in me—I swear to you—I had it in me, to be great. When I went to town, all the stars of heaven were singing and dancing in my head, so that I couldn't feel the road under my feet. Yes, I felt fit to conquer this world and the next—I mean, Today and Tomorrow—to sing my song, old friend. . . . Poor me!

"It is all illusion, believe me. It is all a dream. Comrade, every man lives, as it were, on a magic island in an enchanted sea. Wherever he turns, he sees that which is not and never was. Brother, at the moment, I see the world as . . . well, you know how, on a hot day you see the summer heat dancing in the light?

"I see a world made of intersecting sheets of this dancing heat, illuminated by the summer lightning, and tied with gossamer. Nothing but a bright bubble shivers between us and the eternal dark . . ."

He sighed so deeply that his friend, who was generally garrulous—what they call an extravert—sighed with him. Observing this, his host said, with a flicker of

lively interest: "I sigh; therefore, you sigh. There is a contagion in the mere machinery of it. If you yawned, I'd yawn. Yet I should not yawn because I felt your weariness any more than you have sighed because you knew my grief. Oh dear me, everything is epidemic except understanding. . . .

"You have seen it yourself, old friend, in the theatre: it is one laugh, all laugh; one jeer, all jeer; one weep, all weep; and if some frantic fool, smelling smoke, cries '*Fire!*' they will trample their best friends to death, contaminated by this same imitative fever, the apes! Do you know, Ben, if I dared I would put out a kind of comedy, or fantasy, or morality—call it what you will—based upon the idea that man is akin to the ape?"

Big Ben Jonson, swallowing another cup of sherry said: "God's name, man—don't!" To change the subject, he went on hastily in his stentorian bass voice: "Come, old fellow, tell us what weighs on your heart so heavy. It is a new piece that gives you no peace? (Forgive me the pun; it was unintentional.) Unburden, Will; unburden, man!"

William Shakespeare, sighing again, became suddenly interested in his own sigh. He said: "Some slobbering little philosopher told me, once, how it is said in the Orient that a man's soul is seated in his stomach. I believe it."

"The soul is in the head, the head!" cried Ben Jonson.

"Quiet, quiet, Boanerges," said Shakespeare, with a weary gesture. "Pour more wine. The soul, the soul is

everywhere. It is in your toes, your guts, your head—inside and outside of you. Who understands these mysteries? Once, I turned hope of good news into some sonnets. Where lies hope, but in the head? Another time, a disappointment in love transmuted itself into a fine speech. So, the soul is in the organs of reproduction? And yet again: many was the time when a cut off a buttock of beef gave me courage and inspiration. So, the soul is in the stomach, then?

"Believe me, Ben, I have known heaven in a full belly, and touched the depths of hell in the tiny cavity of an aching tooth . . . and now my midriff troubles me, my soul is in my stomach and burning in hell there. *In the head*, says you, you noisy fellow! You are positive of this, no doubt, because one night you went to bed with an inspiration and awoke with a headache—which won the day, I guess."

Ben Jonson was disposed to make a quarrel of it, and he might have done so twenty years ago. But he had learned not only to love William Shakespeare, but to honour him more than he chose publicly to admit. If this conversation had taken place in one of those taverns between Fleet Street and Millbank, Jonson would have bellowed like the high wind, spluttered like the sleet, and made thunderbolts of his big red fists on the table. He would have run through all the furies of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water.

Here, however, away from an audience, and with the murmuring of the Avon in his ears, much of the

turbulence was stroked out of him, and he was content with the sweet air and the sugared sherry. Furthermore, there was that about little William Shakespeare which made him believe him when he said that he was not long for this world. So, mildly (for him) Ben Jonson asked: "Who told you the seat of the soul was in the stomach?"

William Shakespeare replied: "A little fellow, a little fellow. A miserable, dreary little fellow. To the devil with him! But what was I to do, tell me, Ben? God knows, you have had your ups and downs . . ."

"God knows I have," said Ben Jonson, solemnly. "My father was nobody, I came from nowhere. I trailed my pike in the Netherlands, you and some others got me out of gaol after I'd killed my man——"

"Yes, yes, yes! But you are you, and contented with yourself. You have sung your song, Ben. But I am William Shakespeare, and I am dying before I have even learned to whistle, dying at . . . oh, pardon, you were asking me of the little fellow who opined the stomach was the seat of the soul. You have met him, I believe. He used to come to the Globe, *incognito*, less for love of the drama than for other considerations less creditable.

"Now I ask you, Ben, to put yourself in my position. You know show business—either you are everybody's slave or everybody's master; in which latter case, becoming a tyrant, you are your own slave; from which slavery only death can liberate you. Thus, with me, it was always that I was receiver of stolen property for Procrastination the Thief of Time.

"All the years I have lived—may I be forgiven!—I have hidden from myself, like a ruffian or a debtor in St. Paul's, under a shadowy dome. And always cheating myself, as a bully cozens a tailor, with 'Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.' Burbage wants a speech and a part with a lot of meat in it for him; so, I write for him, faithfully promising myself: 'When I get my pay, by God, I write for myself!'

"Then, there are mouths to be fed, and what I am writing for myself comes slow; what time Tom, Dick and Harry want something to mouth. Money is low again. I put aside, therefore, *The Tragedy of Belisarius*, and scribble *Titus Andronicus* for Harry, Dick and Tom. Soon, someone comes to me with a piece by some poor poetaster—Kyd, I think his name was—and asks me to rewrite it with fine speeches and soliloquies for another strutting ape. Into the closet goes my *Belisarius*, and I am off again on such offal as *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*."

Ben Jonson began with heavy condescension: "I have read worse but——"

"You have read worse and, by God, written worse! By my soul, hack as I have been and am, I have had it in me to be great. Ay, and still have, if it were not——" William Shakespeare laid a hand upon his stomach.

"If it were not for the seat of your soul," said Ben Jonson, with difficulty controlling his temper.

William Shakespeare said: "After the eighth cup of sugared sherry, Ben, you arrive at the argumentative or disputatious. Not here, and not with me, old Ben! . . .

'Seat of the soul'—s'truth! Why, I see by your fiery face where the pincers of hell will soon be nipping you —in the joints, the joints of the knees and the articulations of the feet.

"Drink while you may, good Ben; and when you awake to shriek in the night, dreaming of some learned pentameter, remember with regret your little ironies, and your old friend Will Shakespeare. Because then the seat of your uproarious soul will be at the big joint of your great toe, while the gout gets his teeth between. . . . Fill, brother, fill; and spare me your satire.

"Laugh, if you like, at 'The stomach is the seat of the soul.' I say, I do not know what a soul is, or where, but I tell you this: The stomach is the midriff of the Stage. I have written—and played, too—cold and empty, and have seen some of my betters doing likewise. Bear with me for a moment, Ben, before you begin to holler at me!

"I have seen you, even you, roaring like a brute for lack of bread and wine—now don't be angry!—with all your scholarship forgotten, animated by nothing but the rampant beast that, dined and wined and warmed, is my sweet Ben Jonson. Also, I have seen a good troupe of players lose their lines, and let the virtue evaporate out of them for the want of something hot to eat, more than one winter's night.

"So, the soul is—do not ask me where, Ben. It is somewhere near the breastbone; and I can tell you that when you are empty, and you sink within yourself so that your body wants to peel itself away, inside out, and

cast itself over its own shoulder like a soiled glove—why, curse me if I lie, a weight hooks on to your heart that the belly must lift. And if it does not, comes then the triumph of the soul. This triumph, I may say, is—as it were—from the stomach which hardens itself and lifts itself——"

"The point, the point, man!" Ben Jonson shouted. "To the 'Seat of the Soul,' Will—the soul, the seat of it!"

In anguish between the contemplation of his wine and the anticipation of the consequences of drinking it, Shakespeare took a sip, which he turned into a gulp, before he said, almost tearfully: "Oh, you! You never could put your flat feet in another man's shoes, Ben! Say you were I, for instance. . . .

"You must write for Tom, Dick and Harry; you must write for Dick, Harry and Tom; for Harry, Tom and Dick. Why? That the show may go on. Do you understand me? All of a sudden, you find yourself father to a fabulous family . . . and farther than ever from your best children.

"There is no way of conveying to you the loneliness, the ultimate sense of excellent things thrown away! I never did finish my *Belisarius*. The show must go on, as they say. This means that one man, and one man alone, in the end, must find speeches and lines, entrances and exits, meat and drink, for a whole cry of fellows from the top to the bottom . . . and eat his heart that some Burbage, sleek and contented as a cat, may moan of the

slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune, while the boy who plays Ophelia wants a little money for his aged mother, and oneself (God save us all!) has mouths to feed, and a position, an appearance, to keep up.

"Why, how do you think they ate and drank, the dogs, after I took over the theatre? Of my flesh they ate. Of my blood they drank. And now——"

"If, after a certain number of cups, I am disputatious, brother Will, then you slip into the maudlin," said Ben Jonson. "Go on with your 'Seat of the Soul,' and spare us what everyone on Millbank knows inside out."

Shedding tears and clutching his stomach, Shakespeare groaned: "It catches me right in the middle, the span of three fingers above the navel; and it is as if I had swallowed a nest of young rats. They grow with their appetites. I am their prey, heaven comfort me!

"You know, Ben, what I have been through in part, I believe? Judge for yourself: I am well into the Third Act of *Belisarius*, when the King, crazed about witches and such old wives' tales, requires a piece about witches. 'Send him to the devil; send him back to Scotland, with his witches, and his tobacco, and his counterblasts'—says you!—'and go on with your *Belisarius*.'

"Brother, I couldn't. I remembered certain old aches of cold and pangs of hunger. The troupe had something of the hungry greyhound in their eyes. Back goes *Belisarius* into the closet, and out comes my flibberty-gibbet of a *Macbeth*. Of the prose I have written for hire I say nothing——"

Ben Jonson said: "Prose? Prose? What prose did you write, Will?"

"Oh, hack work, hack work. And time enough and trouble enough it cost me . . . only I got enough out of it to turn the kids into goats, and support the other playhouse.

"This is in confidence, you know. There came to me, one night, the slobbery, sly-looking, crafty little man, to whom I have referred, and takes me to dine, and fills me with rich food, fine wine, and fulsome flattery; telling me this and that about my turn of phrase, my command of English, and what-not. And would I, for a consideration, put into coherent English—in fact, develop and elaborate—certain notes of his, for a consideration that was to be considerable?

"Would I? I wanted the money for the new stage. But nobody will ever know what I suffered, listening to that lisping voice, so disgustingly compounded of the lawyer and the woman—let alone what I went through, turning into passable reading his turgid philosophies and thrice-thought thoughts. . . . Give me some more wine, Ben."

Ben Jonson began: "Why, surely, I remember the man——"

"Yes, yes, yes!" said William Shakespeare, with a weary gesture. "If I had my time over again, the show might go to the devil before it went on. As things were, heaven help us, I was reduced—hack as I am—to writing the works of Francis Bacon . . .

"Tell me some of the gossip around Millbank."

The White-washed Room

SHE was one of those hearty, healthy young women whom you may see every day in towns like Guildford. You see them and you hear them. They wear good tweed execrably cut, and more often than not, are accompanied by pink-faced men in yellow turtle-necked sweaters and big flannel trousers, who wear—as it were with an air of astonishment—brushed-up gingerish moustaches. The men with the moustaches stand condescendingly filling foul old briar pipes, or lighting cigarettes, while conversing at the tops of their voices—usually with one big, booted foot on the running-board of a small, fast, yet dilapidated little car.

She came of an excellent family. She could out-ride, out-smoke, out-drink and out-think any other well-bred girl in the little town. She could ride and take care of a horse, and knew exactly what to look for in a dog. As her father said, Athene was a good girl with no damn nonsense about her. She was his only child, and after his wife died she was mother, daughter and son to him.

She had only one secret. This was the only thing of which she had ever been ashamed, or afraid. It was a dream. Normally, Athene didn't dream; she went to bed and pulled down a big, thick black curtain which rolled up at daybreak, when she awoke, bright like a

struck match, and went storming and roaring about her daily business—which was the strenuous business of organised pleasure. It would have humiliated her to admit that she had dreams that troubled her.

From time to time—especially after a hard day's hunting—she would drop into a deeper sleep than usual, and, although this sleep was terribly deep, she felt until the last, that she was somehow standing aside from herself and watching herself. The dream took this form:

She dreamt that she had been asleep. Something at the back of her mind told her that she had been travelling, and was a long way from her home. As, in the dream, she came out of a deep blackness, with something like the gasp of relief of a swimmer who comes up to the surface from somewhere below his depth, she knew that she was in a remote and strange place, and that she was in danger.

In her dream she lay still and waited. Athene was an intelligent girl, accustomed to the frenzied patience of the hunter and the fisherman: she knew how to keep still.

She knew that she was dreaming, but she wanted to know what was to come.

Her eyes were open. She could see the foot-rail of a black iron bed. Beyond it stood a blank white-washed wall. She could not move her eyes, yet something informed her that, on the north side of the room, directly opposite the window, there stood a lectern with a small vase containing four dying chrysanthemums.

As she reached this stage of the dream the horror of the grave and the fear of death took hold of her, and she wanted to scream. But she couldn't scream.

She was paralysed. Athene was well aware that outside the sun blazed, and that there she would be free and happy. Here there was no sun. This place was dead. One white-hot bar of light had poked itself between the bars of the window and made a little puddle somewhere behind her. She couldn't see it but she knew it was there; she couldn't move her eyes.

But she could hear.

She could hear little quiet feet approaching. Their scuffling began as a whisper, turned into a flapping, and at last became footsteps which stopped outside the door.

She heard the door-knob turn.

Slippered feet slapped the clean floor. Then she saw two little old ladies dressed in washed-out pale blue, who walked to the foot of the bed.

At this point she awoke, always wet and cold, biting off the beginning of a scream, because it would have been improper for such a woman to express terror, let alone scream.

Athene married. She bore her husband three children, two girls and a boy. Only one of her children went wrong—the girl, who went to live in sin with a politician who afterwards made a fortune out of advertising and thereby vindicated himself. Athene had never said anything about her hideous dream. The time had passed. She was desperately lonely. Her children were

strangers to her and she could find no means of loving her husband. She went away.

She did not know where she was going; she knew simply, that she wanted to go away, anywhere away from her world.

She took the train. It was filled with soldiers. Athene had taken a ticket to the end of the line and was prepared to get out anywhere at all. The train was hot and stuffy; they had been crossing a great white desert—white because it was of fine sand under a white-hot sun.

It seemed to her that she read BERGVILLE on the sign in the station and she got out and drank ice-cold beer until the groan of coaches and the screeching of the wheels told her that the train had left without her, so she sent a telegram ahead, dealing with her luggage, found a hotel and went to sleep.

Athene slept heavily, and, as it always happened in her heavy sleeps, she had her dream.

She dreamt that she was in a strange town. She knew that she had missed her train. Athene had not the slightest doubt concerning what was to come; she had dreamt this dream too often before. She knew that she was going to have her nightmare of the white-washed room and the iron bed.

Surely enough, the dream came. . . . There she lay, rigid on the iron bed in the white-washed room, unable to move. Athene knew—having dreamed this dream a hundred times before—that she was going to hear footsteps in the passage.

She heard them. They were the old familiar shuffling footsteps that she had associated with the quiet old women in blue.

Athene was aware that she was dreaming, and that in a second or two she would be properly awake, laughing at herself and preparing to go out with the Chesterfield Hunt. So, in spite of the nightmare, she stayed calm.

She heard the footsteps approaching, heard the door open and heard the door close, strained her fixed eyes until the two old ladies in blue came into her field of vision, and then expected to wake up with a terrified shriek, as usual.

But she didn't wake up.

The dream continued:

The two old ladies in blue did not stop. Looking at each other and sadly shaking their heads, they advanced. One of them, with a dry and tremulous forefinger, closed Athene's eyes, and she heard one of the old women say to the other:

"What a lovely corpse she makes. I wonder where she comes from."

And Athene knew that, when she awoke this time, no one would ever hear her scream.

The Violin Maker

POKORNY held his breath while the other man, with exquisite delicacy, found the right place between two joints with the razor edge of an instrument like a chisel. But when the blade went in, and there was a sharp crack, Pokorny could not hold back a cry of agony. "For God's sake, enough!" he said. "You are killing me!"

"Patience, sir, patience. For desperate diseases, there must be desperate remedies. Here, I see, the trouble lies between the shoulder and the belly; and upon my honour, there is nothing for it but exploration by the knife. But if, maestro, you find this operation too harrowing, turn your head. It will be over in only a few seconds, and then we shall know the worst. Courage, now——"

There was a noise of something sensitive being torn. Pokorny covered his eyes; and when he opened them again his magnificent violin lay gaping on the table, prised apart from the waist, burst from belly to shoulder.

Pokorny the musician, Kapellmeister to the King, stood, biting his nails, while the violin maker examined what appeared to be the ruins of a noble instrument. "Well?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Patience, maestro, patience."

"For God's sake, man, be careful! That violin is an

Agosto diMaggio, and as far as I know the very last of the great old violins in Italy."

"Yes," said the other man, lifting the detached belly of the violin with such nonchalance that Pokorny uttered a little cry of protest, "so I see. Agosto diMaggio was well enough in his way, and in his day . . . well enough, well enough . . ."

Pokorny shouted: "What do you mean, puppy—well enough? 'In his way, in his day!' By God——"

"Sir, if you lay so much as a finger upon me, by the Lord I will not lay a finger upon your violin. I understand your emotion. But you must calm yourself. You must face the facts of life and of death. You had better sit down, sir, and drink a glass of cordial."

"I beg your pardon, Antonio, if I was a little hasty," said the great musician, "but I love that violin—I tell you, sir, I love her! I know her, she knows me; we are married, each to each. Next week I must lead my dogs of fiddlers in my *Concerto Grosso* at the palace. How am I expected to do this without my violin?"

"Oh," said the workman, "there are other violins."

Pokorny, in the bitterness of his heart, mocked him: " 'There are other violins!' Oh, yes! I have heard that tale before, little man. You love your mistress, but she loves another. There are other women; eh? You love your child, and he dies. You can have other children; no? What you love, young fellow, is irreplaceable, believe me."

The violin maker filled a glass with some pale-coloured

cordial, and put it into the musician's hand, saying: "Drink this down. As for what one has loved being irreplaceable in itself, sir, I agree with you, I believe you. Irreplaceable in itself, with all its faults—ha? The woman you have loved and lost cannot in herself be replaced. Rather than mourn, better thank God, because if she had not been herself, she would not have had the flaws that made her what she was—a creature spoiled in the making, and bound to fail you in your direst need. Similarly: as it is with men and women, so it is with violins. Agosto diMaggio could make a beautiful instrument, but the work of his hand, excellent as it was, was not strong enough to respond to the greatest music. This poor fiddle of yours, maestro, was not strong enough to contain all that you poured into it. She could not bear the weight of your heart, you understand. She must go where she always really belonged—to some third-rate fiddler in a wine shop, where she will be happy."

Pokorny cried, in a passion: "What the devil is this that you are trying to tell me? I was told—Sabini swore —that you could mend my violin of Agosto diMaggio. Are you telling me that you cannot?"

"I am sorry."

In a breaking voice, the master violinist said: "It is nothing but . . . a nothing . . . a certain deficiency. Some kind of wrong vibration where the G string is . . . a petty imperfection——"

"Yes. But that little nothing is everything; and since

an instrument is nothing if it is not perfect, this 'petty imperfection' renders it totally imperfect, as far as you are concerned. You must find another."

Presently Pokorny said: "If I must find another violin, I suppose I must. But I shall never see the like of this again."

The other man replied: "Pardon me: you will see better than this. Nicolo Amati made better——"

"What, Amati!" cried the violinist. "Agosto diMaggio was Amati's master—Amati was his pupil, merely; an apprentice! Amati sharpened diMaggio's chisels. Amati!"

"Oh, believe me, my dear sir! One must be an apprentice before one dares to call oneself a master. DiMaggio, in his time, slept among the sawdust, and ate his share of dirt. . . . No other way, upon my soul, no other way to master a craft!"

"There I believe you," said Pokorny. "Lord! How many times did I cry myself to sleep, nursing my bleeding fingers when old Antonini was teaching me the art and the craft of the violin! . . . But all this will not bring back to me my beloved Agosto diMaggio." Then, recollecting himself, he inflated his chest and said: "Enough discussion. Sabini said that if you could not cure my poor violin, you would supply me with another. Please do so."

Unoffended by the peremptory tone of Pokorny's voice, the other man said: "Sabini was right. I can put this fiddle——"

"Violin, if you please!"

"—I can put this violin back as it was, when you brought it to me——"

"It? It? *Her*, if you please!" The cordial was having its effect on Pokorny; his lips were pursed, and his chin out-thrust.

His companion went on, with a shrug: "—I can put her back as she was before, so that she will play. She will play, oh, yes. But not for you. No, she will neither play for you, nor even with you. Forget her. Now I have here a tolerably good violin which I have made myself. I have modelled her upon the noblest of God's instruments, which is Man. Between back and belly, there is tongue and palate, and, if you love her, she will sing with you."

He reached for a violin that hung, still unvarnished, from a hook over his work-table, but Pokorny stopped him with a gesture, and said: "No, no, no! For what do you take me?"

The violin maker smiled, not without bitterness. "That is not a fair question to ask me," he said. "I think I understand. I have here a most excellent Amati violin—a lovely instrument—but I will not offer it to you, because I know that you will not take it. I will, however, give you a violin by Agosto diMaggio. It is no good. Only, you will pour out your heart to it because it will remind you of your old false love—only it will be somewhat younger and fresher—so you will take it, and pour out your heart into it. And it will lead you astray

and, again, in some dark hour betray you. Take it, sir, take it!"

Pokorny took the Agosto diMaggio violin in his hands, and tuned it, *G*, *D*, *A*, and *E*. He dwelt for a long time on the *G* string, plucking it again and again. Then he smiled, and said: "Ah, *bella bellissima*—oh, the little beauty! Out of a bit of wood and a string of gut she makes pure gold!"

The violin maker, somewhat impatient now, said: "Oh, no, excuse me, *she* does not. You strike one note, but you hear another. What you have just heard is a note that sounded in your ears, a long time ago, when you were in love with that violin's sister before she died."

"You are raving," said Pokorny.

"Am I?" said the violin maker, picking up the Amati by the scroll, and handing it over. "Try this, sir, and we'll see."

Pokorny put down the Agosto diMaggio with ineffable tenderness, and, with a kind of cold respectfulness, took up the Amati; tuned this violin perfectly, but without affection, and tried it. In the delicate ears of the violin maker, the Amati seemed to throb with passionate love and forlorn hope. But Pokorny, with a shrug, put the Amati down and said: "She is very good, very true. Yes. But not a patch on the Agosto diMaggio, no."

Then the violin maker said: "It is just as I thought, I fear. You never played that old violin of yours. She

played you. Take the Agosto diMaggio, sir, and go with God."

"If you like," said the violinist, "I'll try that instrument of yours, which you say you have made."

"She is no longer available. She is not ready," said the violin maker.

"Have your way. I will buy the Agosto diMaggio, certainly . . . and, come to think of it, in case of emergency, I'll take the Amati for a spare."

"Excuse me again, maestro, the Amati is no longer for sale."

Thus, Pokorny bought and paid for the treacherous violin of Agosto diMaggio, because it so resembled its sister instrument. The violin maker conducted his customer to the street, and watched him go. With one foot in his carriage, Pokorny paused and looked back. His eyes were cloudy with doubt. He glanced down at the feminine shape of the violin case in his hand, and up again towards the doorway of the shop. But at last he got into his carriage and rode away.

The violin maker, Antonio Stradivari, went back to his bench, took down the unvarnished violin and caressed it, saying: "No, sweetheart, he was not for you. Patience, and we will find you the right man . . ."

Then, sitting down and pulling towards him certain pots and brushes, delicately and with much love he proceeded to put the finishing touches to the first Stradivarius.

Femme Fatale

"HE stroked my neck," said the old coquette, Hayala, with a sidelong toss of her grey head. "If that man does that again, I'll bite him, I'll kick him, I'll kill him!"

Nehushtha shook her head sadly, and whimpered: "And then? So what would be the result?"

Hayala and Nehushtha then looked towards old Lisa, who was looking at them out of her better eye. Answering the unspoken question; sharply, didactically, and with dignity, Lisa said: "So you want my opinion, Hayala? All right, I'll give you my opinion. If you did not want to be touched by that man, you *should* have bitten him, kicked him, killed him!"

Nehushtha said: "And so what would have been the result?"

"He would have beaten me," said Hayala.

"So he would have beaten you," said Lisa. "But you would have expressed yourself, at least."

Nehushtha whined: "And then what would have been the result?"

At this Lisa grew angry. She stamped her foot, and cried: "You express yourself! Enough! . . . Oh, believe me, girls, a little show of violence—a little expression of independence—is enough to put the fear of the devil into a man. What kind of creatures are you,

that you submit to be ordered about and led, like the slavish women that you are, by a Man? Creatures of Man!"

"And so what are you, Lisa?" asked Hayala.

"I revolted," said Lisa, with a lift of the lip which uncovered yellowing teeth.

"You had spirit," said Hayala.

But Nehushtha, lowering her head, said, as it were, to the ground: "Lisa revolted. So what was the result?"

"She was beaten," said Hayala, not without satisfaction. "Asaph beat her with a stick."

Lisa said: "So? Asaph beat me with a stick."

"However, Lisa *expressed* herself," said Hayala, with a kind of asinine sneer.

Then Lisa, in her feminine way, turning upon her sister Hayala, found a new nerve to pluck at. "Ha!" she cried. "Hayala is a fine one to talk behind people's backs. Yet when that man caressed her, then she was all honey! . . . Admit, confess, Hayala, you *love* that man!"

Hayala plucked a stem of grass and, contemplatively chewing it, muttered: "I don't know."

Nehushtha murmured: "So she loves him, so she doesn't love him. So what'll be the result? Let her love him, let her not love him—it's the same thing. Oh, dear me!"

Now, in anger, Hayala cried: "I don't wish to be hard on you, Nehushtha; but since your Operation, everything is all the same to you. 'What'll be the result?'

and 'What'll be the result?' and 'What'll be the result?' "

Nehushtha, with a sigh, asked: "So *what* will be the result?"

Lisa, who had a habit of moving her jaws as if she were chewing something, turned suddenly and screamed "Enough is enough! Hayala, you betray your sex! Nehushtha, you betray . . . I don't know what. Solidarity! We should stick together!"

"Together we should stick," said Hayala.

The unhappy Nehushtha said to Lisa: "Yet you, in your time, have been bought and sold by men?"

"I fought!" cried Lisa. "I did not submit. I struggled —nobody knows how I struggled. I——"

"And so? What was the result? You struggled, you fought, yes? So you were bought and sold like the rest of us, poor girl," said Nehushtha. Thereupon, Lisa shivered with half-suppressed fury. She cried:

"You dare to talk to me like this—you! To me! . . . I am old enough to be your mother. I have had seven children——"

"And so what was——?"

" 'And so what was the result?' she was going to ask! Don't ask me. Results, results, I don't know. But I tell you this—you, Hayala; and you, Nehushtha—I come of a good family, and you should think yourself honoured to be in the same place with me . . . *Na*!"

"Mind you, Lisa *was* beautiful," said Hayala. "A little —what do you call it?—a little bit out of proportion. A

little too much—excuse me—chest, and the tiniest bit too narrow in the hips. Beautiful legs, yes, and a neck like a swan. Even after she had had half a dozen children, Lisa kept her figure, Nehushtha, and the men were always crazy about her——"

"—Once, two men fought for me with knives," said Lisa, mollified, "and one of them killed the other and was hanged. A pity. I could have loved that man. He had wild eyes, he was violent, no doubt he would have beaten me most cruelly. But there was something about him . . . I don't know what . . . that would have made me work for him, follow him. . . . Aie-aie-aie! What are we girls but slaves, after all?"

Nehushtha nodded, in her maddeningly helpless, melancholy way, and said: "Only too true, Lisa." She sighed. "You are lucky. You've got personality. I had too much youthful enthusiasm when I was young and full of spirit—but no sense, no personality. So what was the result? I made a fool of myself out of jealousy for a man and had to have an Operation."

Hayala murmured: "I like men. To tell you the truth, my dears, I don't know what I'd do without them. It's an instinct—what you might call a Biological Urge. Men are necessary; so you might as well like them. No?"

Lisa impatiently snapped her strong jaws, and then said: "Men are not necessary to me, but I am necessary to men, and in this—if only you creatures had the sense to realise it—in this lies our power. Time and time again I have tried to start a Movement to liberate us girls.

But what material did I have to work with? Creatures like Hayala, who would give everything for a kind word from a Man! Bah! . . . You know, I have risked death half a dozen times. It was only my charm, my personality, my good looks, perhaps, that got me off scot-free."

"True, everybody admired the colour of your hair," said Hayala. "And even now, Lisa, you have lovely legs. Yes, you were always admired, my dear Lisa. Poor me, all I ever had to give was affection. Men liked me because I liked them. And they liked you because you *didn't* like them! Go understand!"

"And so what——" Nehushtha began.

Lisa, nudging Nehushtha into silence, said: "The way for a girl to be admired is not to love any man, but to accept the adoration of all men. Inspire passion without reciprocating it—then, if you are homely as Nehushtha here, you may become a *femme fatale*. Look at me. Well-born though I may be, I am of the same sex as yourselves. Like yourselves, I have had my ups and downs with men in my time. Yet I never starved and, despite the fact that I was sold into slavery when I was young, no man ever dared to beat me much——"

"—For fear of spoiling your beauty?" Hayala asked.

"It could be. I don't know. There was about me a something. Don't ask me what. It was like that. A slave I was, bought and sold—yes. Yet, believe me, girls, I never yet met a man I could not master. And my beauty—above all, my intelligence—became the talk of

the country. At last I received my reward. The people got together and declared a holiday in my honour—triumphal procession and all!"

Hayala whispered to Nehushtha: "Ah-ah, Lisa is off again!"

Lisa went on, with a kind of dreamy, ruminant scorn: "You are nothing but donkeys. My time came. I had my reward. A certain morning dawned when my Man sent a hairdresser to me—a fellow called Luke—who brushed me and combed me, and made me elegant. He was respectful, of course, but he gave me to understand that I was to lead a Procession. Later they came to dress me, simply but effectively, and so I went out into the bright sunlight. . . . That was a day, my girls!"

"So what was the result?" asked Nehushtha, sniffling, perhaps, at treasured memories of her own.

"I made my *début*. The road was hot and hard, and the air full of dust. So they strewed palms and threw sweet-scented flowers, crying: 'Hosanna! Hosanna!' And do you know, my pride at that moment was such that I scarcely noticed the dead weight of the Man on my back —whoever He was—as these four hoofs of mine walked into Jerusalem."

Gratitude

THE operation was a success, but I awoke with bruised knuckles. The sister saw me looking at them and said, in a matter-of-fact tone, that as I was coming out of the anæsthetic I had punched the surgeon on the jaw. Not content with that, I had given a nurse a black eye.

It was nothing said the sister; people often did things like that, or tried to. . . .

"And language! You'd be surprised. People you'd never suspect come out with words you'd never think they knew! In your case, Mr. Kersh, it was only the instinct of self-preservation. You were trying to defend yourself while unconscious."

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, Sister!"

"Oh, that's quite all right; it's nothing to what some people do."

"What sort of things do they say under anæsthetic?"

"It wouldn't be fair to repeat them . . . and even so, it wouldn't be nice to. People are very funny, on the whole, don't you think?"

"Screamingly funny."

"For instance, there was a certain lady . . ."

A certain lady (said the sister) came to this hospital for a fairly serious operation on her tummy.

She was a nice lady, quite good-looking, fairly young, and very well-to-do; she had a private room, and half London seemed to be sending her flowers and fruit and jellies and things.

Some patients are a little difficult, but she was not. As a matter of fact she was quite the reverse.

We do our best to make people comfortable, because that's our job. It's nice to be appreciated, but we don't really expect to be thanked . . . let alone remembered.

Well, as I was saying, this lady behaved as if she was afraid of us—of me in particular.

You know how little boys, when they are late for school, sometimes bring the teacher some flower or an apple? She behaved rather like that.

It was really quite embarrassing. As soon as any of us came into the room she would offer something—a grape, a peach or a carnation.

She told one of the girls that she would get her a job as a doctor's receptionist in Harley Street, at five pounds a week. She suggested to me that I might start a private nursing home . . . she'd find the money, because I was so wonderful and marvellous.

She insisted on giving me an angora bed-jacket that I admired, a lovely red one. I didn't want to take it, but she insisted, so I didn't refuse.

She was one of Mr. X's private patients. Wonderful surgeon, that man—he wouldn't stick a scalpel into a private patient for less than a hundred guineas; does a lot of free work though.

She was in here for about a week before her operation, and within about four days she was everybody's friend.

She even made up to old Mrs. Biggs, who makes the fires, asked her whether she had a husband, and if he would like a few suits of clothes and a nice winter overcoat, because her own husband had some that had got too small for him; kept giving her grapes, and all that kind of thing.

She had hundreds and hundreds . . . well, anyway, an awful lot of lovely magazines and books, great stacks of them. She said that when she left here she'd leave them behind for us.

No doubt she was rolling in money. Her hands were covered with jewels. As she said, she liked jewels for their beauty rather than for their value.

Her engagement ring was a great big sapphire; she said she was going to be buried with it on. That, she said, had a sentimental value.

But on her little finger, next to it, she wore a ring with a diamond in it about as big as your thumb-nail and worth an awful lot of money.

On the evening before her operation I came in to make her comfortable and say good-night to her, as one usually does. She said to me: "Sister, I want to give you something."

I said: "It's very kind of you, but I'm sure you've given me enough already."

But she said: "It would give me so much pleasure if

you would accept a little gift from me: so will you? Please? Please, Sister?"

She took off her diamond ring and put it on my little finger. I was absolutely stunned, because the diamond must have been worth hundreds of pounds.

I said: "You can't give me this!" All the same, I felt a kind of flutter, because as it happens I've always had, really, an idiotic liking for diamonds . . . I mean, large sparkling ones.

You only need to look at me to see that nobody in his right senses would ever be likely to offer me one. And here was this lady simply throwing one at me!

I told her, naturally, that I couldn't possibly accept it.

But she argued. She said that the diamond meant nothing to her, and she'd taken a liking to me, and that it really would give her very great pleasure indeed to know that I had it. She didn't want it, she said.

In short, after a long rigmarole, I took the ring.

I was afraid to carry it about with me, so I asked the matron to put it in the safe. She told me what a lucky girl I was. Everybody was a lucky girl that night. The night sister was given a fur coat. The night nurse got a satin dressing-gown that you couldn't have bought for twenty pounds. Everybody agreed that there never had been a patient in the hospital like her.

I saw her next morning. She was scared stiff, and kept asking me if I thought she'd die. Of course, she wasn't going to die, the silly woman!

The operation was fairly serious, but we do things

like that three times a day. You ought to have seen some of the women and children we had here during the Blitz!

So she went down, and Mr. X did his stuff, as usual—a beautiful operation—and she came up again, right as rain.

We do the best we can for everybody, as you know; it's our job. We didn't treat this lady any better, therefore, than anybody else; if she had been an organ-grinder we'd still have done the best we could to make her well and comfortable.

But since she had given us all those nice things in her gratitude, well, we had a kind of personal feeling for her, and we were particularly glad to see her coming through safe and sound.

I was there when she woke up. She kissed my hand and held it, and asked if she was all right. I said that she was, and she kissed my hand again and God-blessed me, and went to sleep, as they always do.

She woke up again at about five in the afternoon. I was there again. The first thing she said was: "Where's my ring?"

I said: "In the safe."

"Bring it back at once," she said.

One has one's pride. I got it for her, gave it to her, and watched her put it on.

Later, she said to me: "Where on earth is my bed-jacket?"

She got that back too. The long and the short of it is,

that she got everything back from everybody, as calmly as you like.

When she left she gave me one of those sixpenny paper-covered books of poetry as a thanks-offering, and that was that.

Now, what do you say to that? Why did she have to go and do things like that? Was it because she felt that she was at our mercy? Did she think that we needed to be confidence-tricked into saving her life? She must have known that we would do our best in any case, surely?

Why are people so mean and cruel? It isn't necessary to be mean and cruel, is it? Then why do people do things like that, just because they're afraid they're going to die?

"I don't know," I said.

"Nor do I," said the sister, with a good-humoured laugh.

The Madwoman

THE leader of the troupe, the actor-manager, who had hogged all the big speeches and expropriated all the great moments in the comedy, *Lust Must Rust*—flagrantly stolen by Hitchens from White's translation of Curzio's farce entitled *Pericoloso*—got into the Earl's carriage, and was driven away to a good hot supper. One by one, the actors went away. A bitter wind, full of rain, was coming not only from the river, but from the thirty-two points of the compass. Willie lingered, hoping that little Sidney Snow, at least, would stay to keep him company and help him to talk away his awful loneliness over a bit of bread and cheese and a mug of beer. But Sidney Snow left the theatre with a barely polite "Good night, Willie," arm-in-arm with a decaying actor of low comedy parts named John Bartlett, and Willie was alone in the world.

He had been angry to begin with. Hitchens, that dolt, could not write a true line. One of Hitchens's false metres kept going, threehalfpence—twopence, through the boy's brain:

Play is the toil of innocents,
And toil, the play of Man . . .

It was like listening to a club-footed man pacing the attic bedroom just above your head. Had people no ears? the boy wondered. There was an excellent idea lost in those lines. Hitchens might, at least, have put them:

> For Play's the Toil of Youthful Innocence,
> And Toil the Play of Man's Maturity . . .

He could have written it better himself, he decided.

Meanwhile, he had stepped backwards into a doorway, where an overhanging gable offered protection from the driving rain and the biting wind. He had to make a 'line' even out of his discomfort:

> The weakest Elements themselves conspire—
> Wind lends blind Night her invisible feet
> And, charitable, shoulders Water . . .

But this would never do. Good enough for Hitchens; good enough for Kyd. In other words, not good enough for him.

Then he trod upon something soft, that stirred and cried out, startling him so that he jumped back into the wind and the rain, while a terrifying apparition appeared to emanate rather than arise from the wooden flooring of the doorway.

It was a woman. Although she was wet and grey, and

limp as linen beaten in a stream, there was that about her which suggested fire—something reminiscent of cinders not yet cooled. Somewhere inside her there lingered a dull glow which became visible when she opened her eyes; and audible, too, when she spoke. Her voice, though small, had a penetrative timbre—it got into your ears like the metallic crackle of a dying ember. She said: "Tread on me. Good. That is right. Tread, tread hard! Trample my feet, put your heels in my bosom, grind my face, stamp on my throat!"

And then she burst into wild laughter, whereupon—as if she had called it down—lightning cracked the sky, and there was a deafening peal of thunder. Simultaneously, someone threw out a pot of slops from an upstairs window and, as if to go one better, the heavens let fall a torrent of hailstones, sharp as gravel.

"Blow! Thunder, lighten, crack your black cheeks, Night!" the old woman screamed. She went into the street, threw back her head, tore open her ragged dress, held up her withered breasts for the hailstones to strike, shrieking: "Come to my breast, you good warm ice! Dry me, oh, you rains! Touch me not, good lightning, lest I blast you!" Then she threw herself down, half naked as she was, on the miry cobblestones of the pavement, moaning: "Comfort me, kind stones! Cleanse me, filth of the kennel! . . . Ah, tender, tender, tender stone! Let me kiss you. You will let me lie here, kind stone? I may? Sweet stones, you are so much lighter than my old heart. . . . *Ah*!"

She had cut herself on a flint. Blood was trickling from a small wound in her cheek. Blood and mud, matted grey hair and wild eyes—the frightened young man saw all these by the light of a lightning flash, ghostly behind the curtain of the rain. Above the thunder he heard the old woman cry: "Oh, sharper than a serpent's tooth! Ungrateful stones! Oh, cruel—unkind! . . . Then bite, bite, bite! . . . Oh, me, oh, me—poor, poor me! Must you, also, drink my blood? Oh Lord . . . from the perils and dangers of the coming night . . . . and Gib, my cat, is dead, dead, dead!"

Young Willie was afraid to touch her. She got up, painfully, and came back into the shelter of the doorway, shaking her head very slowly. Sitting down again, covering herself decently with what was left of her dress —with a gesture of quiet dignity—she said: "Pardon, young man. Sometimes, to tell you the truth, I believe that I am not in my right mind. Not to lie to you, I think I am far from well . . ."

The young man stammered: "I would help you if I could, my good woman, but . . . to tell you the truth, I have nothing, too. Believe me when I tell you—I am an actor, I have nothing."

Then the old woman shrugged herself into a different attitude. She managed to raise her head. As the lightning flashed again, she said: "This is foul weather, sir. Come in, come in, out of the storm! My house is yours. . . . Kate, take the gentleman's boots off!

Bring hot spiced wine! . . . Give? Pardon me, I could not have heard you right, sir. Pardon me, it is *I* who give, I, you understand."

A wretched little grey cat crept in out of the storm. The old woman called: "Gib, Gib, Gib!" and when the cat approached her, she laughed, embracing it, and said, with a sob of relief: "It is Gib! Why, thank God, then it was nothing but a dream. Oh, sweet Jesu, thanks! Now let me sleep a little, and then I shall be awake."

Holding the cat, she closed her eyes. In her chest, or low down in her throat, there started a noise which (the young man mentally noted) was not dissimilar to the sound made by Mr. Arthur's lute when some mischievous boy poured into it a handful of dried peas. The rain was falling less heavily. Tentatively, he looked out. He accosted a passing watchman, and said: "There is a woman here who is dying, as I believe."

"Then the Lord have mercy upon her. What am I to do? Am I a surgeon?" The watchman looked closer, in the light of his lantern. "Oh, yes, poor soul," he said. "I know her. She's crazed. Poor soul, she was a gentlewoman, once. Her husband's name was Iremonger. He was a haberdasher. Time was when she was Mistress Leah. Her husband died, and everything went to the three sons, who played ducks-and-drakes with the money. Their wives couldn't bear the old lady, and sent her from pillar to post, from one to t'other. They put her out of house and home, in the end, having run through everything. One of the daughters-in-law even

poisoned her cat, and it was then, as I guess, that Mistress Leah went mad."

"She's dying," said the young man.

The watchman said, in his watchman's way—as if he were allowing a suspect to go through a gate—"Let her pass, let her pass."

Suddenly, the rattling in Mistress Leah's throat ceased, and all that could be heard was the purring of the cat.

The rain had stopped. The young man went away. As he went to bed, he said to himself: "That was magnificent, the way she cried against the thunder! 'Crack your cheeks!'—and then that business with the paving stones. I mustn't forget that. Oh, the magnificent tragedy of it! And, at last, to die in a doorway, bemused. Crowning touch of pathetic irony, or ironic pathos—call it what you will—that cat! 'Gib, Gib, Gib!' she says, as the starved beast creeps for warmth to her starved bosom; and, touching its sad bedraggled fur, she shines with a glory of relief, and dies dreaming that her agony has been a dream . . . a dream within a dream encompassed by a sleep . . ."

He yawned, then wondered: "Would Burbage allow it—an old beggar woman? No, he must play kings, and rant and rave. Pity. Still, the tragedy is there. Call Mistress Leah, King Lear. The public could never see tragedy in a haberdasher's wife, anyway. . . . Instead of a shop, a kingdom. Instead of sons, daughters. Instead of a cat, some kind of serio-comic clown, some

faithful fool. . . . By God, I'll make shift to write it, when they let me, and call it *The Tragedy of King Lear*, or something like that."

Falling asleep, young Willie Shakespeare lamented: "The business of the dream-within-the-dream is beautiful, but I don't believe they'd let me use the device. . . . And the cat, I fear, would not be practical . . ."

Then he slept and, in the morning, believed that he had not dreamed.

The Life and Times of the Dog Basta

THE dog Basta was about two years old when the Countess Urgulania took him away from the fisherman Brazza and carried him home to the Villa. He was filthy —the rickety framework of a dog encrusted with mud.

God will forgive many of the Countess's sins for what she did that day. She was one of the most fastidious ladies in Rome: she had almost a morbid passion for cleanliness. Her friends likened her to that aristocratic French lady whose nose was so sensitive that she fainted if she happened to smell a bunch of violets.

She preferred to live at the Villa because there the air was nice and clean, perpetually washed by the sea, quite free of soot.

Her husband, the Count, amused himself in Rome; he smoked pungent cigars, got involved in little love affairs with highly aromatic young ladies, and dabbled in politics and industrial speculations.

He had deodorised himself in order to win her heart. Later he went back to his old habits. He went his way, she went hers.

Things really broke up when they had a quarrel concerning a political friend of his who perspired heavily in warm weather.

. . . .

The Countess was walking to the Villa when the dog Basta came out of the shadow of a tall umbrella pine, sat on his haunches, lifted a paw, looked up at her, and whimpered almost inaudibly.

Even at that tender age he had lost faith in the power of the whimper: whimpering had got him nowhere. His thick, repulsive coat was striped with the marks of a whip, or a piece of rope. He had been kicked hard, and one of his teeth was broken.

The Countess looked at him, stopped, shut her eyes convulsively, stepped aside and walked on quickly. But before she had walked ten paces something like a hand seemed to take hold of her heart. She turned. The dog was sitting there, looking so wistful, so void of hope, that she went back and said:

"What is it, then?"

The dog whimpered. She thought she saw tears in its eyes. With all her finickety delicacy and sickly fastidiousness she was a good-hearted woman. She loved children in spite of the fact that her detestation of mess had prevented her having any of her own.

She stopped, picked up the dog, clasped him to her bosom, and took him home. There she washed him, using her own soap. She dried him with a monogrammed towel (which she afterwards burned) and fed him on minced beefsteak and milk. The dog ate as if he feared that he might fall dead before he had emptied the plate.

She called in a veterinary surgeon, who examined the

dog and said that it was just a dog: some mysterious combination of all the breeds in the world, dreadfully ill-used and out of condition. All it needed was worming, feeding, and a little affection.

In three or four days the dog filled out. In that short time he fell in love with the Countess with all his heart and soul. He saw nothing but her; crept after her wherever she went. Once, when she returned from a visit to a lady who lived five miles away, she found the dog in her bedroom. He had not dared to climb on to her bed; he was sitting, wet-eyed, yearning, with his nose towards the place where she had lain. She had never inspired any human being with such deep and terrible love.

On the fifth day the fisherman Brazza came to the house, bowing and scraping with his hat in his hands, and said:

"Excuse me . . . I beg pardon . . . so sorry . . . forgive me. . . . Some mistake. Whatever the Contessa says is good. By accident, some misunderstanding. . . . Her Excellency has taken my dog. If Her Excellency will be so kind, I want my dog."

The butler said: "Go to hell. Get out of here, you dirty pig, or I'll kick you out."

"I want my dog," said Brazza. He was a man of hasty temper, an embittered man, and he had been drinking grappa.

He had no particular desire to get his dog back, he

had no use for a dog. He disliked dogs. His wife, who was a malicious woman, insisted on keeping a dog in the house in order to torment him; also, his children liked to play with the dog. They used to tie a string to his tail and drag him backwards up and down the beach, or throw him into the water and amuse themselves watching him struggle. But the dog always came cringing back for more torture—just as a henpecked husband or an ill-used wife comes back to his or her little Calvary.

Brazza said: "Who the hell do you think you are? And who the hell does she think she is? I want my dog."

"All right, Brazza! You'll wait a long time before we buy any more fish from you."

Brazza roared: "I don't care a damn whether you buy my fish or not!" He was gesticulating with a little bag of baby cuttlefish. "My dog is my dog. I want my dog back. What? Who do you think you are? Who does she think she is, that scented lady? Am I nobody? As God's my judge I'm going to the police."

"Now look here," said the butler calmly. "You're drunk. You have been drinking grappa."

It happened that the Countess was passing.

"What is this about a dog?"

"My lady. Countess, I am a poor man. I am a little man, a fisherman . . . one little boat . . . a little, little boat. I am a poor man . . . a wife, you understand, excellent lady . . . seven children. And a dog. All I have is yours—that is a matter of course. Be merciful, have pity! Give me back my dog! My dog!"

The dog, having seen Brazza, was trying to hide himself in a corner.

The Countess said: "You—whatever your name is—you have no right to own a dog. You have no idea how to treat a dog. I will buy your dog. How much do you want for your dog?"

"Countess, I am a poor man. I am poor, you are rich. What am I to do without a dog? He is a special dog, a trained dog. He is my dog, I have taught him everything I know. He is——"

"How much?"

Brazza had been thinking that after a little haggling he might get twenty lire. Now, something made him say: "He is worth a hundred lire."

The butler made an explosive hissing noise, and exclaimed: "The man is raving mad! Five lire would be too much for a dog like that!"

"Give him a hundred lire," said the Countess. Then she went away. The dog, at her heels, looked back. His tail was between his legs. He must have been aware that this was his moment of liberation: he drew himself up, lifted a haughty chin, and followed his new mistress. Ten yards away he had hysterics.

The butler threw a hundred lire in dirty notes at Brazza's feet and said: "Crook!"

"I could have got two hundred," said Brazza, picking up the money.

A week later he was poorer than he had ever been before (having mortgaged his boat at the climax of the

last orgy), and, returning to consciousness with a bad headache, felt that he had been robbed.

"Holy Mother of God! There is no justice in the world! Look at me!" he shouted to Mario, who owned the little bar in the village. "Is there one law for the rich and another for the poor? I am a worker! Look at these hands—look at them—broken, cut to bits. And where's the only friend I ever had in the world? Where's my dog, my poor little dog? They have taken him away from me.

"I brought him up, fed him, trained him, educated him. I shared my little bit of bread with him. And now they have taken him from me . . ."

Brazza began to weep. But Mario said:

"You must be crazy. You didn't want the dog. Wasn't it I who stopped you when you wanted to kill him in here with a knife only three weeks ago? If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't have had any dog to sell for a hundred lire. And she must be out of her mind to pay such a price for such an animal. In any case, shut your mouth. I don't allow that kind of talk in my place."

Brazza was silent. He finished his drink and went out.

Two days later when he went to the Villa with a basket of shellfish he saw the dog in the kitchen, well fed, combed, clipped, and wearing a red leather collar with silver studs. The cook was teaching him to beg for a piece of sugar.

When he saw Brazza he backed away and tried to

make himself inconspicuous in a corner; it was as if he felt that this state of affairs was too good to last; that it was all a dream from which he would soon be awakened by a howl of execration and a kick in the teeth.

Brazza said: "Look at me. No shoes to my feet. Look at these trousers—falling to pieces. And my dog goes about dressed up in silver collars. Can I afford a hair-cut? No. But my dog, he has his hair cut."

"Now, look here," the butler said, "we've had just about enough of this. He isn't your dog. He is the Countess's dog. You sold him for fifty times more than he was worth. We're just about fed up with you around here. Enough is enough. Go and peddle your fish elsewhere."

Brazza went away cursing. When the outer gate had closed behind him, the dog came out of the corner with something so remarkably like a sigh of relief that the cook gave him the piece of sugar and excused him from further duty that morning.

Time passed. Italy went to war.

When the United Nations began to break through the German defences the Countess went to Rome; her husband had become uneasy.

She left the dog Basta in charge of the butler and the cook, who were well content to live in comfortable idleness and keep a languid eye on things.

They had grown fat and lazy, and so had the dog. He was nearly nine years old.

He was sinking into a senile lethargy. Nothing aroused him but a certain series of sounds: the squeak of tyres on the gravel of the drive, the slamming of the door of a car, and footsteps. When he heard these noises his weary eyes opened and his limp ears lifted.

He was waiting for the Countess.

She did not come. She did not return to her Villa until the spring of the year 1946, and then she found a shell, the grey ghost of a house.

Someone had painted moustaches on the ancient wooden image of the Virgin Mary in the corridor. Russian prisoners had been there. They had taken all the electric fittings to pieces to see how they worked; they had not put them together again. There were bullet holes everywhere: bored Germans in occupation had fired at walls and windows with light machine-guns.

The ancient umbrella pines, four hundred years old, had been cut down by the Germans to block the road. The local peasantry had carried away the furniture. An enterprising looter had torn out all the lead pipes for scrap metal.

The world had crumbled away. The Countess's husband was dead: he had grown a beard, hoping to disguise himself, but was mistaken for Grandi and torn to pieces in the streets of Rome by an infuriated mob. His property had disappeared. The Countess is living, now, on what she gets for certain pictures painted by old masters, which her husband rolled up and put away when things began to look difficult.

She came back to the Villa and cried her heart out, poor woman, over the dirt and destruction. Sitting wretchedly by the ashes of a fire that had been lit to boil soldiers' soup in the middle of the drawing-room, she thought of the dog Basta.

She called. Only the echo answered. And then, in that hollow dead house, she realised that she was alone in the world.

Among the few things that were left was the dog's basket. She found it, lying where it had always lain; rested her head on it and cried herself to sleep.

She had nowhere else to sleep. When it was known that Mussolini had been shot and hung up by the heels, the villagers remembered that they had hated him. They defaced the pictures of him and looted the houses of his known supporters.

The fisherman Brazza went straight to the Villa. The butler had run away. The house was empty. He, followed by his children and led by his wife, went from room to room, taking everything portable and smashing everything that was not. At last they came to the Countess's bedroom.

The dog Basta was lying with his nose to the crack under the door, plaintively whining. When Brazza stood over him, the dog turned crouching, baring his old decayed teeth.

"Bourgeois! Fascist!" shouted Brazza. He was carrying a shotgun. Taking careful aim he shot the dog dead.

The Guardian

I HAD been sharing a bottle of Parmigiani's Scotch Type Whisky with a soldier in the train, as it crawled, overloaded, across the burnt-up desolate plains of Nevada. By the time we had dropped the empty bottle into the container holding the used towels in the washroom, the train had stopped. Night was coming. The porter told me that the train would be in the station for at least twenty minutes: the weather was warm and the dining-car needed icing.

Followed by the soldier, I went out to stretch my legs. We bought two slabs of something that resembled gravel and glue, labelled 'Peanut Chunk' and walked up and down, solemnly chewing and talking about our families. He, too, had been in England. We found many fascinating trivialities to talk about, and became so engrossed in the counting of our conversational small change that we did not hear the long-drawn-out melancholy voice of the porter cry: "All aboard."

And by the time we got back to the platform the train had run away.

There was nothing to do but wait. We walked out to look at the town, and at last found, in a wide and dreary street, a place outside which hung a sign which said Magruder's Bar. We went in and found, to our surprise,

that it was full of extraordinary people. Near the door, gloomily staring into a glass of beer, slouched a giant. He was at least seven feet tall. Unlike most giants, he was well proportioned; the glass of yellow beer, in his colossal hand, appeared to be no bigger than a liqueur glass of brandy. Next to him sat something like an empty suit of clothes. Out of one of the cuffs protruded a hand of skin and bone, almost completely devoid of flesh. This hand was twirling a glass of whisky and Coca-Cola: the other hand was caressing the wrist of a lady who wore a thick, opaque veil. She was sipping *crème de menthe*, delicately pushing the glass up out of sight under the veil's spangled edge.

A male and female midget were quarrelling in subdued tones, and exchanging venomous looks, while they pretended to open packets of cigarettes. There was also a man who had no arms, but he was sitting with perfect nonchalance on a high stool, holding a glass of wine between two bare toes of his right foot.

We found ourselves a place at the bar, and I remember that I whispered: "Do you see what I see, or am I dreaming?"

Then a small, completely unremarkable man on my right said:

"Why, didn't you know? Hohler's Circus is just getting into Edwardsville. It looks a little strange to you, hey? Well, that's all right. Don't you care. Did you come from England? I do too. Well, at least my father did. That one over there, at the end of the bar by

the door, he's the Finnish Colossus. Seven feet three, weighs five hundred pounds, wouldn't harm a flea. See the lady in the veil. . . . Yes, that's right, the one that's putting a glass underneath the veil—she's Orchid Thompson, the Bearded Lady. Keeps herself covered up. Doesn't want to make herself cheap. That thin man—do you know who he is? They call him Bobbie-Pin Kolinsky, the Human Hairpin—thinnest man in the world. My name is Pine, Crippen Pine. You may have heard of me?"

"I can't say that I have."

"Well, now, maybe you wouldn't have. Won't you have a drink . . . well, then, if you insist, O.K. I like you, you're a good one . . . I shouldn't do this really, it affects me. Shall I tell you something? Do you know what? When I drink, do you know what happens?"'

"It makes you drunk?"

"You guessed it. By gosh, you guessed it. My golly, he guessed it! . . . Tell me something. Do you like monkeys?"

"Not very much, I must say. Somehow they seem to be too near home, if you know what I mean."

"I am the greatest monkey trainer in the world—did you know that? Tell me, didn't you know?"

"I'm a stranger here, so you must pardon me if I appear to be ignorant."

"Didn't you ever hear anyone speak about Kasai?"

"Not that I remember."

"Most intelligent monkey that ever walked the earth?

Never heard of Kasai? Listen, how do you like that? Feller here never heard of Kasai!"

One of the midgets said in a fine, reedy voice: "Oh, shut up."

"Came to me when she was only six months old. She's a chimpanzee—highly intelligent, highly intelligent animal. Do anything except talk. Wouldn't be surprised if she could talk. I love that chimp, do you hear? And she loves me."

"Oh, shut up!" said one of the midgets.

"Isn't it true," said the little man shedding tears, "that I taught Kasai everything she ever knew? As God is my judge, gentlemen, I was mother and father to that chimp. She came to me right out of the jungle. And I made a human being out of her. I taught her how to eat with a knife and fork. I taught her how to dress. I made a lady of her, so help me I did. Look at me, take a look at me, and tell me—am I a well-dressed man? No. Far from it. Far, far from it. I put all my money on Kasai's back. Nothing but silk and satin is good enough for Kasai. And look at me.

"And why? I am proud of that chimp. It's training, training that does it. She gets up in the morning, makes her own bed, takes a bath (and nothing but the best bath salt is good enough for her), and then she dresses herself, from the skin outward—panties, and everything, and finishes by putting on a pair of high-heeled shoes. I have to have her shoes made by Mancini in New York; she won't wear anything else. She powders her nose.

She likes asparagus, and she hates the smell of alcohol."

I asked: "Can she read and write?"

"No, I won't go so far as to say that. She knows the shape of letters—capital letters—but she has not yet got around to stringing them together. She will though, she will! But she understands words all right, and I've nearly got around to teaching her how to drive a car. After that I guess I'll train her so that she can play bridge, or at least some simple card game. She can throw a pair of dice, but once in a while the jungle kind of creeps back, and she forgets. I don't wish to flatter myself, but I will say that no man in the world has ever trained a monkey like I trained Kasai.

"Do you know what? She behaves just like a Christian!

"Once when we were in Detroit, she saw a lady in a fur coat and took a fancy to her fur coat. And so nothing would do for Kasai but I have got to buy her a fur coat like this lady is wearing. So I go to a man called Isaac, a furrier you understand, and got him to make Kasai a fur coat. Can you imagine that? A monkey in a fur coat! Imagine that! She wanted mink. I can't run to it. She nearly killed me when I told her she couldn't have mink. Have you ever felt a chimp's grip when a chimp is really sore? Try it sometime and you'll know what I mean. I got her to accept marmot—it was all I could afford. . . . It's very kind of you indeed, mister. I don't mind if I do have just another little one. . . . She can do everything . . . she even cooks—I mean to say, she can fry you an egg or a chop. No French cooking;

nothing like that. Just plain frying or broiling; she can do that. She even cleans my shoes. It's training that does it. Training. It's all done by kindness . . ."

"You must make a great deal of money out of this chimp of yours," I said.

He blinked, groping unsteadily for his fresh drink and said: "Why, yes, that's right. Yes, I do make quite a little. But I'm still a poor man. Don't have a penny in the world. You see, she costs me quite a bit. I've kind of civilised her. Nothing but the best is good enough for Kasai, and she costs me plenty. Look at these pants I'm wearing. Take a look and see—if I was a rich man, would I wear pants like this? And this shirt: $2.50. I tell you, I made a lady of that ape . . . but no, oh no, no, no, no, I am not doing anything like that. I don't want your God-damn money. You trying to insult me? Here am I talking to you, being sociable, having a confab . . . and you . . ."

Emotion overcame the little man. He pushed back my five-dollar bill and started crying.

Then the doors were pushed wide open and swung back behind an aged chimpanzee, dressed ridiculously in a frilly silk gown, over which there hung a moth-eaten fur coat. The queer square feet were crammed into huge high-heeled shoes.

The giant nudged the human skeleton with an elbow larger than a bent knee, and let out a peculiar high-pitched giggle. The thin man laughed in an astonishingly melodious bass voice. The chimp, looking neither to

the right nor to the left, waddled up to little Pine, brushed his glass off the bar, extended a black and leathery hand, took him by the belt and dragged him out.

As the swinging doors thudded to a standstill, my friend the soldier said to me:

"Do you see what I saw?"

One of the midgets, with a malicious snigger said: "Pine—ha! He thinks he trained that monkey? Well, that monkey trained him."

We caught the next train, at six-forty-five in the morning, and I was never able to get to the bottom of the matter.

Carnival on the Downs

WE are a queer people: I do not know what to make of us. Whatever anyone says for us is right; whatever anyone says against us is right. A conservative people, we would turn out our pockets for a rebel; and prim as we are, we love an eccentric.

We are an eccentric people. For example: we make a cult of cold baths—and of our lack of plumbing—and a boast of such characters as Dirty Dick of Bishopsgate, and Mr. Lagg who is landlord of The White Swan at Wettendene.

Dirty Dick of Bishopsgate had a public house, and was a dandy, once upon a time. But it seems that on the eve of his marriage to a girl with whom he was in love he was jilted, with the wedding breakfast on the table. Thereafter, everything had, by his order, to be left exactly as it was on that fatal morning. The great cake crumbled, the linen mouldered, the silver turned black. The bar became filthy. Spiders spun their webs, which grew heavy and grey with insects and dirt. Dick never changed his wedding suit, nor his linen, either. His house became a byword for dirt and neglect . . . whereupon, he did good business there, and died rich.

Mr. Lagg, who had a public house in Wettendene, which is in Sussex, seeing The Green Man, redecorated

and furnished with chromium chairs, capturing the carriage trade, was at first discouraged. His house, The White Swan, attracted the local men who drank nothing but beer—on the profit of which, at that time, a publican could scarcely live.

Lagg grew depressed; neglected the house. Spiders spun their webs in the cellar, above and around the empty, mouldering barrels, hogsheads, kilderkins, nipperkins, casks, and pins. He set up a bar in this odorous place—and so made his fortune. As the dirtiest place in Sussex, it became a meeting place for people who bathed every day. An American from New Orleans started the practice of pinning visiting cards to the beams. Soon, everybody who had a card pinned it up, so that Lagg's cellar was covered with them.

When he went to town, Lagg always came back with artificial spiders and beetles on springy wires, to hang from the low ceiling; also, old leather jacks, stuffed crocodiles and spiky rays from the Caribbean gulfs, and even a dried human head from the Amazon. Meanwhile, the cards accumulated, and so did the bills advertising local attractions—cattle shows, flower shows, theatricals, and what not.

And the despisers of what they called the 'great Unwashed' congregated there—the flickers-away of specks of dust—the ladies and gentlemen who could see a thumb print on a plate. Why? Homesickness for the gutter, perhaps—it is an occupational disease of people who like strong perfumes.

I visited The White Swan, in passing, on holiday. The people in Wettendene called it—not without affection—The Mucky Duck. There was the usual vociferous gathering of long-toothed women in tight-cut tweeds, and ruddy men with two slits to their jackets howling confidences, while old Lagg, looking like a half-peeled beetroot, brooded under the cobwebs.

He took notice of me when I offered him something to drink, and said: "Stopping in Wettendene, sir?"

"Overnight," I said. "Anything doing?"

He did not care. "There's the flower show," he said, flapping about with a loose hand. "There's the Christian Boys' Sports. All pinned up. Have a dekko. See for yourself."

So I looked about me.

That gentleman from New Orleans, who had pinned up the first card on the lowest beam, had started a kind of chain reaction. On the beams, the ceiling, and the very barrels, card jostled card, and advertisement advertisement. I saw the card of the Duke of Chelsea overlapped by the large, red-printed trade card of one George Grape, Rat-Catcher; a potato-crisp salesman's card half overlaid by that of the Hon. Iris Greene. The belly of a stuffed trout was covered with cards as an autumn valley with leaves.

But the great hogshead, it seemed, was set aside for the bills advertising local attractions. Many of these were out of date—for example, an advertisement of a Baby Show in 1932, another of a Cricket Match in 1934,

and yet another for 'Sports' in 1923. As Mr. Lagg had informed me, there were the printed announcements of the Christian Boys' affair and the Flower Show.

Under the Flower Show, which was scheduled for August 14th, was pinned a wretched little bill advertising, for the same date, a 'Grand Carnival' in Wagnall's Barn on Long Meadow, Wettendene. Everything was covered with dust.

It is a wonderful place for dust. It is necessary, in The Mucky Duck cellar, to take your drink fast or clasp your hand over the top of the glass before it accumulates a grey scum or even a dead spider: the nobility and gentry like it that way. The gnarled old four-ale drinkers go to The Green Man: they have no taste for quaintness.

I knew nobody in Wettendene, and am shy of making new acquaintances. The 'Grand Carnival' was to begin at seven o'clock; entrance fee sixpence, children half price. It could not be much of a show, I reflected, at that price and in that place: a showman must be hard up, indeed, to hire a barn for his show in such a place. But I like carnivals and am interested in the people that follow them; so I set off at five o'clock.

Long Meadow is not hard to find: you go to the end of Wettendene High Street, turn sharp right at Scott's Corner where the village ends, and take the winding lane, Wettendene Way. This will lead you, through a green tunnel, to Long Meadow, where the big Wagnall's Barn is.

Long Meadow was rich grazing land in better times, but now it is good for nothing but a pitiful handful of sheep that nibble the coarse grass. There has been no use for the barn these last two generations. It was built to last hundreds of years; but the land died first. This had something to do with water—either a lack or an excess of it. Long Meadow is good for nothing much, at present, but the Barn stands firm and four-square to the capricious rains and insidious fogs of Wettendene Marsh. (If it were not for the engineers who dammed the river, the whole area would, by now, be under water.) However, the place is dry, in dry weather.

Still, Long Meadow has the peculiarly dreary atmosphere of a swamp and Wagnall's Barn is incongruously sturdy in that wasteland. It is a long time since any produce was stocked in Wagnall's Barn. Mr. Etheridge, who owns it, rents it for dances, amateur theatrical shows, and what not.

That playbill aroused my curiosity. It was boldly printed in red, as follows:

!!!JOLLY JUMBO'S CARNIVAL !!!
!! THE ONE AND ONLY !!
COME AND SEE
!! GORGON, The Man Who Eats Bricks & Swallows Glass !!
! ! THE HUMAN SKELETON ! !
!! THE INDIA RUBBER BEAUTY—

She Can Put Her Legs Around Her Neck & Walk On Her Hands !!
!! A LIVE MERMAID !!
! ! ALPHA, BETA, AND DOT, The World-Famous Tumblers
With The Educated Dog!!
! J O L L Y J U M B O !
! ! J O L L Y J U M B O ! !

I left early, because I like to look behind the scenes, and have a chat with a wandering freak or two. I remembered a good friend of mine who had been a Human Skeleton—six foot six and weighed a hundred pounds—ate five meals a day, and was as strong as a bull. He told good stories in that coffee-bar that is set up where the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Combined Circuses rest in Florida for the winter. I 'tasted sawdust,' as the saying goes, and had a yearning to sit on the ground and hear strange stories. Not that I expected much of Wettendene. All the same, the strangest people turn up at the unlikeliest places. . . .

Then the rain came down, as it does in an English summer. The sky sagged, rumbled a borborygmic threat of thunderstorms, which seemed to tear open clouds like bags of water.

Knowing our English summer, I had come prepared with a mackintosh, which I put on as I ran for the shelter of the barn.

I was surprised to find it empty. The thunder was

loud, now, and there were zig-zags of lightning in the east; what time the pelting rain sounded on the meadow like a maracca. I took off my raincoat and lit a cigarette —and then, in the light of the match flame, I caught a glimpse of two red-and-green eyes watching me, in a far corner, about a foot away from the floor.

It was not yet night, but I felt in that moment such a pang of horror as comes only in the dark; but I am so constituted that, when frightened, I run forward. There was something unholy about Wagnall's Barn, but I should have been ashamed not to face it, whatever it might be. So I advanced, with my walking-stick; but then there came a most melancholy whimper, and I knew that the eyes belonged to a dog.

I made a caressing noise and said: "Good dog, good doggie! Come on, doggo!"—feeling grateful for his company. By the light of another match, I saw a grey poodle, neatly clipped in the French style. When he saw me, he stood up on his hindlegs and danced.

In the light of that same match I saw, also, a man squatting on his haunches with his head in his hands. He was dressed only in trousers and a tattered shirt. Beside him lay a girl. He had made a bed for her of his clothes and, the rain falling softer, I could hear her breathing, harsh and laborious. The clouds lifted. A little light came into the barn. The dog danced, barking, and the crouching man awoke, raising a haggard face.

"Thank God you've come," he said. "She can't

breathe. She's got an awful pain in the chest, and a cough. She can't catch her breath, and she's burning. Help her, Doctor—Jolly Jumbo has left us high and dry."

"What?" I said. "Went on and left you here, all alone?"

"Quite right, Doctor."

I said: "I'm not a doctor."

"Jumbo promised to send a doctor from the village," the man said, with a laugh more unhappy than tears. "Jolly Jumbo promised! I might have known. I did know. Jolly Jumbo never kept his word. Jumbo lives for hisself. But he didn't ought to leave us here in the rain, and Dolores in a bad fever. No, nobody's got the right. No!"

I said: "You might have run down to Wettendene yourself, and got the doctor."

" 'Might' is a long word, mister. I've broke my ankle and my left wrist. Look at the mud on me, and see if I haven't tried. . . . Third time, working my way on my elbows—and I am an agile man—I fainted with the pain, and half drowned in the mud. . . . But Jumbo swore his Bible oath to send a physician for Dolores. Oh, dear me!"

At this the woman between short, agonised coughs, gasped: "*Alma de mi corazon*—heart of my soul—not leave? So cold, so hot, so cold. Please, not go?"

"I'll see myself damned first," the man said, "and so will Dot. Eh, Dot?"

At this the poodle barked and stood on its hindlegs, dancing.

The man said, drearily: "She's a woman, do you see, sir. But one of the faithful kind. She come out of Mexico. That *alma de mi corazon*—she means it. Actually, it means 'soul of my heart.' There's nothing much more you can say to somebody you love, if you mean it. . . . So you're not a doctor? More's the pity! I'd hoped you was. But oh, sir, for the sake of Christian charity, perhaps you'll give us a hand.

"She and me, we're not one of that rabble of lay-abouts, and gyppos, and what not. Believe me, sir, we're artists of our kind. I know that a gentleman like you doesn't regard us, because we live rough. But it would be an act of kindness for you to get a doctor up from Wettendene, because my wife is burning and coughing, and I'm helpless.

"I'll tell you something, guv'nor—poor little Dot, who understands more than the so-called Christians in these parts, she knew, *she* knew! She ran away. I called her: 'Dot—Dot—Dot!'—but she run on. I'll swear she went for a doctor, or something.

"And in the meantime Jolly Jumbo has gone and left us high and dry. Low and wet is the better word, sir, and we haven't eaten this last two days."

The girl, gripping his wrist, sighed: "Please, not to go, not to leave?"

"Set your heart at ease, sweetheart," the man said. "Me and Dot, we are with you. And here's a gentleman

who'll get us a physician. Because, to deal plainly with you, my one-and-only, I've got a bad leg now and a bad arm, and I can't make it through the mud to Wettendene. The dog tried and she come back with a bloody mouth where somebody kicked her . . ."

I said: "Come on, my friends, don't lose heart. I'll run down to Wettendene and get an ambulance, or at least a doctor. Meanwhile," I said, taking off my jacket, "peel off some of those damp clothes. Put this on her. At least it's dry. Then I'll run down and get you some help."

He said: "All alone? It's a dretful thing, to be all alone. Dot'll go with you, if you will, God love you! But it's no use, I'm afraid."

He said this in a whisper, but the girl heard him, and said, quite clearly: "No use. Let him not go. Kind voice. Talk"—this between rattling gasps.

He said: "All right, my sweet, he'll go in a minute."

The girl said: "Only a minute. Cold. Lonely——"

—"What, Dolores, lonely with me and Dot?"

"Lonely, lonely, lonely."

So the man forced himself to talk. God grant that no circumstances may compel any of you who read this to talk in such a voice. He was trying to speak evenly; but from time to time, when some word touched his heart, his voice voice broke like a boy's, and he tried to cover the break with a laugh that went inward, a sobbing laugh.

Holding the girl's hand and talking for her comfort,

interrupted from time to time by the whimpering of the poodle Dot, he went on:

They call me Alpha, you see, because my girl's name is Beta. That is her real name—short for Beatrice Dolores. But my real name is Alfred, and I come from Hampshire.

They call us 'tumblers,' sir, but Dolores is an artist. I can do the forward rolls and the triple back-somersaults; but Dolores is the genius. Dolores, and that dog, Dot, do you see?

It's a hard life, sir, and it's a rough life. I used to be a Joey—a kind of a clown—until I met Dolores in Southampton, where she'd been abandoned by a dago that ran a puppet show, with side-shows, as went broke and left Dolores high and dry. All our lives, from Durham to Land's End, Carlisle to Brighton, north, south, east, west, I've been left high and dry when the rain come down and the money run out. Not an easy life, sir. A hard life, as a matter of fact. You earn your bit of bread, in this game.

Ever since Dolores and me joined Jolly Jumbo's Carnival, there was a run of bad luck. At Immersham, there was a cloudburst; Jumbo had took Grote's Meadow—we was two foot under water. The weather cleared at Athelboro' and they all came to see Pollux, the Strong Man, because, do you see, the blacksmith at Athelboro' could lift an anvil over his head, and there was a fi'-pun prize for anybody who could out-lift Pollux (his name was really Michaels).

Well, as luck would have it, at Athelboro' Pollux sprained his wrist. The blacksmith out-lifted him, and Jolly Jumbo told him to come back next morning for his fiver. We pulled out about midnight: Jumbo will never go to Athelboro' again. Then, in Pettydene, something happened to Gorgon, the man that eats bricks and swallows glass. His act was, to bite lumps out of a brick, chew them up, wash them down with a glass of water, and crunch up and swallow the glass. We took the Drill Hall at Pettydene, and had a good house. And what happens, but Gorgon breaks a tooth!

I tell you, sir, we had no luck. After that, at Firestone, something went wrong with the Mermaid. She was my property, you know—an animal they call a manatee—I bought her for a round sum from a man who caught her in South America. A kind of seal, but with breasts like a woman, and almost a human voice. She got a cough, and passed away.

There never was such a round. Worst of all, just here, Dolores caught a cold.

I daresay you've heard of my act, Alpha, Beta and Dot? . . . Oh, a stranger here; are you, sir? I wish you could have seen it. Dolores is the genius—her and Dot. I'm only the under-stander. I would come rolling and somersaulting in, and stand. Then Dolores'd come dancing in and take what looked like a standing jump—I gave her a hand-up—on to my shoulders, so we stood balanced. Then, in comes poor little Dot, and jumps; first on to my shoulder, then on to Dolores' shoulder

from mine, and so on to Dolores' head where Dot stands on her hind legs and dances. . . .

The rain comes down, sir. Dolores has got a cold in the chest. I beg her: "Don't go on, Dolores—don't do it!" But nothing will satisfy her, bless her heart: the show must go on. And when we come on, she was burning like a fire. Couldn't do the jump. I twist sidewise to take the weight, but her weight is kind of a deadweight, poor girl! My ankle snaps, and we tumbles.

Tried to make it part of the act—making funny business, carrying the girl in my arms, hopping on one foot, with good old Dot dancing after us.

That was the end of us in Wettendene. Jolly Jumbo says to us: "Never was such luck. The brick-eater's bust a tooth. The mermaid's good and dead. The strong-man has strained hisself . . . and I'm not sure but that blacksmith won't be on my trail, with a few pals, for that fi'-pun note. I've got to leave you to it, Alph, old feller. I'm off to Portsmouth."

I said: "And what about my girl? I've only got one hand and one foot, and she's got a fever."

He said: "Wait a bit, Alph, just wait a bit. My word of honour, and my Bible oath, I'll send a sawbones up from Wettendene."

"And what about our pay?" I ask.

Jolly Jumbo says: "I swear on my mother's grave, Alph, I haven't got it. But I'll have it in Portsmouth, on my Bible oath. You know me. Sacred word of honour!

I'll be at The Hope and Anchor for a matter of weeks, and you'll be paid in full. And I'll send you a doctor, by my father's life I will. Honour bright! In the meantime, Alph, I'll look after Dot for you."

And so he picked up the dog—I hadn't the strength to prevent him—and went out, and I heard the whips cracking and the vans squelching in the mud.

But little Dot got away and come back. . . .

I've been talking too much, sir. I thought you was the doctor. Get one for the girl, if you've a heart in you —and a bit of meat for the dog. I've got a few shillings on me.

I said: "Keep still. I'll be right back." And I ran in the rain, closely followed by the dog Dot, down through that dripping green tunnel into Wettendene, and rang long and loud at a black door to which was affixed the brass plate, well worn, of one Dr. MacVitie, *M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P.*

The old doctor came out, brushing crumbs from his waistcoat. There was an air of decrepitude about him. He led me into his surgery. I saw a dusty old copy of *Gray's Anatomy*, two fishing rods, four volumes of the Badminton Library—all unused these past twenty years. There were also some glass-stoppered bottles that seemed to contain nothing but sediment; a spirit lamp without spirit; some cracked test-tubes; and an ancient case-book into the cover of which was stuck a rusty scalpel.

He was one of the cantankerous old Scotch school of doctors that seem incapable of graciousness, and grudging even of a civil word. He growled: "I'm in luck this evening. It's six months since I sat down to my bit of dinner without the bell going before I had the first spoonful of soup half-way to my mouth. Well, you've let me finish my evening meal. Thank ye."

He was ponderously ironic, this side offensiveness. "Well, out with it. What ails ye? Nothing, I'll wager. Nothing ever ails 'em hereabout that a dose of castor oil or an aspirin tablet will not cure—excepting always rheumatism. Speak up, man!"

I said: "There's nothing wrong with me at all. I've come to fetch you to treat two other people up at Wagnall's Barn. There's a man with a broken ankle and a girl with a congestion of the lungs. So get your bag and come along."

He snapped at me like a turtle, and said: "And since when, may I ask, were you a diagnostician? And who are you to be giving a name to symptoms? In any case, young fellow, I'm not practising. I'm retired. My son runs the practice, and he's out on a child-bed case. . . . Damn that dog—he's barking again!"

The poodle, Dot, was indeed barking hysterically and scratching at the front door.

I said: "Doctor, these poor people are in desperate straits."

"Aye, poor people always are. And who's to pay the bill?"

"I'll pay," I said, taking out my wallet.

"Put it up, man, put it up! Put your hand in your pocket for all the riffraff that lie about in barns and ye'll end in the workhouse."

He got up laboriously, sighing: "Alex is over Iddlesworth way with the car. God give us strength to bear it. I swore my oath and so I'm bound to come, Lord preserve us!"

"If——" I said, "if you happen to have a bit of meat in the house for the dog, I'd be glad to pay for it——"

"—And what do ye take this surgery for? A butcher's shop?" Then he paused. "What sort of a dog, as a matter of curiosity would ye say it was?"

"A little grey French poodle."

"Oh, aye? Very odd. Ah well, there's a bit of meat on the chop bones, so I'll put 'em in my pocket for the dog, if ye like . . . Wagnall's Barn, did ye say? A man and a girl, is that it? They'll be some kind of vagrant romanies, or gyppos, no doubt?"

I said: "I believe they are some kind of travelling performers. They are desperately in need of help. Please hurry, Doctor."

His face was sour and his voice harsh, but his eyes were bewildered, as he said: "Aye, no doubt. I dare-say, very likely. A congestion of the lungs, ye said? And a fractured ankle, is that it? Very well." He was throwing drugs and bandages into his disreputable-looking black bag. I helped him into his immense black mackintosh.

He said: "As for hurrying, young man, I'm seventy-seven years old, my arteries are hard, and I could not hurry myself for the crack of doom. Here, carry the bag. Hand me my hat and my stick, and we'll walk up to Wagnall's Barn on this fool's errand of yours. Because a fool's errand it is, I fancy. Come on."

The little dog, Dot, looking like a bit of the mud made animate, only half distinguishable in the half dark, barked with joy, running a little way backwards and a long way forwards, leading us back to the Barn through that darkened green tunnel.

The doctor had a flash-lamp. We made our way to the barn, he grumbling and panting and cursing the weather. We went in. He swung the beam of his lamp from corner to corner, until it came to rest on my jacket. It lay as I had wrapped it over poor Dolores, but it was empty.

I shouted: "Alpha, Beta! Here's the doctor!"

The echo answered: "*Octor!*"

I could only pick up my jacket and say: "They must have gone away."

Dr. MacVitie said, drily: "Very likely, if they were here at all."

"Here's my jacket, damp on the inside and dry on the outside," I said. "And I have the evidence of my own eyes——"

"No doubt. Very likely. In a lifetime of practice I have learned, sir, to discredit the evidence of my eyes, and my other four senses, besides. Let's away. Come!"

"But where have they gone?" I asked.

"Ah, I wonder!"

"And the dog, where's the dog?" I cried.

He said, in his dour way: "For that, I recommend you consult Mr. Lindsay, the vet."

So we walked down again, without exchanging a word until we reached Dr. MacVitie's door. Then he said: "Where did you spend your evening?"

I said: "I came straight to the Barn from The White Swan."

"Well, then," he said, "I recommend ye go back, and take a whisky-and-water, warm; and get ye to bed in a dry night-shirt. And this time take a little more water with it. Good-night to ye——" and slammed the door in my face.

I walked the half mile to The White Swan, which was still open. The landlord, Mr. Lagg, looked me up and down, taking notice of my soaking wet clothes and muddy boots. "Been out?" he asked.

In Sussex they have a way of asking unnecessary, seemingly innocent questions of this nature which lead to an exchange of witticisms—for which, that night, I was not in the mood.

I said: "I went up to Wagnall's Barn for Jolly Jumbo's Carnival. But he pulled out, it seems, and left a man, a woman, and a dog——"

"You hear that, George?" said Mr. Lagg to a very old farmer whose knobbed ash walking-stick seemed to have grown out of the knobbed root of his earthy,

arthritic hand, and who was smoking a pipe mended in three places with insulating tape.

"I heerd," said old George, with a chuckle. "Dat gen'leman'll been a liddle bit late for dat carnival, like."

At this they both laughed. But then Mr. Lagg said, soothingly, as to a cash customer: "Didn't you look at the notice on the bill, sir? Jolly Jumbo was here all right, and flitted in a hurry too. And he did leave a man and a girl (not lawfully married, I heerd) and one o' them liddle shaved French dogs.

"I say, you'm a liddle late for Jolly Jumbo's Carnival, sir. 'Cause if you look again at Jolly Jumbo's bill, you'll see—I think the programme for the Cricket Match covers up the corner—you'll see the date on it is August the fourteenth, 1904. I was a boy at the time; wasn't I, George?"

"Thirteen year-old," old George said, "making you sixty-three to my seventy-two. Dat were a sad business, but as ye sow, so shall ye reap, they says. Live a vagabond, die a vagabond. Live in sin, die in sin——"

"All right, George," said Mr. Lagg, "you're not in chapel now . . . I don't know how you got at it, sir, but Jolly Jumbo (as he called hisself) lef' two people and a dog behind. Hauled out his vans, eleven o'clock at night, and left word with Dr. MacVitie (the old one, that was) to go up to Wagnall's Barn.

"But he was in the middle o' dinner, and wouldn't go. Then he was called out to the Squire's place, and didn't

get home till twelve o'clock next night. And there was a liddle dog that kep' barking and barking, and trying to pull him up the path by the trousis-leg. But Dr. MacVitie——"

"Dat were a mean man, dat one, sure enough!"

"You be quiet, George. Dr. MacVitie kicked the liddle dog into the ditch, and unhooked the bell, and tied up the knocker, and went to bed. Couple o' days later, Wagnall, going over his land, has a look at that barn, and he sees a young girl stone dead, a young fellow dying, and a poor liddle dog crying fit to break your heart. Oh, he got old Dr. MacVitie up to the barn then all right, but t'was too late. The fellow, he died in the Cottage Hospital.

"They tried to catch the dog, but nobody could. It stood off and on, like, until that pair was buried by the parish. Then it run off into the woods, and nobody saw it again——"

"Oh, but didn't they, though?" said old George.

Mr. Lagg said: "It's an old wives' tale, sir. They *do* say that this here liddle grey French dog comes back every year on August the fourteenth to scrat and bark at the doctor's door, and lead him to Wagnall's Barn. And be he in the middle of his supper or be he full, be he weary or rested, wet or dry, sick or well, go he must. . . . *He* died in 1924, so you see it's nothing but an old wives' tale——"

"Dey did used to git light-headed, like, here on the marshes," said old George, "but dey do say old Dr.

MacVitie mustn't rest. He mus' pay dat call to dat empty barn, every year, because of his hard heart. Tomorrow, by daylight, look and see if doctor's door be'nt all scratted up, like."

"George, you're an old woman in your old age," said Mr. Lagg. "We take no stock of such things in these parts, sir. Would you like to come up to the lounge and look at the television until closing time?"

Elizabeth and Temptation

EVEN now, I cannot think of her without a peculiar sensation as of champagne bubbles in my backbone. She was barely seventeen when I first set eyes on her—a magnificent girl, built on the lines of a miniature Venus of Syracuse. I used to tell her that she would go far, provided she overcame her tendency to put on weight. The night would come, I would say, when the whole world would blink at the blaze of her name in neon.

And why not? She had magnetism, this girl Elizabeth. I disliked her at first. Such people are always dangerous. Acquired tastes are always habit-forming. Who likes his first puff of tobacco smoke, or his first sip of alcohol? Yet men die on account of the fatal fascination of nicotine and drink. She was like that.

She had too much assurance. I preferred humble women. She was blonde, and I did not like blondes. She was not even beautiful: in the course of growth, some parts of her face had, so to speak, impatiently pushed beyond the rest. Her upper lip was thin, and she had, without much success, tried to make it look thicker with lipstick two shades too light. But her lower lip protruded a little: it was provocative. Her ears were not really small, and her hair was done wrong. There was mud on her shoes. Her stockings were of black

lisle. The rain had bedraggled her a little, yet she was not in the least subdued. Her large brown eyes blinked insolently at me from under the brim of a preposterous black hat.

It is all astonishingly vivid, even to this day, after nine years. It was in the town called Rock Bottom, one bitter November night.

Oh that town, that town, that God-forsaken town of Rock Bottom! It hangs under the murderous brows of the moors, in the dreariest corner of the north. Once upon a time they used to spin cotton there, but now the mills are closed. There used, also, to be sandstone quarries nearby, but they, too, are deserted. "Delfs," they call them; and they are full of water. People hardly dare to go near them—they have such a sombre atmosphere that one has an almost irresistible impulse to throw oneself into them and drown. It is a has-been, that town. There were coal-mines, but the coal gave out. There were claypits, but the clay was no good. There was a paper-mill, but it blew up. There was an iron foundry, but it went bankrupt. Nearly every able-bodied man there is unemployed. The whole town lives on the dole. Nobody has anything to do. The entire population leans against the walls around a square called the Circus at the centre of the town. Whenever anybody passes, the whole crowd bursts out laughing. It is their only means of passing time! They vary it by making abusive noises.

Fate sent me to Rock Bottom with the *Sweet Lilac*

company. I rented the Theatre Royal, which could contain six hundred and three people. About a hundred turned up on the first night. The second and third nights were even worse. On the Thursday, having fallen into a state of desperation, I distributed two hundred free tickets, simply to fill a few seats for the sake of the morale of the troupe. The population became suspicious: they felt that there must be a catch in it somewhere. Only ten people came, and then with the profoundest reluctance—because, I think, their roofs leaked, and it was raining hard.

On the Friday night I was sitting in the office brooding, when I was told that there was a young lady to see me. It was an aged employee of the theatre who brought the news.

"What name?" I asked.

"Ee, I don't know."

"What's she like?"

"Ee, nobbut a lass."

"Who did she say she wanted?"

"Ee, I forget."

I said: "Show her in," and in came the girl Elizabeth.

"Good evening," I said.

"Are you the manager?" she asked.

"Yes, why?"

"My name's Elizabeth Yorke." She sounded breathless.

"And what can I do for you?"

"I want you to give me a job," she said.

"Oh," I said, "oh. So you want me to give you a job? Excuse me if I appear to laugh. What sort of job, might I ask, do you want me to give you?"

"Acting."

"Miss Yorke," I said, "I've got a whole cast to pay, and ten complimentary stalls and three eightpennies to pay them with. If I have the fare to take us to Black Lump on Sunday, I shall be astonished. And so you want me to give you a job acting? Ha!"

She said: "I don't care."

She irritated me. I did not like her manner. I rose, and opened the door. "I'm sorry," I said. "Good-night."

She did not move. I spoke louder: "Now come, Miss. I have nothing for you."

"It's no use your shouting," she said, with perfect calm. "You've got to give me a job."

"Now please, Miss Yorke! Go home like a good girl."

"No, I won't."

"I'll have you put out!"

"If you do," she said, "I'll ruffle my hair, and tear my dress, and then scream for the police."

I was smoking a pipe at the time. I bit right through the mouthpiece.

"But please," I said.

"You'll *have* to give me a job," she said. "I can't go home. I haven't got a home."

"But you must live somewhere?"

"I was at a convent school. I ran away yesterday."

"But, why, in heaven's name, come to *me*?"

"I want to go on the stage."

"Excuse me a moment," I said.

She threw off her hat, ruffled her hair, and began to tear at the front of her dress.

"Oh, God," I said, wearily, "all right, I'll give you a job. Go away now, and come back later."

"No," she said, "I don't trust you. I'm going to stay."

She stayed. My sufferings were, I felt, growing greater than I could bear. How do you get rid of such a girl? I had a sudden insight into the heart of the man who, faced with certain situations, buys himself a bludgeon, a surgical saw, and a trunk. An insight and a sympathy! But I did not have the price of a trunk . . .

In two hours, she had won everybody's heart but mine. The men opened doors for her. The women offered to lend her clothes. She had personality, the girl Elizabeth. And character: she hit the comedian in the eye for taking, in vain, the name of the Deity. It was as black an eye as I have ever seen.

And there was something about her that attracted people. When she walked across the Circus there was a distinct rustling noise as hundreds of necks grated against mufflers, and the walls were white with staring eyes. On our last night at Rock Bottom, the theatre was full. That, probably, was because it was Saturday; but everybody swore that Elizabeth was bringing us luck. We survived; moved on to Black Lump, a prosperous town that centres about a huge factory

where they manufacture purgatives; and did much better.

Elizabeth gulped down all we could teach her. She could sing a little, dance a little, act a little, but do nothing much. She didn't really have to: her figure was superb, and she had poise. I tell you, she had an indefinable something. In *Clarissa and the Inkpot*, she had only to walk on in a short-skirted parlourmaid's dress with black stockings, and imbeciles actually applauded.

A little money came in. We went to Manchester, and with mad courage, took the Blue Hall and put on *Little Mother*.

Then came the nun.

She was, I believe, some kind of lay sister. I was in the office at about eleven in the morning, when she startled me horribly by appearing in the doorway, in robes as black as soot, and asking if I were the manager.

I replied: "Yes," stammering; for the presence of holy people always embarrasses me.

"Is a Miss Elizabeth Yorke working for you here?"

"Why . . . yes, ma'am."

"I have come to take her away."

Until that moment I had thought that I hated the girl. But as the nun said this, I experienced a curiously painful pang, together with the sensation I have already described—champagne bubbles in the spine.

"Eh?" I said. "I beg pardon? Where to?"

"Back to the Sacred Heart School."

"But . . ."

"I am afraid she cannot stay here. She must come

back. She is a very headstrong girl. She has caused us a great deal of grief. I have hardly slept for weeks, thinking of her. I have been searching for her everywhere." She raised her face, which was sweet in expression and utterly bloodless, and stretched out the cleanest hand I have ever seen: "Yet we all love her so much."

"Yes, I can imagine that," I said.

"So will you please help us?"

"Well, madam, I'll do whatever I can. She *can* be a little difficult, you know . . ."

"Yes, poor girl."

"She'll be here about midday——"

Then, with a clash and a bang, Elizabeth came in. She saw the good sister, and froze in her tracks. "Why," she said, "Sister Agatha!"

I could see disapproval struggling with joy in the nun's face. Then the prim little lips parted, and she said: "Elizabeth, my dear."

They looked at each other. Elizabeth said: "Well . . . here I am!"

"I've been looking for you day and night, Elizabeth. And now that I've found you, I'm going to take you back with me," said Sister Agatha.

I felt my heart beating.

"But Sister Agatha!"

"No, Elizabeth, you must come."

"But I can't possibly, Sister Agatha."

"You must, dear."

"But *why*?"

"Because this is not the place for you, Elizabeth."

"But it *is*!"

"No, dear, you only think it is. You're very young. This is only a passing weakness. Theatres are terrible places for girls to spend their youth in, Elizabeth. Believe me, you only like it now because it's so fresh and new to you. All sin seems so bright and pleasant at first, Elizabeth. That is why Satan is so strong. If sin were unpleasant, my dear, there would be no souls lost. But you must fight against it, and overcome it, my dear. You think I don't know, but I do. Elizabeth! The——"

"But Sister Agatha, there's nothing sinful about it! I don't *do* anything. I——"

"Now Elizabeth——"

"No, but listen, please, Sister Agatha! Stay and see for yourself. Stay for the matinée. And——"

"Oh, no!"

"Yes, do, please, Sister Agatha!"

"No, Elizabeth!"

Elizabeth took the good lady by the hand. (She had a caress like old ivory impregnated with electricity.) And she said in a voice like warm cream: "Be a *dear*! Just this once?"

Sister Agatha melted like milk-chocolate in strong sunlight, and she replied: "Well, this once. . . . But afterwards . . .!"

At this point, Mr. Lawrence, the junior lead, thrust his head into the office and said: "Old Maggie's got colic and can't turn up."

I choked back bitter words, and said: "Trouble, trouble, trouble! One—*gug*—thing after another! Who's going to deputise for the Nurse?"

"Is somebody sick?" asked Sister Agatha.

"Yes," I said, "a lady called Maggie. She plays the part of a nurse in *Little Mother*. Excuse me. I must find someone to take her place."

"Wait a minute," said Elizabeth, and looked at Sister Agatha.

"No!" I cried, scandalised.

"Dear Sister Agatha," said Elizabeth, "would you be a sweet darling and help us?"

"Of course I'll help in any way I can."

"Sister Agatha, you always were a dear. You'd only have to walk across the stage twice, and bend over a woman in a sick bed . . ."

"*Stage*?"

"Just *walk* across it."

"I never heard——"

"But darling Sister Agatha!"

"I never heard such a——"

"Oh, *do* help us! Do please! Just this once?"

"I . . ." Sister Agatha paused; in her amiable old eyes there was dawning a sparkle of excitement.

"You will? Oh, I know you will!"

"This once . . . but afterwards——! Will—will I have to say anything?"

"I knew you would, you're such a dear! Only three words: 'The fever's rising.' "

"The fever's rising?"

"Oh, Sister Agatha, what a clever darling you are! Oh, goody, goody, goody!" said Elizabeth; and kissed the unhappy woman three times on the cheek.

She never kissed me three times on the cheek.

Sister Agatha was quivering with excitement. She shook like a leaf. When I begged her to be calm, though, she shut her eyes tight for a second, and was calm. She had self-control, this lay sister.

It was the sick-room scene—the little iron cot; the dim lights; the drawn blinds. At (*a*) a wash-hand stand, with a jug and basin. (*b*) a rickety dressing-table with nothing on it but a hairbrush and a photograph of the bad daughter Lucille (Miss Elizabeth Yorke). On the bed, in a delirium, the Little Mother.

LITTLE MOTHER (*feverishly*):

"Oh, oh, Lucille . . . such a little girl . . . my Lucille, poor Lucille. . . . Of course Mummy forgives you . . . only come a little closer . . ."

NURSE (*sotto voce, laying hand on* L.M.'s *forehead*):

"The fever's rising."

. . . "Now!" I said, to Sister Agatha.

She crossed the stage, not daring to raise her eyes; laid on her clean little hand, and said in a voice that shook with pity: "The fever's rising."

Then, to my astonishment, she took out a handkerchief as white as a lump of sugar, dipped it in the water-jug, pretended to wring it out, laid it on the brow of the delirious mother (I saw her start with surprise at the

shock of the thing) and said: "There . . . there . . . ssh . . . ssh . . . ." Smoothed the bed; tucked the sheets in; made the patient comfortable, and then walked off, looking back once or twice.

I heard a tremendous hiss: it was me, relaxing. I had been holding my breath, I think, for five minutes.

Sister Agatha was moist-eyed. "Was that right?" she asked.

"Right?" I said. "You *lived* it! It was perfect! You're a born actress, though you'll laugh at me for saying so."

"Do you *mean* it?"

I did, and said so: I really think she was.

Half an hour later she said: "Would you . . . would you . . . would it help you if I did it some more?"

"Sister Agatha," I said, "I could wish for nothing better. Would you?"

Her eyes were shining. She said: "Why, I . . . It would be a pleasure!"

And just then, a melodious and reproachful voice said: "No, Sister Agatha, you mustn't."

I turned.

It was Elizabeth. She was standing there, drawn up to her full height. If she had had no head, she would have looked like the Winged Victory. For an instant I felt that I should help her to complete the resemblance. She had an amazing power to rouse me, in one way and another, this girl Elizabeth.

"You must go back, Sister Agatha," she said.

"But Elizabeth——"

"No, Sister Agatha, you mustn't do it any more. You must go back this very evening!"

"But I——"

"If you don't, Sister Agatha, you'll never know peace any more. It's only the bright lights and the novelty of the thing that are getting you. No, dear, you mustn't. I'm going to see you to the station right after the matinée!"

It was exactly what you would have expected of the girl. The nun had come to save Elizabeth. But what had happened? Elizabeth had saved the nun.

Somehow, I have never felt more sorry for anybody. The sister was such a pitiful little figure in her black and her white, with her wan little face and her clean little hands, saying good-bye to us on the platform.

"Be careful, now," said Elizabeth; and stood there like a saviour, a benefactress, an evangelist, as the train shouted *Whaash*!—*Whaash*! and slid out.

We went back. On the way, I thought: *What a girl! What a personality! She does something to you, that girl. I could love that girl. I could marry that girl. One of these days*, I said to myself, *I'll propose to her!*

But I never did. A fortnight later, a talent-spotter for Epoch Films offered her a contract for three years, during which time they vet you for stardom. That was nearly six years ago. I have not seen her since. She married somebody else; it won't last. Elizabeth married? Bah! Can a peony grow in a jampot? She is destined for bright lights—if only she watches her

weight. But she never could resist baked potatoes.

I still think of her with a pringling; a qualm; a sadness; a feeling similar to homesickness, which means, I suppose, that I must have been in love with her.

In a Misty Window

ONE morning, not long after he had got his baronetcy, Sir John Hardesty wiped steam from the surface of his shaving mirror and saw—or thought that he saw—an image so forlorn that for the first time in forty years his heart contracted and his eyes grew wet with tears.

He saw, as it were between the fog of an autumn and the gaslight in a shop, the head and shoulders of a boy of sixteen reflected in a dingy shop window. Sir John knew that his sixty-year-old head was white, venous and massive as the marble head of a Roman emperor, and that the shoulders upon which it was balanced were thirty inches wide and draped with a thirty-guinea robe. Still he saw the reflection of a shaggy, hatless head and the bottle-necked bust of a lad who appeared wistful and eager as an uncombed terrier pup waiting, with lifted paw, in the window of a pet store.

"To think that this boy was me, at sixteen," said Sir John Hardesty, as the steam came crawling back over the looking-glass. "Oh, time, time! But what's got into me this morning? Port. Too much port last night, at Virginia House, with His Grace the Duke of St. James's, that's what it is. His Grace's port," he repeated, with relish.

There was something vague and misty in the air, and

an indefinable something had come between Sir John's finger-tips and the things he wanted to touch. The handle of his safety-razor felt like wool. The tube of shaving-cream seemed to evade his groping hand. The shaving-brush was both here and there. He wiped the shaving-mirror with a towel and saw himself again—a powerful old man, good for another twenty years; hard as nails, self-sufficient, with large and watchful grey eyes and the jaws of a bulldog.

Nevertheless, he felt strange. He constantly wanted to wipe the mirror. He was not quite here this morning. As the towel, leaving flecks of fluff, passed over the glass, he saw himself as he really was. He saw Sir John Hardesty. But in five seconds the glass blurred: it gathered mist which ran into beads, and then the shaggy head and wan face of the sixteen-year-old boy came back to gaze at him out of wistful eyes.

He pressed the button of the bell, and Bryant appeared like a demon in a pantomime.

"Today, I'll not shave till after breakfast," said Sir John.

"Yes, Sir John."

"Juice of half a lemon in half a wine-glassful of water, crushed wheat, shirred eggs, toast. No butter. Coffee. Got it?"

"Yes, Sir John."

Bryant went away. Sir John Hardesty wrapped himself in his robe and took two steps towards the door. Then he paused, returned, wiped the mirror and looked

at himself. Everything was blurred: it was as if rain was trickling down. He could recognise himself, and yet he could not banish the image of the shaggy and wistful little boy from the reflection of himself.

He said: "Oh, bah!" and went into the bedroom. Breakfast was waiting, but Sir John Hardesty was not hungry. He drummed with a knife on the edge of a plate, and poked at his eggs with a fork.

How that steamy mirror brings it all back! he thought. The years blew away like smoke. Sir John remembered how he had stood in the rain outside the shop of the tobacconist, Mr. Poppy, his master, who paid him five shillings every Saturday for seventy-two hours of drudgery during the week.

God, he thought, how I worked! I scrubbed the floors, swept the shop, polished the brass, dusted the shelves, carried heavy weights, ran errands; working until I dropped, poor kid that I was. And for what? For a bit of bread. And if Poppy took it into his head that I was a second too slow, down came that fat, white hand of his, smack right in the face. I used to lie awake at night, tired as I was, thinking of all the things I would do to him if I had him in my power. . . .

But what was I? A brat out of the gutter, a pauper boy with a running nose. Could I help it? I always had a cold. I couldn't afford handkerchiefs. Much Poppy cared. He was glad of anything that gave him a chance to pick on me. He knew, for instance, that I wasn't

strong enough to handle the big shutters without struggling and hurting myself. But he just stood over me.

And that was how I came to stand there day-dreaming, as he called it, that morning in the rain. Yes, that was it. I had the last shutter down, and paused for a few seconds to get my breath. And I looked in through the shop window, and I saw the stock on the shelves, and the brass weighing-machine, and the silver-plated cigar lighter in the shape of a snake with a little blue gas flame coming out of its mouth; and I saw my own face—the face of a weak, stupid, over-patient guttersnipe. Yes, I remembered how I looked at myself, and thought of that big, fat, well-dressed pig Poppy, and all of a sudden I was disgusted with myself. I hated myself for being the dirty, wet-nosed little starveling slave that I was, and I began to cry. I wanted to go away and cry my heart out. But just then Poppy, who had crept up behind me, boxed my ears and said: "Stop standing there admiring yourself! If I were you it would make me sick to look at myself. Get those shutters inside, and get the floor swept, you idle young dog, or I'll take the skin off your backside."

And he gave me a shove with his foot.

And that did something to me. Yes, indeed, if Poppy only knew, that shove launched me on the way to where I am today; shoved me towards ten million pounds and a title. As I went into that dark shop, staggering under the weight of the shutters, I swore I would get my

revenge. I swore that instead of being bullied and beaten, I would become great, and bully and beat others in my turn.

That is what made me do what I did on the following Saturday night. Poppy left me to mind the shop, just before closing time. He had to go round the corner to the wholesalers before they closed, because of Jenkins's unexpectedly big order of cigars. There were two day's takings in the till and a quarter's rent which was payable first thing Monday morning—altogether a matter of £45. I emptied the till, pocketed the money, shut the shop and walked away. Everything I had ever been afraid of had been taken off and thrown away in half a minute like a dirty shirt. I knew I wasn't long-suffering any more. I knew I wasn't honest any more. I knew I wasn't soft any more. I knew that I was going to be a big man, a great man, a hard man. The hardest of the hard! I changed my name to Hardesty.

And as Hardesty I became what I am. It seems like a thousand years ago, and yet it seems as if it were only yesterday—damn that steamy mirror!

I went north to Liverpool. My luck had changed. It was like turning over the pages of a dull, dreary old book, and coming suddenly upon a bright picture. I had picked up something of Poppy's trade. I went into tobacco, got a job in a wholesale house, learned more, saved money, learned how important it is to gamble with other people's money rather than your own. I listened and learned. It was by listening that I learned of

the big Bosnian Tobacco Deal; it was through having listened that I knew whom to approach, and how to make terms. And so I went up and up, year by year.

Let the dogs bark! Let them say that I underpay twenty thousand employees in my shops, my factories, and my counting-houses. Let them say what they like. Let them whisper that I cheated Lehmann and Thurber. Let them compile dossiers about me and hint that I am a crook, a bully, a villain, and an oppressor of the poor. Let them bark as long and as loud as they like. I am too big to bite, too powerful and hard to bite, damn them! Who dares to question me? Let anybody touch me who dares!

But I wish I had not seen that steamy mirror.

Such things are best forgotten—not that I care.

These eggs are cold. Why are my eggs always cold?

Bryant! Bryant! Confound the man! *Bryant!*

Sir John Hardesty jabbed viciously at the bell-push, but as his thumb touched the button and he heard the waspish buzz in the distance, something like a pair of cold iron pincers seemed to fasten upon him just under the breast-bone, and the plate of eggs rushed up and hit him in the face.

Coming from everywhere, and reverberating like a voice in a whispering gallery, Bryant's voice said: "Quick, Maria! Sir John's had a stroke——"

And then he felt himself falling through an immense darkness.

. . . .

The darkness was cold, and Sir John was afraid. Yet even as he fell, twisting and turning in the immensity, he could see the face of the boy in the rain-splashed window. The image was broken by raindrops and blurred by tears. And a stupendous voice which had something of the shuddering, lingering quality of a beaten gong was saying:

"Not right yet, my child. Go back, go back, son, and begin again." The gong-like voice throbbed with pity. "Back into the rain, back into the cold. Back as you were, and try once more!"

He cringed and cried out. In his head, something not unlike a humming-top seemed to pause, totter, and come to rest. He found himself standing in the rain before a shop window. A big pale man was standing behind him, saying:

"Get those shutters inside, and get the floor swept, you idle dog, or I'll take the skin off your backside."

Staggering under the weight of the shutters: wet-nosed, wistful and eager, the boy John went into the dark shop.

"And stop singing, and take that grin off your face," said Mr. Poppy. He was angry. It was not that his hand was softer than John's head and therefore tingled at the finger-tips. He was angry because, for no defensible reason, he had suddenly become aware of a certain virtue and power in the boy.

The noon edition of the *Evening Extra* announced the sudden death of Sir John Hardesty.

Memory of a Fight

YES (said the old fighter, baring a gnarled arm and showing the company the various marks with which it was tattooed), oh, yes, as you may see, I have served in several armies. And here are my badges.

Look!—here is the Fish, in green, pricked out when I signed on as a mercenary for Carthage. And here, again, the Two Triangles in blue, that I wore when I fought for pay on the Levantine coast. The Triple Cross, in red, I got in Nubia. Came away with a helmet full of silver pieces; and all before I was twenty years of age.

Only one mark I hold sacred, though, and that is this one on my thigh. What they call my 'birth mark.'

You know, I come from Scythia; I am one of the Huns. My name was a Hunnish name, but they got to know me as Crasnius, because I had red hair—it is white now, and not much of it to boast of. Where I come from, do you know, twins are sacred. As soon as twins are born in my Province, the midwife marks them each on the thigh with a certain mark.

The first to come out is tattooed with what, in our language, means Number One, the second, Number Two; but in such a way that the marks cannot be mistaken for the marks of any other twins. Also, they are ineradicable. The midwife does it under the direction

of a *shaman*, who devises the patterns or runes, which are always, by some peculiar formula, coloured purple.

Oh, those old men! The secrets they know—them and the midwives! . . . But what was I saying?

Oh yes, I was a twin, and marked with my brother as such, which made me kind of holy. But when I was only eighteen, I killed the son of a chief in a quarrel about a girl and, since I could not pay blood-money, took to my heels and followed the wars, hiring myself here and there until I became a boxer.

That was when I was a foot soldier in a Roman Legion. There was a big Goth; we had words over wine, and he struck me in the face. In those days, as it seems to me now, nothing mattered. This big Goth, whose name I forget, went down, I assure you, like a tree; but, he came up like a ball.

It was bare fist, mind! Except for one which I will tell you of, that was the hardest fight I ever fought. Because, infantrymen—swordsmen—have the habit of leading with the right hand; whereas I, a Scythian, early trained as a bowman, have the habit of leading with the left hand, and, then, following with the right.

I broke his jaw, that dog of a Goth. But I had been observed by a noble Centurion. He had sporting instincts, or whatever you call them. In two shakes, I was out of the Army and into the Arena, boxing with the cestus—which is, as everybody knows, a strap of heavy cow-hide, studded with brass or iron spikes and knobs.

I had a pair called 'the skull-crushers.' Being pretty

strong in the arms and legs, I could handle half a pound of brass on each hand as if it were feathers. What is more, I had learned my lesson—that had come to me when I fought that Goth—that, while the swordsman leads with his right, the bowman leads with his left. I am a bowman, I, Crasnius!

Year after year, I fought in the Colosseum. More Roman ladies fell in love with me than would carpet this house. They called me 'Invincible' and 'Untouchable'—because, in boxing, I knew from within myself that he wins who keeps clear. . . .

"Who keeps clear?" says you, in view of my busted face.

Wait a bit: here is the story.

Now, when I was young, I was taught to fight in the Scythian style, with hands and feet—bare fists, bare feet. Later, when they laughed me out of being a barbarian, it was Classic Greek style of boxing—ladylike stuff, no tripping, no elbows, no hitting below the belt. This cramped my style.

I felt at home in the Roman ring, with a pair of knuckle-dusters, and licence to do what I would, with everything but my feet. What, does anybody question this—that, with this same left hand, thrust up-and-out like a Scythian bowman, cestus on fist, I cracked the skull of the Greek, Kraton?

And, with my right hand, did I not batter the one they called the Syrian, so that, for the rest of his life—seven feet tall though he was—he walked in circles?

But, you ask me, do you, in spite of my bragging, how I came to get this apology for a face? I will tell you.

It must have been, let me see, fifteen or sixteen years ago. Cæsar had wagered ten thousand on me, to beat a barbarian. So we met.

In height, weight, girth, and what-not, we were well matched. But, in the manner of barbarians—I was made a Roman citizen, you know—he had the habit of lashing himself into fighting form, by stamping and chanting. You know the kind of stuff, banging his chest—the fool!

Chornie, I, the black one!
Man-breaker, bone-breaker,
Chornie, widow-maker!
Weep, widows of Crasnius,
But yet rejoice—
Soon, you shall be
The wives of Chornie! . . .

. . . The usual damned nonsense. You used to get it mainly from the Northlanders, who, as I have said, wasted their breath boasting, and their energy in wild gestures, before a fight.

Mark my words; before a fight, no bobbing and weaving—keep still! You will need, if you are evenly matched, every little bit of breath you throw away shouting.

As I was saying, the type of cestus we were wearing, then, was called 'the skull-crusher.' A heavy glove,

well-studded with brass spikes, and having wide straps to protect the arm as far as the elbow. The old man, who was dressing me—that is to say, tying the straps—whispered to me: "Be careful of that man, master. He has already killed twenty-eight in fair fight, and crippled fifty more."

I said to him: "Shut your toothless mouth"—he was an old pugilist and, therefore, naturally had no teeth—"I am Crasnius, and he against whom Crasnius lifts his left hand the Gods forget!"

"This one, also, is a left-handed hitter," the old man mumbled.

I said to him: "Cæsar has ten thousand gold pieces on me—he, alone. All in all, I carry about a million in this left hand of mine. Be quiet, and tie the straps a little tighter on my right arm."

To cut the story short: I met this barbarian Chornie. And, by all the Gods, for the first time in my life I was uneasy!

Old Apollodorus, in the Gladiators' School, used to teach boxers—wearing a seven-pound cestus of bronze—to fight with their own shadows. Also, in front of a plate of polished metal, to spar with their own reflections. This made for a certain kind of speed and accuracy.

Well, when I came into the arena to smash that loud-mouthed barbarian, it was as if I were boxing with my own shadow, or my own reflection. Whatever I did, he did, and in the same instant. . . .

And the crowd began to hoot me, calling me vile names, and throwing rotten fruit, so that I determined to make an end of it by means of one or two of my 'secret' punches—which are no secret at all to any shepherd boy in Scythia.

Here is, practically, the end of the story. I tried the left-right. The barbarian countered. I tried the swinging upper-cut. The barbarian parried it. At last, reduced to unconventional play, pretending to fall—oh, how the crowd roared!—I snatched a handful of sand and threw it into his eyes, while, with my right hand, I hit him in the liver, so that he fell.

Then, as I stood over him, our eyes met, and I saw him staring, amazed, at the tattooed birth-mark on my thigh. And so I looked down to his. . . .

You have guessed? Yes, this shadow of mine, this mirror of mine, was my twin brother, born in the same hour of the same mother.

He rose. I could have cracked his skull, but I sparred a little, and so did he, for we had recognised each other, and had always loved each other.

"And how are things at home?" I asked, swinging my left hand to his head, but taking care to miss.

Driving at me with his right hand—it whizzed past my ear like an arrow—he said: "Sister died in childbed."

Then, while the crowd roared, I said to him: "Cæsar has ten thousand on me. I daren't lose. Wait for it, brother, and I'll break your arm."

He nodded, and I prepared to bring up my left. But

the sand on which we stood was slippery. We had shed a good deal of blood between us. So, he falling forward, instead of hitting him in the upper arm—woe is me!—my cestus went home between eye and ear. And he fell dead.

The crowd went mad. The nobility filled my hat with gold, over and above my fee. But my heart was so sore I could not even weep.

I could not fight again after that. I took my money and bought this pleasant farm in Sicily—the ghosts of the dead cannot cross running water.

Here is the end of the story. I have a strong son whom I have named after my brother; but I am not teaching him to box—only to run and jump.

Good-night.

The Fabulous Fido

IN a northern public-house, a man with a broken nose stroked my dog and said: "Not bad: pretty fur." He spoke in a Liverpool accent. "Is 'e supposed to be a Staffordshire bull terrier?"

"What d'you mean, 'supposed to be'? He *is*."

"Aha! Hum? *With them thur ears?*"

Those whom the Gods would destroy, they attach to Staffordshire bull terriers. I ground my teeth and became black in the face. For more than twenty minutes I talked, with desperate eloquence, of my dog's ears. He was a perfect dog, I said; and anyway, his imperfections were more desirable than the finest points of supposedly perfect dogs. I pulled back his lips and showed his teeth, dragged up his eyelids and displayed his eyes; picked him up by the tail to demonstrate his good nature; made him bite somebody to prove his fighting spirit; told him to sit down (which he wouldn't do) to let it be seen that he was intelligent and obedient. Only that day, I said, my dog had caught a mouse—a large, fierce mouse—which he killed in less than three bites. The day before—as I could prove—he had chased a sparrow, and it would have gone hard with that sparrow if my dog had got a grip on it. Here, I said, was strength, courage and gentleness.

The man with the broken nose told me that he had

owned a Staffordshire bull terrier named Jack the Ripper, a dog of unnatural colouring, with red, black, and putty-coloured stripes. Jack the Ripper had killed a horse . . . to say nothing of rats.

I said: "Well, my dog *could* kill a horse if he wanted to. But why *should* he? I bring him up *not* to kill horses. My dog *likes* horses."

"Does 'e kill cats?"

"Well, no, not exactly. He doesn't kill *cats* . . . not to speak of." I blushed as I said this, because my dog likes cats. He rushes up to them, smiling and wagging his tail, and when they spit at him and scratch him he goes into a corner and cries piteously.

"Jack the Ripper killed fowerty-fower cats in six weeks."

"But why?"

" 'E didn't like 'em, see?"

"I see. My dog catches flies," I said.

"What does 'e want to catch flies for?"

"He likes them."

"Flies are no good to a dog, sir."

"He doesn't actually eat them—just bites them until they're unconscious and then drops them."

"Jack the Ripper could uproot a young tree and carry it in 'is mouth for miles," said the broken-nosed man.

"That's nothing," I said.

"And look at that thur Surrey dog. Thur's a dog! An old lady 'as 'im; a lady in some place they call Low Down."

"What?" cried a man in uniform. "Not Mrs. Imblemay of White Cottage? You don't mean her dog Fido?"

"That's right—Mrs. Imblemay's Fido."

"I've heard all about that," he said. "The dog that drove away the Commando."

"That's right. A red-brindle dog, I 'ear."

"Who told you?"

"A man called Osbald. Red-brindle, wi' teeth like a bear and one eye. You and your fly-catching pup!" he added, looking at me. "If I wanted to catch flies I'd buy a fly-paper."

"You and your horse-killing terrier! If I wanted to kill a horse I'd buy a pole-axe," I answered.

The man in uniform said: "Mrs. Imblemay's dog Fido wasn't a red-brindle with one eye, and it didn't have teeth like a bear. It was a sort of light grey, with pale blue eyes, and it didn't have any teeth at all."

The man with the broken nose said: "I know that thur dog was a red-brindle."

"How do you know?"

"I got it for a fact from a man named Osbald," said the other, with a superior smile. "And as for a pale grey bull terrier wi' blue eyes and no teeth, *I* never 'aird of one, and no more 'ave you."

"Who said it was a bull terrier?" asked the man in uniform.

"Osbald."

"Oh, Osbald said so, did he? And did he tell you

about how this dog Fido picked a basketful of cowslips?"

"What d'you mean, cowslips?"

"That was the nearest Mrs. Imblemay's Fido got to being a bull terrier."

The man with the broken nose became angry. He said: "Once I fur killed a chap for taking a rise out of me. Are you pulling my leg? Or what?"

"Ah, you're a regular Fido of Low Down, that's what you are," said the man in uniform. "Now listen . . ."

This is what he said:

He said that he knew Mrs. Imblemay, because his home was near White Cottage in the village of Low Down. She was, he told us with sentiment, like the Little Old Lady in the song: she dressed in grey, picked flowers, preserved forgotten fruits in the form of unheard-of jam, and made strange wines. Her dandelion wine tasted innocent as gripe-water, but worked on uninitiated drinkers like a blow across the knee joints with a four-foot crowbar; her cowslip wine had the lifting force of a stevedore's hook; and out of parsnips she could distil a kind of gentle chloroform. She was fragile, clean, kind-hearted and devout; invariably polite, always anxious to please. Her cottage shone like a new pin. You could eat your breakfast off the scullery floor.

The man with the broken nose asked who wanted to eat his breakfast off the scullery floor, but the man in uniform would not be interrupted.

You could eat your breakfast and your dinner too off her scullery floor, and mop up the gravy with a bit of bread—she kept the place like a new pin. But she was all alone, and, being old and feeble, and a woman into the bargain, she was nervous, especially at night.

Here was where Fido came in. She had a notice on her gate which said: Beware of the Dog. Fido, it must be understood, was for her protection.

The man with the broken nose said that at last we were getting to the point.

The man in uniform, in agreement, said that this was the whole point. Mrs. Imblemay was terrified of dogs, and wouldn't have one anywhere near her. She had never owned a dog in her life—only a cat, and a very old sexless cat at that. She would not even have a radio in her house, for fear that it might attract lightning. The dog Fido was a figment of her imagination; the notice on the gate was a mere bluff. Fido was a fabulous monster. There was no such thing as Fido the Dog, and if Osbald—or whatever his name was—talked of a red-brindle Fido with one eye, he was an unscrupulous liar. Mrs. Imblemay herself played the part of Fido.

Osbald could put that in his pipe and smoke it.

Now the incident to which the man with the broken nose had referred, took place one spring midnight. A Commando, having lost his way, knocked at the door of White Cottage. Mrs. Imblemay put on her dressing-gown, armed herself with a pair of brass-knobbed fire-tongs—with which she would have had neither the

heart nor the strength to hit a dent in a rice pudding or beat her way out of a paper bag—and went downstairs.

"Who's there?" she asked.

"Let me in for a moment," said the Commando.

"Fido! Fido!" cried Mrs. Imblemay. Then, having paused for an instant, she rattled a little chain and said: "Down! Down, Fido! Watch the door, Fido!"

The Commando shouted: "Ma'am! Just a moment!"

But Mrs. Imblemay said: "Go away, or I'll set Fido on you." Having said this, she imitated the growling of a ferocious dog, and scratched the door with her finger-nails. "He's terrible fierce," she said. "Do please for your own sake go away, young man." And she barked hoarsely.

At this the Commando said: "I'm going! I'm going! Don't let him loose—I'm going!" And, being a man who was as good as his word, he went. He got home at last, and warned his comrades against the ferocious guardian of White Cottage, and so, from camp to camp, the tale of Fido spread over England from Surrey to Lancashire.

Yet, the man in uniform insisted, Fido was Mrs. Imblemay herself—a toothless grey, blue-eyed, charming old lady who wouldn't even have running water in the cottage for fear of getting drowned, let alone a red-brindle dog with one eye. And if what he said was in the slightest degree untrue, he hoped he would be struck by thunderbolts on the spot.

. . . .

The man with the broken nose finished his drink with a gulp and a snort. Then he poked a finger of scorn at my terrier and said: "Catching flies!" Whereupon the dog bit his finger to the bone.

The Tarleton Twins

THAT evening Vernon drank five brandies after dinner; but still he would not talk. He held his glass by the stem, twirled it, raised it to his nose in the manner of a man smelling a flower; emptied it; called for more; and sank deeper and deeper into gloom.

I asked him what was wrong. He replied: "I'm depressed. Brandy?"

"Thanks," I said. "Well, you don't eat like an unhappy man."

"What else have I got to live for?" muttered Vernon.

"You're putting on weight, Vernon, you know."

"Who cares?" He was silent again. Then he looked up suddenly, and said: "Guess who I saw this afternoon."

"Well?"

"The Tarleton girls."

"No!" I cried, and stared at him.

"Yes, both of them. Mary and Roberta. They recognised me at once. They simply looked at me, and said: 'Vernon!' Both together, just like they used to. And after twenty years, mind you. I can't have aged so damned much."

"No," I said; but to myself I added: *Oh no*? Poor Vernon had got fat and was getting fatter. Time had made him obese; it was fattening him for the Reaper.

He wheezed. Yet there had been a time when he could box fifteen rounds with the amateur middleweight champion and finish moderately fresh.

"They've aged," said Vernon.

"Have they? They used to be such good-looking girls."

They had, indeed, been beauties. Everybody talked about the Tarleton Twins. You could scarcely open an illustrated magazine without seeing their portraits. *Pearson's* put them in the middle of a 'Types of British Beauty' page, with a decorative border round them.

"Dried up," said Vernon. "They look like typical spinsters. They still dress the same. They still look the same. I mean, the same as each other. But you'd hardly know them. What a terrible thing it is, to get old . . . for a woman. A man . . . well, a man isn't the same. Some men get distinguished-looking in middle age." He looked at his reflection in the silver ash-tray. "Women go to the devil. Oh, Lord . . ."

"Vernon, hadn't you better have a coffee?"

"They still use Verbena," said Vernon. "I recognised them by that, first of all. I went into Raoul's to have some tea and some of those marvellous rum babas they make so well, and all of a sudden I caught a whiff of Verbena; and I turned round and there they were. It took my appetite away."

"I thought that nothing but death could take your appetite away, Vernon."

"Don't laugh. This is a serious thing for me. I don't

suppose I told you that I was in love with those girls."

"What, both of them?"

"Sort of. What I mean to say is, I could have fallen desperately in love with Roberta, if it hadn't been for Mary . . . or desperately in love with Mary if it hadn't been for Roberta. They were so exactly alike."

"In appearance, yes," I said, "they were twins."

"And similar in temperament, too. Twins from the same cell. They were like . . . two reflections of the same woman. Oh, damn it, I wish I could have married both of them."

"Vernon, instead of brandy, have another coffee."

"No. You know I used to call on them, I suppose. Well, after a while, I fell in love with Roberta."

"Why not? She was a beautiful girl."

"Quite. And Roberta fell in love with me. Well, that was simple enough. Then, when I began to turn the business of marriage in my mind, I discovered that I also loved Mary. And when I came to consider the matter more carefully, I found that Mary, also, was in love with me."

"What an idiotic situation! Surely, you liked one just a little better than the other?"

"Well, it seemed to me that Roberta had a more loving nature, but that Mary was perhaps a little sweeter in her disposition. Otherwise they were the same. They dressed the same, acted the same, laughed the same, spoke the same . . . oh, hell, they *were* the same. You know what twins are. They don't seem to

exist separately. You never talk of, say, 'Roberta Tarleton,' or 'Mary Tarleton,' but you say 'The Tarleton Twins.' Collectively."

"But you can't be in love with two women at once, Vernon."

"Yes, you can. It's awful. *I* know. When I was with Mary I wanted to be with Roberta, and vice versa. I couldn't really tell the difference between them. It sounds crazy to you, but practically speaking, they were one woman."

"And you say they both loved you?"

"Yes."

"Then if you found out which one loved you most, that should have solved it."

"They both loved me equally."

"Bah!"

"I tell you, yes!" Vernon's voice dropped to a whisper. "Can I trust you?"

"You've known me for about twenty-eight years."

"Well, it was like this. You remember the Tarleton house party, that summer, back in . . . oh, hell, I forget the year."

"Yes, I was there. Well?"

"Well. Between Roberta and myself, things had . . . you know."

"Developed?"

"Yes. It turned into what you might call an affair."

"Oh?"

"To be perfectly frank, it . . ."

"Went the limit?"

"Um. You remember that time we got lost in Holythorne Woods? Well, then."

"Oh."

"Of course, I said: 'Now, Roberta, darling, we must be married.' "

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"Yes. She said: 'Of course.' That was that, then, you might think. But it wasn't."

"What wasn't what?"

"That *wasn't* that. The same night, I went to bed about twelve, and read—I think it was *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes;* or no, no, it was *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*——"

"—Well, go on."

"Charlie! Brandy. Well, about two-thirty, I drop off to sleep. Something wakes me up. I was always a light sleeper. I look. It's Roberta. Well, the way things were . . . I was going to marry the girl in any case, so . . ."

"Exactly."

"Then about four o'clock, I say to her: 'Roberta, hadn't you better slip back to your room?' "

"Yes?"

"And she says: 'I'm not Roberta. I'm Mary.' "

"No!"

"Yes. And just at that moment, the door opens, and in slips Roberta. And the two sisters met, *plonk*, right on my bedroom rug."

"Good God!"

"So what would you do in a case like that?"

"Run away," I said.

"That's exactly what I did," said Vernon.

"And this was the first time you saw them, since then?"

"Yes. This afternoon. And when I caught the smell of that damned Verbena . . . hell, I was so upset, honestly, I left a baba practically untouched. Middle-aged as hell, they were, eating buttered scones. And no ill-feeling, either. Hell, what a life, what a life. I wish . . ."

"That you could have married both?"

"Exactly," said Vernon.

The Charcoal Burner

GLARING with red eyes that bulged out of blackened orbits, the charcoal burner looked more like a devil than a man. His beard, if it had been washed, would have been white; but it was so full of black dust that the fires of hell might have scorched it. The lost traveller was appalled, for a moment, by the inhuman ferocity of the old man's appearance. But the storm was rising and, between his shoulder-blades, he felt a spatter of hard snow—to employ an image belonging to our times, here were the tracer bullets of the blizzard finding their target.

"Let me in!" cried the traveller. "For God's sake, let me in!"

"Hey there, Hektor!" shouted the old man; and there appeared a great black-and-grey dog, three-parts wolf, hideously fanged.

In a breaking voice, the wayfarer said: "For the love of God, man, let me in! All I ask is to lie by your fire. A bit of bread . . . an onion . . . anything. I will pay you well. Here——" His hands were very cold, but after some fumbling he found a large silver coin—his fingers were too numb to take hold of a smaller one—and offered it.

The old charcoal burner snatched the coin, tasted it, bit it, put it away under his rags, and growled: "I

thought you were another of these tax-gatherers. Even so, I don't like company. You can come in, if you like, seeing as you pay your way; which is a devil of a long sight more than most people do. . . . Down, Hektor! . . . Ah, yes, sir, you may well look! Hektor's mother was a grey wolf. If I snapped my fingers once, he'd pin you; if I snapped them twice, he'd tear your throat out." Maliciously, the charcoal burner extended a blackened hand and took a pinch of air between thumb and second finger.

"Don't do it!" cried the visitor, watching the dog who, crouching for a spring, was growling deep in his throat.

The old man said: "You can sit by my fire, if you like. Since you've paid for it, you can have some soup."

"Thank you," said the traveller, shaking snow out of his fur cloak and coming through a stinging fog of stinking smoke towards the fire. "Some soup, yes, and shelter until daybreak. Do you happen to have something strong to drink?"

"Plum brandy—if you can pay for it," said the old man.

"Why," cried the traveller, "I have already paid you more than you could earn in three months! Get out your plum brandy this instant, you surly dog!"

"Speaking of dog . . ." said the old man, and held up conjoined thumb and second finger. Hektor snarled, crouching again. The traveller found a small coin this time, which he gave to the old man who, then, pulled as it were from out of the smoke that filled the hovel a

crockery jar half full of something that had the perfume of an autumnal orchard delicately flavoured with wood smoke. Of this the traveller drank. The charcoal burner drank, too. Scratching the place where he had put his money—under his left armpit—he said: "You are some kind of a clerk?"

"That is right," said the traveller.

"I can tell from your dress," said the old man, "and by the way you carry your sword. What is more, your cloak is of fox fur. You must be a middling high-up kind of clerk; otherwise you'd be wearing coney, or mole-skin, at the best . . . not wolfskin—oh no! There's more warmth in that than any amount of foxes. But that's fit only for the likes of me. . . . Vanity, vanity! Go on, have some more plum brandy, and eat your soup. If you want bread, you can whistle for it, because I haven't got any."

Warmed by the fire and the plum brandy, the visitor said: "You are a charcoal burner, I take it, my friend?"

"How d'you think I got so black? Weaving silk? Making tapestry? It isn't a clean trade, mister, charcoal burning. If you don't believe me, you try it and see! Have some more plum brandy, if you like. . . . Oho! Particular, are you? Go on, then—wipe the jar on your sleeve. Is it my fault I follow a dirty trade, and get all black? Drink, and pass the jar."

The visitor said: "I see that you are a misanthrope, my friend. That means to say, that you do not like your fellow creatures."

The charcoal burner replied: "I have too much to do to like my fellow creatures. All I know is the forest: out with my axe and cut and cut and cut—wood, wood, wood. Then, make my stack, light my fires, and wait and wait and wait. Fill my baskets, hump 'em into town, sell the charcoal for what I can get . . . and back again! Cut and burn and carry, carry and burn and cut. . . . I like the little trees. Tell you something—I'd as soon hew down a man as a sweet little tree." The charcoal burner drank more plum brandy. "By killing the things I love, to warm the creatures I don't like—that's how I live."

"That is life, friend," said the traveller.

"I know, and you can keep it."

"But, my friend, judging by your accent, you are not from these parts, surely?"

"No, I'm from over the Frontier. Ran away. Too much taxes. I was born and bred over there by St. Agnes's. I was comfortable enough, but they won't leave a man alone. What was it you called me just now —miserope?"

"*Misanthrope*, my friend; which means one who dislikes his fellow creatures."

"Well, you are not far wrong, you know. The more I've seen of men, the more I love my dog. I wasn't always like this, though, was I, Hektor?" The wolf-dog growled as it were in assent. The old man took another drink of plum brandy and continued:

"When I lived over by St. Agnes's, I used to be a

good-natured fellow enough, until my woman died in child-bed, and after that I kept myself to myself—cut my wood, charred my wood, sold my charcoal, made ends meet. Earned enough to keep me and my dogs. Twenty years ago this was, mind you.

"I don't mind telling you that if you hadn't shoved a little ready money through the door tonight I'd have let you go out into the storm, and be damned to you. But in those days I was full of good nature. This was in Hektor's grandmother's time. She was having a litter just about then. Her husband, the dog, was called Kuli —great big red beast—could pin a wild pig by the ear or pull down a wolf. More than half wolf himself—couldn't even bark—could only howl. . . . Have some more plum brandy? No? Well, if you won't, I will.

"One night, in a crackling frost, with the snow knee-deep, Kuli starts howling. 'That means strangers,' I says to myself. Now the nearest fellow human being lived a league or two away, by the palace, and they wasn't likely to come and visit the likes of me. So I calls Kuli, and gets my axe, and covers my ears with my cap, and I looks out. Well, up on the hill (I'm in the valley by the forest, d'you see) somebody is waving a lantern and crying for help. I says to Kuli: 'Go, mark 'em, boy; mark 'em, Kuli!' And off Kuli goes, loping like a wolf through the snow. I follow in Kuli's tracks, and they lead me to an old gentleman and a boy lost in a snowdrift. The old gentleman is carrying under his cloak a kind of a bundle. The boy is shivering in his

shoes, empty-handed. The old gentleman says: 'Lead me to St. Agnes's.' In those days, I'd do anything for anybody. D'you follow me?

" 'A matter of five hundred paces,' I says, 'follow me, gentlemen.' D'you follow me?

"So they follow me. The boy falls down. The old gentleman has his hands full with his parcels, so I slings the young 'un across my shoulders, and Kuli leads us back to my hut.

"I'm not a rich man, never have been—if I was, you understand, I wouldn't be burning charcoal in the bitter forest and coughing black. All the same, I always make ends meet——" the charcoal burner put the tips of his forefingers together, "—like *that*. One thing I always have in my hut, and that is, a good fire. Well, that year hadn't been a good one. Still, I had soup in the pot. For the sake of Christian charity—in those days, I believed in Christian charity—I chucked in my last chunk of bacon, and rubbed the boy's frozen feet with snow (*he* would have thawed them directly at the fire!) and old Kuli licked them just as the dog in the Bible licked the sores of Lazarus. . . . If you ask me, Kuli licked the boy's feet for the sake of the salt. But when the old man saw this, he burst into tears. Proud and humble, both at the same time.

"Then I put the soup into my one bowl, and they ate. Oh, but how that boy could tuck the grub away! The old man had the spoon. He sniffed and he sipped, he sipped and he sniffed, and he said: 'What do you put in

this, my poor man?' I told him—a bit of bacon, a bit of goat, a few roots. Wild garlic, essential; but first of all, throw into your pot some pig's fat and half a handful of flour. 'Fry the flour in the fat until it is brown. Then, toss in half a handful of the fruit of the sweet pepper tree, dried and ground up,' I told him, 'but not with the seeds. They'll burn your tongue. Add water—a little to begin with—stir it up, and after that sling in what you like. Anything goes.'

"By this time, the rime was melted off his cloak, and I could see that he was dressed in sable and ermine. No doubt about it, he was a Somebody. I had a little bit of plum brandy left in the house, so I offered it. I make it myself. You've tasted it. It's not bad, is it? . . . Well, the old gentleman drank, and so did the young 'un. At last, the old one got up and said: 'Now I see how the Poor live.' The frost had melted in his beard, and turned to water. He shook it out into my fire, where it hissed. Then he looked me up and down, and said:

" 'I came here, my man, to bring you gifts in honour of the season of the year . . . a haunch of venison, some wine, and fuel. The meat and the wine, unfortunately, were lost when my page Prokop dropped them into a snowdrift. The Christmas fuel, however, I have with me. Take it!' And he threw down three little pine logs. 'Not that you appear to need it,' he said, 'the heat in your hovel is suffocating. . . . Have you a timber-drag?'

"As if he didn't know: a charcoal burner without a

timber-drag, I ask you! So I nodded, and he said: 'Take my page and me home, fellow.' And what could I do but obey the old beard, since he was King Vaclav—the one they made the ballad about—the old man they call Good King Wenceslas? The following spring, he took a mistress from Wallachia, and wow, but she stung him to rights! A castle, no less, and three thousand acres o' fat land! Light head and heavy purse make light purse and heavy head. He remembered, then, how well the Poor live—meaning me—and slapped on such a heavy tax that I fled the country.

"Can you wonder that I do not welcome visitors at this time of the year?"

Drowsily, the traveller shook his head. Then he nodded. Just before he fell asleep he heard the old charcoal burner grumble: "The very idea of the old fool, bringing *me* pine logs . . ."

The Sympathetic Souse

THE Carpathians have always been the rocky-breasted wet nurse of sombre and terrible fantasy. Dracula came out of these parts in which, as the peasants whisper, crossing themselves: "The dead ride hard." Hungary, and Austria, have always been breeding grounds for vampires, werewolves, witches, warlocks, together with their bedevilments and bewitchings.

Psychoanalysis started in these parts. There are hundreds of professional psychologists (witch-doctors) from most other countries in the world who have studied under Freud, Jung, Adler, Groddeck, and the rest. Most of them go away with unblinking conviction: a species of owl stuffed with conjecture curdled into dogma. It is interesting, by the way, to observe that most of these fumblers in the dark are in a state of permanent nervous breakdown—an occupational disease you get when you try to take someone else's soul to pieces and clean it and reassemble it. No man in the world ever emptied his heart and mind in an analyst's office or anywhere else—only madmen try, who do not know what they are talking about; their candour is fantasy.

Anglo-Saxons ought to leave psychology to take care of itself. They break their hearts trying to make an

exact science of what—considering the infinite permutations and combinations of the human mind—can never crystallise out of mere philosophy. In the end, it all boils down to repetitive case-histories, reports, and other rubbish—sex in statistical tedium, with the spicy bits veiled in the obscurity of a dead language.

So, in effect, said that shrewd little mental specialist whom I will call Dr. Almuna, when I met him in a select scientific group at a cocktail party. He runs the Almuna Clinic—a polite, expensive kind of looney bin not far from Chicago—and specialises in dope fiends and alcoholics.

Almuna is good company. This cheerful man who has kept clean because he has learned how to wash his hands in any kind of water—this Almuna, a kindly cynic, believes everything and nothing. There is nothing didactic about Dr. Almuna: he admits that the more he knows he knows, the less he knows he knows.

Once, in the course of a conversation he said to me, in reply to a certain question: "I know the lobes of a brain, and have followed the convolutions of many brains, and the patterns of behaviour of many men and women. And still I cannot pretend to understand. I try, believe me! But every human brain is a separate labyrinth. He would be a lucky man who, in a lifetime, got to the heart of anybody's brain. No, no; quite simply, I do not try to explain. I treat, and endeavour to understand. The other way lies theory. Hence, fanaticism; and so delusion . . ."

On the occasion to which I have referred, when earnest professional men made a group and discussed cases, Dr. Almuna was there, cocking his head like a parrot; one eye shut; avidly attentive. Some practitioner whose name I forget was talking of a case of 'sympathetic pains'. He had investigated and thoroughly authenticated the case of a girl who, at three o'clock in the morning of January 7th, 1944, uttered a piercing shriek and cried: "I'm shot!" She pointed to a spot under the collar-bone. There, mysteriously, had appeared a small blue dot, exquisitely painful to the touch. It transpired that exactly at that moment her brother, who was serving overseas, had been struck by a bullet in that very place.

Dr. Almuna nodded, and said: "Oh, indeed, yes. Such cases are not without prececent, Doctor. But I think I can tell you of an even more extraordinary instance of physical sympathy between two brothers . . ."

Smiling over his cigar, he went on:

These two brothers, let us call them John and William, they came to me at my clinic in Vienna, in the spring of 1924, before Mr. Hitler made it imperative that I leave for foreign parts—even Chicago!

John came with his brother William. It was a plain case, open and shut, of dipsomania. Aha, but not so plain! Because there was such a sympathy between these brothers, William and John, that the weakness of the one affected the other.

William drank at least two bottles of brandy every day. John was a teetotaller—the very odour of alcohol was revolting to him. William smoked fifteen strong cigars a day. John detested the smell of tobacco smoke —it made him sick.

Yet account for this, if you like,gentlemen—William, the drunkard, and the smoker, was a harmless kind of fellow, while his brother John, the total abstainer, the non-smoker, showed every symptom of chronic alcoholism, cirrhosis of the liver, and a certain fluttering of the heart that comes of nicotine poisoning!

I do not suppose that any doctor has had the good luck to have such a case in his hands. There was William, breathing brandy and puffing cigar smoke like a steam engine, in the pink of condition; blissfully semi-comatose; happy. And there was John, with a strawberry nose, a face like a strawberry soufflé, eyes like poached eggs in pools of blood, fingers playing mysterious arpeggios all over the place—a clear case of alcoholic polyneurotic psychosis—but John had never touched a drop.

It was John who did most of the talking—the one with the strawberry nose. He said: "Dr. Almuna, for God's sake, stop him! He's killing me. He's killing himself, and he's killing me."

William said: "Pay no attention, Doc. John's a man of nerves. Me, I take things easy."

At this John cried: "Nerves! Damn you, William, you've torn mine to shreds!"

William said, quite placidly: "Give me some brandy, Doctor."

And then you would have been amazed to see the play of expression on the face of John, the plaintive one. He folded his hands and gripped them tight to stop the tremor; and I have never seen a more remarkable combination of desire and revulsion in a human countenance.

"Don't!" he said; and then: ". . . Well, Doctor, if you think it's okay . . ."

Alas, that I should say it—to an inquiring mind, however well-disposed, all men are guinea-pigs. Besides, it might be argued, who was John to say what the suave and comfortable William might, or might not, have? Experimentally, if you like, I gave William three ounces of brandy in a measured glass. It went down like a thimbleful, and he smiled at me—a smile that was pleasant to see.

And believe me or believe me not, his brother John began to retch and hiccup and blink at me with eyes out of focus, while William, having lit a strong cigar, folded his hands on his stomach and puffed smoke!

Sympathy, what? Wow, but with a vengeance!

At last, after a fit of deep coughing, and something like nausea, brother John said: "You see, Doctor? Do you see? This is what I have to put up with. William won't let me work. Do you appreciate that? He won't let me work!"

Both John and William were evidently men of substance. They had arrived in a custom-built Mercedes-

Benz, were tailored by Stolz, and carried expensive jewellery. It is true that William was covered with cigar-ash, and that his platinum watch had stopped in the afternoon of the previous day; but it was impossible not to detect a certain air of financial independence.

John, the strawberry-faced, the tremulous one, he was neat as a pin, prim, dapper. I wish I knew the laundress who got up his linen. He wore a watch-chain of gold and platinum and, on the little finger of his left hand, a gold ring set with a large diamond. There was about two carats of diamond, also, stuck in his black satin tie. . . .

How shall I describe to you this weird mixture of dandyism and unkemptness in John? It was as if someone had disturbed him in the middle of a careful toilet. His clothes were beautifully cut and carefully pressed. You might have seen your face in the mirrors of his shoes. But his hair needed trimming—it came up at the neck in little feathers—and his finger-nails were not very tidy. William was flagrantly, cheerfully—I may even say atavistically—dirty, so as to be an offence to the eye and to the nostrils. Still, he too wore well-cut clothes and jewellery: not diamonds; emeralds. Only rich men can afford to be so elegant or so slovenly.

So I asked: "Work, Mr. John? Come now, what do you mean by 'work'?"

William, rosy and contented, was smiling and nodding in a half-sleep—the picture of health and well-being. And his brother John, who had not touched a drop, was

in a state of that feverish animation which comes before the sodden sleep that leads to the black hangover.

He said: "Oh, I don't *need* to work—I mean, not in point of economy. Mother left us enough, and much more than enough. Don't you worry about your fee, Doctor——"

"You leave Mother out of this," said William. "Little rat. Always picking on Mother, poor old girl. Give us another bit of brandy, Doctor: this is a bore."

Before I could stop him, William got hold of the bottle and swallowed a quarter of a pint. He was very strong in the hands, and I had to exert myself to take the bottle away from him. After I had locked it up, it was—believe me!—it was poor John who said, in a halting voice: "I think I am going to be sick." What time William, blissfully chewing the nauseous stump of a dead cigar, was humming 'O Doña Clara,' or some such trash.

And upon my soul, gentlemen, John joined in, in spite of himself, making what is politely called 'harmony':

O Doña Clara,
Ich hab' dich tanzen gesehn,
Und deine Schoenheit
Hat mich toll gemacht . . .

Then John stopped, and began to cry.

He said: "That's all he knows, you see? You see what he is? A pig, a vulgar beast. My tastes are purely

classical. I adore Bach, I love Mozart, I worship Beethoven. William won't let me play them. He breaks my records. I can't stop him. He's stronger in the hands than I am—exercised them more. Day and night he likes to bang hot jazz out of the piano; and he won't let me think, he won't let me work—Doctor, he's killing me! What am I to do?"

William lit another green cigar and said: "Ah, cut it out, will you? . . . Why, Doc, the other day this one ordered in a record by a guy called Stravinsky, or something." He chuckled. "It said on the label, *Unbreakable*. But I bust it over his head; didn't I, Johnny? Me, I like something with a bit of life in it . . . rhythm. You know?"

John sobbed. "My hobby is painting miniatures on ivory. William won't let me. He mixes up my paints——"

"Can't stand the smell of 'em," said William.

"—Jogs my arm and, if I protest, he hits me. When I want to play music, he wants to go to sleep. Oh, but if *I* want to sleep and *he* wants to make a noise, try and stop him!"

"Let's have a little more brandy," said William.

But I said to him, solemnly: "The stuff is deadly poison to you, Mr. William. I strongly urge that you spend about three months in my sanatorium."

"I won't go," he said. "Nothing the matter with me. *I'm* okay."

"Make him go, *make* him go!" his brother screamed.

"Oh, William, William, for God's sake—for *my* sake—go to the sanatorium!"

"I'm okay," said William, cheerfully. "You're the one that needs the sanatorium. I'm not going. I'd rather stay at home and enjoy myself. A short life and a merry one. Ha?"

And the extraordinary fact of the matter was, William was, as he said, okay—liver impalpable, kidneys sound, heart in excellent condition—he, who drank two quarts of brandy every day of his life! A tongue like a baby's, eyes like stars, steady as a rock. It was John who showed the stigmata of the alcoholic and the cigar-fiend—he who had never tasted liquor or tobacco.

How do you like that for sympathy?

John whispered brokenly: "I might have tried to bear it all; only last week this sot proposed marriage to our housekeeper! Marriage! To our housekeeper! I can't bear it, I can't bear it!"

William said: "Why not? Nice woman. Johnny hates her, Doc, but she understands me. Past her prime, maybe, but comfortable to be with. Shares my tastes. Likes cheerful music. Don't say no to a highball. Cooks the way I like it—plenty of pepper, rich stuff with a lot of spice. This Johnny-boy, here, all he can take is milk and boiled weakfish. Yes, so help me, I'm going to marry Clara. . . . Sure you can't let me have another little bit of brandy, Doc? An itsy-boo?"

I said: "No. For the last time, are you sure that you won't come to my sanatorium?"

"Sure as you're sitting there," said William, while John sobbed helplessly on the sofa.

So, to conclude: The brothers John and William went out to where their great limousine was waiting in the dusk, and drove away.

Shortly afterwards, John died in delirium of cirrhosis, nephritis, dropsy, and 'the whole works'—as you put it. His brother William died soon after, and they were buried together in the Sacred Heart cemetery.

Curious, what?

The good Dr. Almuna rubbed his hands and chuckled.

A listening psychiatrist said: "Most extraordinary," and began an explanation that promised to be interminable.

But Dr. Almuna cut him short. He said: "The explanation, my dear Doctor, is an exceedingly simple one. Perhaps I failed to mention that John and William were Siamese twins, and had only one liver between them. And poor John had the thin end of it, which cirrhosed in advance of William's."

He added: "Intriguing, what? Perhaps the only case on record of a man drinking his teetotal brother to death."

Incident in a Tavern

TALK stopped when the big fellow came into the tavern. Cut-purses, cut-throats—the very scum of the earth living under the blanket of the dark—looked at him with abhorrence and fascination. He was a powerful, surly man, and although in this place there were desperate characters, room was made for him. Men stood aside, as much with respect as with loathing.

He put down a coin, and ordered ale, glowering left and right. The mistress of the house filled him a great pot, but touched his money with a tentative finger-tip, and crossed herself before she took it—whereupon the big fellow scowled, and looked about him.

A man with a smashed face nudged his companion to his feet, saying: "Home, John. All of a sudden this place stinks."

The newcomer said to him: "Not so strong as you will, Frank, a little while after I have done with you!" And, moodily, he drank his ale. Yet, in spite of this man's gloomy truculence, he had the air of someone who has, in a manner of speaking, brought off a good deal. His manner was somehow triumphant.

Soon, there came a little obsequious man who, looking with some trepidation at the others now talking in

whispers, said: "Hello, Alleyn. Please to have some ale?"

The big one looked down at him and, with something between a snarl and a smile, said: "What, you, Harry?" Yet the scorn with which he regarded the little man was not unmixed with wistfulness. The newcomer was lonely, desperately lonely. He could not conceal his yearning for the company of his fellow men; but at the same time he could not keep the mockery and the disdain out of his voice, as he said: "Is your back healed, Harry?"

"Yes, Alleyn," said the obsequious little man, with an odious snigger.

"Let it not come under my hand again, little man! I could have broken your little back, if I had wished. . . . A man like *me* to waste his sweat on a dog like you! Oh, hell!"

"It was a year ago," the little man said, "and when the rain is in the air, Alleyn, I still feel that flogging. *Ow*!—but you can lay it on hard!"

The man called Alleyn said: "Do you call that hard, you worm? Why, I laid it on soft, if you want to know, just out of spite. Spite against whom? Spite against the King. I am paid to do my work with all my might. By rights, little fellow, I should have cut you to ribbons for a rogue and a vagabond and a masterless man. Thank your lucky stars my heart was not in it, or you mightn't be standing up so straight, now, round-shouldered cadger as you are."

Harry said, with a detestable squirm: "Ah, Alleyn, there's no justice in the world, is there, now? I swear to you, my blood boiled; it wasn't fair, Alleyn—you know, it was unfair to an Englishman to bring in a foreign craftsman. I'll tell you something: I'd rather be flogged at the cart's tail by a good English hangman than healed with ointment by a damned French barber. Have some more ale."

Alleyn laughed grimly. "You have that Frenchman to thank, that you're walking now," he said. "He took my mind off my work. . . . You should be honoured, you pig, to have been flogged by a man like me! With these two hands I have drawn and quartered the nobility and gentry. And to use them on muck like you!"

The obsequious little man smiled sideways, as he said: "I'm sure, Alleyn, I appreciate. . . . Have some more ale?"

"Yes. I will. I don't know where you stole the money, but if they catch you, this time I'll have to hang you for it. Don't get caught, is all I advise. Unless you coined the money, in which case (you know what the penalty for coining is) I'd get something like a decent fee for boiling you." Alleyn drank some more ale. "I'll tell you what," he said, with sulky passion, "these damned foreigners will be the ruin of England!"

At this, four or five drinkers emptied their pots and hurried out: it was not wise to be heard listening to such talk. Alleyn, somewhat drunk, went on: "For instance, the Flemish weavers. Oh, well, it may be they're

necessary. That's not for the likes of me to say. . . . Some more ale, here! . . . No, it's not for me to say about weavers, and so on. But what I say is this: that when we bring in our executioners from abroad, to take the bread out of the mouths of honest Englishmen, the country is going to the devil."

The little man, Harry, laughed: "He-he-he!"

Alleyn said: "Stop laughing. It was only because they brought in a damned French headsman to execute Queen Ann Bullen in preference over me, that my mind was taken off your bloody back, you little rogue. Don't you laugh, or I'll wipe that laugh off your face with the back of my nief."

Ordering more ale, the little man said, in his placatory way: "Why, Alleyn, everybody knows you were hard done by. It's an insult to England to have a Frenchman execute an English queen. Still, there are, as you might say, compensations. It isn't every day—is it? —you get the chance to behead a Lord Chancellor of England, like you did today. Come now, is it?"

Alleyn, the executioner, struck the little man in the face. Getting up off the floor—still obsequious—Harry asked: "What was that for?"

Alleyn said: "Nothing." He pounded the counter with his pot, and called for more ale. His face was savage, but sad. He mumbled into his beard: "I get all the dirty work. He was a nice old gentleman, and game. I like a man to die game. He had a long white beard, like my father. A joker, too. Bit weak on his legs. I

won't forget, in a hurry, what he said when he was going up the steps: 'Master Hangman, help me up, and for my going down I will fend for myself.' And then, pulling back his collar: 'Strike hard, for I am somewhat thick in the neck.' Game to the last. On the block he pushed his beard out of the way, and said: '*It* has done no treason.' And by God, for the first time in my life, I fumbled the axe. Sir Thomas More was a man . . ."

Wiping some blood from his face, the obsequious little man said: "No, but joking aside, you ought to have had the job of taking Ann Bullen's head off last year. But patience. Big Harry will provide plenty of work for the likes of you, Alleyn. Put it which way you like, His Majesty is respectable man, a gentleman to the marrow. He marries 'em first."

Alleyn looked down at him steadily. He was in that dangerous, reasonable stage of drunkenness. "Respectable, is he? I'll tell you something, friend Harry: the devil put an enemy in your mouth to steal your wits away. The tongue has no bones, but it's strong enough to break your neck. Look to yourself!"

So saying, Alleyn strode out of the tavern. The little man, making a broken gesture, looked about him. He saw only stolid, blank faces. "Now what have I said that was wrong?" he asked the company.

Nobody answered, except the mistress of the house, who said: "Get out of here and don't come back again. Better get out of London. Talking of the King that way! Sedition. Be off!"

The little man slunk away. "I am bound, by Law, to serve everybody," said the mistress of the tavern, "but I wish I had a better class of customer."

The atmosphere being, now, easier, conversation was resumed; and the incident was soon forgotten.

The End of a Wise Guy

IN all my professional experience I never found a more fantastic story than the one I stumbled over in Northamptonshire, which is one of the flattest, quietest, and—at certain times of the year, dreariest—counties in England.

The second part is demonstrably true: I have refreshed my memory of it by referring to documents got together and superbly edited by Helena Normanton, Barrister-at-Law of the Middle Temple, of the North-East Circuit, and of the Central Criminal Court. Helena Normanton is also an honorary member of the New York Women's Bar Association.

Helena Normanton's admirable work, from which I have taken most of the facts connected with the second part of my story, is available in the *Notable British Trials* series, published by William Hodge and Company, of Edinburgh and London.

For obvious reasons I cannot publish the name of the unhappy woman who told me that which makes this story wonderful. She is a little criminal, a very little criminal, who, in 1943, was nearly finished. She was about fifty-three years old then, and appeared to be at least sixty-five. Hers had been a squalid, miserable life.

She was a servant girl, out of an orphanage when she was fourteen years of age. She got into trouble—or rather was got into trouble—ran away, took to stealing, served a sentence or two in jail, took to drink, and went down and down to the devil.

When I met her, in the few dreary hours I had to spend in Northampton, she was one of the walking dead —sick and tired, tired out, used up. Her name may not be printed. There is a chance that she was lying, to get the few shillings she asked me for and got. I don't know. But I do know that what she swore is true dovetails neatly with what I know is true. So you must regard this story as half fiction, because I cannot lay my hand on the Book and swear to the truth of the whole of it.

It begins with what was supposed to be the death of a racketeer in 1926—a gangster who, under one name or another, must have been known to the American police. His real name, the woman told me, was Pepper.

He was born in the north of England, where he took to crime at an early age. This boy Pepper was highly regarded by his schoolteachers. He had a natural gift for arithmetic, a head for figures, and might have made a career for himself, but there was something wrong with him. He liked to steal.

Pepper was turned loose when he was seventeen and a half years old; whereupon he stole his mother's savings and went to Canada. When he was twenty-three, it is on record that he was convicted, in Detroit, of mayhem,

after a robbery in a delicatessen store. He was released on bail, jumped bail and disappeared.

Then he married, robbed, and deserted a prosperous widow whose twenty thousand dollars he had taken away to 'invest.' She never prosecuted. Pepper was jailed in California less than a year later for passing a bad cheque. After his release from jail he made his way northward. There was some affair, touching the matter of carrying a gun without a licence, in Oregon, I believe. Soon after that he made his way to Chicago, and found a place in Al Capone's gigantic organisation.

He had never forgotten his arithmetic. The woman who told me all this was by no means sure of her facts; but it appears that Pepper graduated from common keeper-of-accounts to one of Capone's lieutenants, and became a great Collector in his own right, known to his friends as English Peppino.

I am informed that Al Capone disapproved of habitual drinkers. He was wise: the man who flogs his nervous system with drugs is unreliable. He is not fit to hold a position in an organisation dependent upon calm, stolid silence.

While he was with Capone, Pepper (or English Peppino, or whatever he called himself at that time) dared not drink. Still, he was a drunkard at heart. But it is unlikely that he drank, even secretly, because certain kinds of organised lawlessness have their own rigid laws and terrible disciplines. A gangster may not be a talker: a drinker tends to talk, to open his heart;

there is no place for the open heart and the open mouth in organisations like Capone's.

I can see the irritation of Pepper, perpetually watched, yearning for the unbuttoned freedom of the bar-room, and I can feel something of his trepidation when he looked into the flat black eyes of the men that were watching him while he pretended to need nothing but the big money that was coming his way.

For he had become prosperous. He was well dressed, and wore a three-carat diamond ring. Al Capone himself had given Pepper a crocodile-skin belt, the buckle of which was of solid gold set with his initials in little diamonds—and a cigarette-case to match.

Still Pepper was not happy. He wanted to be free to get drunk when he pleased. He hated law and order, and had found that the laws that govern the lives of the men who put themselves beyond the law of law-abiding men are terrible, rigorous, inescapable. The Night has a thousand eyes. The Underworld, because it is afraid, is watchful. It is hard to get out of the dark, once you have got into it.

Nevertheless, Pepper escaped.

He had, as it is calculated, nearly thirty thousand dollars of his own, in cash. His personal jewellery was worth two or three thousand dollars. He was drifting out of Capone's favour, but was not yet discredited.

Pepper had received, from various sources, fifty thousand dollars, which had to be given to his master. This money, in small bills, neatly arranged, was packed

in a brief-case. Pepper's private fortune was stowed away in a belt buckled about his middle, under his underclothes. He felt that the end was not far away, and was wildly casting about to find some way of escape when, in Illinois, God (as Pepper is supposed to have said, being a religious man at heart), God, or the devil, showed him a way to salvation.

There was at that time a wretched man called Moti, who was a nark or stool pigeon. Moti wanted to go away—to go anywhere a long way from where he happened to be. Pepper had had certain dealings with Moti. They met by chance on the highway. Moti made a gesture with his thumb, begging for a lift. When he saw that the driver of the Cadillac was Pepper, or English Peppino, Moti almost fainted out of sheer terror, but Pepper reassured him, saying that he quite understood Moti's attitude.

"You're a pal," said Moti.

"Forget it. How are you fixed?" said Pepper.

Moti shrugged, and Pepper gave him two ten-dollar bills, two fives, and five one-dollar bills. Then, waving away all Moti's expressions of gratitude, he said: "Come along. If you want to know, between you and me . . . now is this under your hat?"

"I swear!"

"Well, Moti, I'm getting the hell out of it myself."

Moti looked at Pepper as he might have looked at an angel out of heaven, and climbed into the car.

Pepper boasted of this to the woman who told me the

story. "This Moti," said Pepper, with a leer, a laugh, and a nudge, "was about my size—see? Well, I ask you —what would you do in a case like that?"

The road was empty. There are great flatnesses and emptinesses in the state of Illinois. After they had travelled twenty or thirty miles, Pepper stopped the car and said: "Pardon me just one minute."

Moti said: "You bet."

Then Pepper went to the back of the car, took out his revolver, and knocked Moti senseless with a quick back-handed blow. The woman told me that Pepper's blow killed Moti. I hope so, because he put his ring on Moti's finger, dropped his cigarette-case into Moti's pocket, buckled his belt about Moti's waist, not forgetting to take away the poor little two-dollar belt that held up Moti's trousers, turned a tap, started the engine, over-turned a five-gallon tin of petrol, threw a lighted match, and ran away into the shadows as a twenty-foot pillar of fire went roaring up and the Cadillac became an incinerator.

Pepper lay very still in the shadow of a hillock. He was big with triumph. Soon, a farmer would see a red-ness in the sky. The police would come. But by then the body of Moti would be unidentifiable charcoal; and out of the ashes of Pepper's car detectives would scrape Pepper's diamond buckle, cigarette-case, and ring.

Even as Pepper laughed alone in the dark, he bit his lip and struck himself in the face with an open

hand. He had forgotten to take out the brief-case full of money.

For a little while he gnawed his nails, thinking of fifty thousand dollars in the fire. Soon, growing reasonable, he said to himself: *Why, that just about clinches it. The police will rake over the ashes. They might stop to wonder about the belt buckle, the cigarette-case, and the ring. But who leaves fifty thousand dollars to burn? Why, of course, that was a good move. When they find what is left in what is left of the brief-case (the Treasury can identify good money by its ashes) then they'll know that must have been me, roasted in that Cadillac.*

I am convinced that Pepper persuaded himself then that he had not forgotten to take the money away, but had left it in the burning car because it was clever to leave it there. As he lay in the cover of the dead ground, watching the diminishing fire, he congratulated himself.

The flames flickered down and when the fiercest of them was only five feet high the police came and the road was full of men in uniform, and the night was vibrant with sirens. Even then they could not approach the red-hot Cadillac, and did what they could from a distance of eight or nine feet, with small portable fire-extinguishers.

When the glowing, twisted metal was cool enough to touch, the remains of a man were found: mere animal charcoal.

Pepper had the good sense to lie still. He regretted the loss of the fifty thousand dollars in the brief-case, but was comforted when he thought of the thirty thousand

dollars in his belt. He crept away before dawn, when everything was quiet.

By devious routes he reached Canada. In Windsor, Ontario, he read in a Chicago paper a dramatised account of his own death. MOBSMAN DIES IN HOLOCAUST . . . CAPONE HENCHMAN FOUND DEAD IN BURNT CAR.

Then Pepper shook with silent laughter.

He had escaped.

He grew a moustache and lived for a while in alcoholic solitude. In Montreal he met a foolish man who liked to play poker; won a thousand dollars one Tuesday evening, offered his unlucky opponent revenge on the Wednesday, and awoke Thursday afternoon seven thousand dollars to the bad.

He went eastward, and paid a heavy price for a passage to England from Quebec City. Pepper landed in England with three thousand pounds—fifteen thousand dollars—in his pocket, and went to London where he met a simple-minded Scandinavian named Lofoten, who had several thousand pounds to invest.

Lofoten was a fool. Pepper was an arithmetician. The unhappy Lofoten had a deposit of pitchblende in Iceland, and needed moral and financial support. Lofoten had only six or seven thousand pounds of his own to put into the proposition.

Pepper, thanking God for a fool, played the simple Scandinavian for all he was worth, and recruited a man named Varga, whom he happened to meet in the

lobby of the hotel in which Lofoten was staying.

Everything was arranged. Varga was to deposit seven thousand pounds. Lofoten had to deposit five thousand pounds. Pepper put down only three thousand pounds. He and Varga should have got away comfortably with Lofoten's money. But Lofoten and Varga disappeared with his.

He drifted from the Savoy Hotel to cheap hotels near Leicester Square, and in Bloomsbury. Pepper kept his clothes and for a time haunted the barren hotels near Russell Square, posing as an American eccentric . . . a Texan cattle man . . . an Oklahoma oil man . . . a Michigan patentee who knew how to save sixty-three per cent of the cost of running a car.

Pepper was a failure. He managed, somehow, in a cheap hotel near Russell Square, to convince an old lady —a clergyman's widow—that there was a better way of investing her five hundred pounds than in opening a tea shop; and so he left London with five hundred pounds and went to Bristol, where he tried to convince a prosperous merchant that he had a new process for the refining of sugar. The merchant was no fool. Pepper left Bristol in a desperate hurry.

He went north; he wandered south-eastward; was charged with the theft of an overcoat from a car in Hampshire, and acquitted; and then, six or seven months later, took up with the woman who told me his story in Northampton.

She, poor devil, was a weak-minded creature, easily

convinced. Pepper had had money. His manner demonstrated that he was accustomed to attention. She loved him.

He was full of great schemes. He needed nothing but a little capital which, in one way and another, she tried to give him. It makes a picture in my head: I see her slinking home, sinking into a greasy easy chair, looking up at him with adoring eyes, and emptying her purse into his unsteady hand.

The quivering fingers close instinctively over the half-crowns, two-shilling pieces, ten-shilling notes, and sixpences. Then Pepper struts and frets, talks of great things, talks himself into believing in these great things, suggests that it would be a good thing to celebrate a little—considering that there will be a fortune coming the day after tomorrow—and takes her out.

At about ten o'clock the next morning they are awake. Pepper's quivering hand finds one shilling and two pennies in one of his trousers' pockets. He cries a little, and tells her to go and buy two new laid eggs, and not to forget to bring back the change. The eggs are fried in the fat in which the kippered herrings were cooked the day before yesterday, and eaten with stale bread, while Pepper, reviving, talks of vast projects. . . .

It is an ugly picture. The woman believed his stories of big money yet to come. She saw him as a gentleman, a clever gentleman. There was, at that time, no way of shaking her faith in him. She wanted to provide for him.

He left their room at noon every day, saying that he was going to see a man about this, that, or the other, taking whatever small change she happened to have in her purse. In point of fact, as she was to learn later on, he steadied himself with a drink and then haunted the public bars, looking for someone from whom he might beg or borrow the price of another drink.

By this time he was no longer elegant. He was dressed in a fifty-shilling suit which she had paid for six months before, and had lost his hat. It irritated and bored him to shave in the morning.

On November 3rd, 1930, he came home and said that he had 'found a mug'—these are the woman's words. He had met a man near The Swan and Pyramid, a public house in Whetstone High Road, and this man had given him money and bought him drinks. The mug, said Pepper, laughing heartily, drank nothing but lemonade.

The woman said: "I'm glad of that. I haven't got a penny, and I'm hungry. Are you hungry?"

"No," said Pepper, "but I've got something for you. You know what it is the day after tomorrow? Guy Fawkes' Day!" He knew that she loved him for his 'education,' as she called it. He continued: "In the year 16 . . . 16 . . . 16 something, a man called Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the House of Parliament, and ever since then, on November the fifth, we burn him . . . in effigy. We burn him, I say——"

"How much did he give you, dear?"

"Half a crown."

"Give it to me, dear, and I'll run out and get you——"

"You'll run out and get me nothing. I have brought you something," said Pepper, and pulled out of his pockets two handfuls of fire crackers, stammering: "Celebrate . . . Guy Fawkes' Day . . . the fifth of November . . .

"Please to remember
The fifth of November,
Gunpowder, treason and plot . . ."

"Do you mean to say you spent the whole half-crown on dirty, rotten fireworks?" she asked. (I omit the other things she said.)

"Now take it easy," said Pepper. "This guy is a sucker. He's lousy with money—he's rolling in it. He's taken a fancy to me. He offered me a lift to Leicester on Wednesday night. I tell you, he's got the dough. I didn't tell him my name. I'm no sucker, see? I put on an act. I told this feller I was a working man. And, look at me, God damn it, don't I look like one in these clothes?"

The woman said: "I do my best for you, dear."

"Sure, I know you do. Well, I told him I was looking for a job, see? Trying to get work around Peterborough, and Hull, and all that baloney. So this mug says do I want a lift to Leicester, because he's going to Leicester Wednesday night. Listen, honey, I'm going to Leicester

Wednesday night. And I'll be back Friday morning with a pocket full of dough. So sit tight and keep your mouth shut."

So, at eight o'clock on Wednesday night, November 5th, 1930, Pepper met the benevolent stranger at The Swan and Pyramid in Whetstone High Road, and after several drinks they drove away.

Pepper was last seen by a lady in Buxted Road.

I have no doubt that Pepper contemplated robbery with violence. It is conceivable, even, that in his drunken exhilaration he hoped to repeat his procedure with Moti in Illinois.

But the lemonade-drinking driver of the car was a man named Alfred Arthur Rouse, a fascinating travelling salesman who, having married more wives and acquired more mistresses than he could reasonably be expected to cope with, startled England with what the newspapers called 'The Blazing Car Mystery' in 1930.

Rouse wanted to disappear. The appearance of a wandering hobo just before Guy Fawkes' Day must have made him feel that Providence was on his side.

On the fifth of November, bonfires blaze all night in England. One bonfire more or less is not likely to be noticed. Rouse picked up an unknown man, strangled him near Hardingstone and, having poured petrol over him, burnt him beyond recognition in his car.

He was tried within the County Hall, Northampton, on the 26th January, 1931. Mr. Justice Talbot was the judge. The terrible Norman Birkett, and Mr. Richard

Elwes, instructed by the Director of Public Prosecutions, were for the Crown. Mr. Douglas L. Finnemore and Mr. A. F. Marshall were Counsel for the Defence.

Alfred Arthur Rouse was convicted of murder. Mr. Justice Talbot said: "You have been found guilty of that crime for which the law appoints one sentence and one sentence only. It is that sentence which I now pronounce upon you. Which is that you be taken from hence to a place of lawful execution, and you be there hung by the neck until you be dead, and that your body be afterwards buried within the precincts of the prison in which you shall last have been confined. And may God have mercy on your soul."

Rouse appealed, lied to the last; and before the end confessed. This is his confession, published in the *Daily Sketch* on the eleventh of March, 1931—the day after he was hanged at Bedford:

". . . I tried to hit on something new. I did not want to do murder just for the sake of it.

"I was in a tangle in various ways. Nellie Tucker was expecting another child of which I would be the father and I was expecting to hear from 'Paddy' Jenkins similar news. There were other difficulties and I was fed up. I wanted to start afresh.

"I let the matter drop from my mind for a while, but in the autumn of last year something happened which made me think again.

"A man spoke to me near The Swan and Pyramid public-house in Whetstone High Road. He was a down-and-out, and told the usual hard-luck story. I took him into the public-house and he had some beer. I had lemonade. Of course, I paid for the drinks.

"He told me he usually hung about there. I met him once again and stood him a couple of drinks. He did not tell me his name, but he did say that he had no relations, and was looking for work. He said he had been to Peterborough, Norwich, Hull, and other places trying to get work, and that he was in the habit of getting lifts on lorries.

"He was the sort of man no one would miss, and I thought he would suit the plan I had in mind. I worked out the whole thing in my mind, and as it was then early in November, I suddenly realised that I should do it on November the fifth, which was Bonfire Night, when a fire would not be noticed so much.

"I think it was on November 2nd or 3rd that I searched out the man. He was having a drink of beer and we talked. When I said that I intended to go to Leicester on the Wednesday night he said he would be glad of a lift up there. This was what I thought he would say.

"I made an appointment with him for the Wednesday night for about eight o'clock. I met him outside The Swan and Pyramid, and we went into the bar. He had more beer, and again I had lemonade.

"I asked him if he would like something to drink on the journey, and he said he would. I bought a bottle of whisky. Then we both got into the car, which was outside the public-house.

"We drove first of all to my house in Buxted Road. I got out, leaving the man in the car. My wife was in. She had seen me draw up near the house and she asked me who it was I had in the car. I said it was a man I knew, but she suspected that it was a woman.

"I said: 'All right. I'll drive close up in front of the house, as I am turning round, to let you see that it is a man.'

"I did so, as I drove out of Buxted Road, so that my wife could see for herself and would have no grounds for jealousy.

"So far as I remember, it was about eight-thirty when I started off for the north with a man in the car, though I might be mistaken about the time. I drove slowly because I wanted it to be late when I did what I had in mind. I don't think I travelled more than fifteen miles an hour.

"I stopped at St. Albans partly for a rest and partly to fill in the time. The man switched out the lights by mistake and a policeman spoke to me, as is already well known.

"During the journey the man drank the whisky neat from the bottle and was getting quite fuzzled. We talked a lot, but he did not tell me who he actually was. I did not care.

"I turned into the Hardingstone Lane because it was quiet and near a main road, where I could get a lift from a lorry afterwards. I pulled the car up.

"The man was half-dozing—the effect of the whisky. I looked at him and then gripped him by the throat with my right hand. I pressed his head against the back of the seat. He slid down, his hat falling off. I saw he had a bald patch on the crown of his head.

"He just gurgled. I pressed his throat hard. My grip is very strong.

"I used my right hand only because it is very powerful. People have always said that I have a terrific grip. He did not resist. It was all very sudden. The man did not realise what was happening. I pushed his face back. After making a peculiar noise, the man was silent and I thought he was dead or unconscious.

"Then I got out of the car, taking my attaché-case, the can of petrol, and the mallet with me. I walked about ten yards in front of the car and opened the can, using the mallet to do so. I threw the mallet away and made a trail of petrol to the car. I took the mallet away with one purpose in view.

"Also, I poured petrol over the man and loosened the petrol union joint and took the top off the carburettor. I put the petrol can in the back of the car.

"I ran to the beginning of the petrol trail and put a match to it. The flame rushed to the car, which caught fire at once.

"Petrol was leaking from the bottom of the car.

That was the petrol I had poured over the man and the petrol that was dripping from the union joint and carburettor.

"The fire was very quick, and the whole thing was a mass of flames in a few seconds. I ran away. I was running when I came near the two men, but I started to walk then. It is not true that I came out of the ditch when the men saw me. I was on the grass verge. I did shout to them that there must be 'a bonfire over there.'

"I did not expect to see anyone in the lane at that time of night. It surprised me and I decided to change my plans.

"I had intended to walk through Northampton and to get a train to Scotland. But when the men saw me I hesitated and went the other way. The men were right when they said they saw me hesitate.

"I left my hat in the car. When I was driving, I nearly always did so with my hat off. I forgot, in the excitement, to take it out of the car.

"I went to Wales because I had to go somewhere, and I did not know what to do. I did not think there would be much fuss in the papers about the thing, but pictures of the car with long accounts were published, and I left Wales.

"I was not going to Scotland, as I said. I just went back to London because I thought it was the best thing to do. London is big.

"In my attaché-case was my identity disc, which

the police still have. I intended to put it on the man in the car so that people would think it was me. I forgot to do so.

"I knew that no one would find out that the man had been strangled, because the fire would be so fierce that no traces of that would be left.

"I am not able to give any more help regarding the man who was burned in the car. I never asked him his name. There was no reason why I should do so."

If what the woman said was true, the man in the car was Pepper. "He was a clever one," she said. "He was a gentleman. I'm glad that man Rouse got the rope."

The Dancing Doll

"IN your shallow and filthy horse ponds," said Leonardo da Vinci to the young Duke, "there lives a certain maggot or larva. It is most interesting. I have observed it closely. It has a tail like a whip——"

"Oh, damn your miserable grubs!" cried the young Duke. "My race is threatened with extinction, and here he talks of larvæ, worms, grubs, maggots! Ser Leonardo, make me some sense, or else!"

Leonardo da Vinci, smoothing his blond beard, said: "Your Magnificence's race is threatened with extinction. Just so. Pardon, pardon; I forgot—your son is ill. It is as I foresaw. He has the flux that comes from the dirty water of this place, together with the fever out of the swamps. That fever, that intermittent fever with delirium! How often have I seen it in the Abruzzi, or in the Campagna, where the mosquitoes are!"

"Here he goes again, with his insects!" cried the Duke. "What, am I to kill flies, with an armed enemy at my gates!"

Leonardo said: "Magnifico, all flesh is grass. All grass is water. Let us not go into this matter again, until you are calm enough to consider it objectively. I am at fault, and I beg pardon. You have great affairs upon your mind—and I talk of insects."

The Duke said: "Great affairs! You aren't far wrong. The enemy is over the river, and my little Ercole is dying. . . . Easy for you, fellow, to talk of my affairs! I can capitulate, yes; but then—what? If only the dogs would fight in the open, like men! Even a siege, even a war of attrition, I could bear, if it were not for my little Ercole." He gripped Leonardo by the shoulder and shouted: "My son, damn you! My son—save me my son!—and let the enemy come in."

Leonardo da Vinci said: "Be calm, Magnifico. The little boy will live. He has swamp fever. It is necessary only to keep him warm——"

"Warm? The child burns, and you say: 'Keep him warm.' "

"Keep him warm, and give him hot infusions, together with as much water as he can drink. To every cup of water add a pinch or two of salt," said Leonardo. His hands were busy, meanwhile, with a sheet of parchment, and a pen-knife.

"And you can only talk of maggots!" said the Duke. "I have half a mind——"

" To hang me up? You have the right, Magnifico; but don't do it! Wait a bit. . . . Touching the matter of these grubs, or maggots—these larvæ—be pleased to let me finish."

The Duke started up in exacerbated fury, but da Vinci waved him back to his seat with a gesture so imperious that the Duke, sitting down in spite of himself, muttered "Who is the master here?"

Leonardo da Vinci continued, still cutting shapes out of the parchment: "Now, it is written in the Vulgate that Samson found a hive of bees in the carcass of the lion he tore asunder. This, of course, could not be, because bees are clean creatures, and do not breed in carrion."

"Well? Make your point, man, make your point!"

Unperturbed, the other man went on: "I say, the insects Samson found in the carcass of the lion were not bees, but drone flies."

"But what has this to do with——"

"Oh, please! Allow me to finish, Magnifico. This drone fly, such as we see in such numbers on our battle-fields, is the product of a certain grub, after it has pupated. . . . Be patient with me for a while. This grub, which is about as long as the middle joint of your forefinger, but only a quarter as thick—the grub that becomes the drone-fly—lives, as I have observed, at the bottom of any foul pond."

"What are you cutting out there?" the Duke asked.

"Oh, a head, torso, and limbs . . . then, I will paint them, and make a little marionette. The limbs, as you will see, will be divided in three. Each to each, I will join them with a tiny knotted string. Then, running my string down the back, and connecting it with the knots at the neck, shoulders, and hips, your son will have a little man who will dance on a thread . . ."

"I don't quite see that," said the Duke.

"You will, Magnifico, in ten minutes," said Leonardo, mixing colours. "The boy needs the wherewithal to

occupy his little mind. Well, well, he shall have a soldier in red and blue, who dances. . . . Patience, Magnifico—it will be done in no time at all, no time at all."

The Duke came to look over Leonardo's shoulder. "Your hands are as quick as flies," he said, with admiration.

"Flies? Oh, yes, as I was saying—these grubs of the drone fly, I have watched them. They live in the muck at the bottom of one of your horse ponds, and grow from their bodies a thing like a hair which is, in fact, a fine tube. Through this tube they draw down air. Do you begin to follow me?"

"I never know what is in your mind. On the one hand you devise dancing dolls, and on the other you talk about drone flies. Go on, Ser Leonardo, and then I may follow you."

"It makes itself apparent, therefore, that what may apply to a maggot may similarly be applicable to a man. And here is where it comes close to Your Magnificence's business."

"How so?"

Da Vinci said: "Why, the enemy has chosen a fine strategic position. He has arranged his artillery at the foot of a precipice, so that you must cross five hundred yards of river, twenty feet deep, to attack him. You have made five attempts, always without success. You can hold out against a siege, for two years. Oh, yes! But who knows what may happen in the meantime?

Times change fast these days, Magnifico." Leonardo da Vinci could not be bothered to remember the enemy's name. He said: "Smash what's-his-name and his condottieri now, and who knows what comes? . . . It reduces itself to the filthy little maggots in your ponds."

"No metaphysics!" said the Duke, imperiously. "This, I don't understand."

"Oh, but here are no metaphysics," said Leonardo, "only plain sense, upon my word. Get your smiths to work under my direction, and I promise you that I will get you two hundred men, fully armed, over the river. It is very simple, Magnifico. Follow the worm, learn from the maggot, take example from that which is most humble. Ask yourself: *How does the lowliest survive?* You will find that it survives, and ultimately conquers, by lying low. There is a lesson to be learned from the snail that creeps under his armour, and from the limpet that sucks himself to the rock. For the time being, Magnifico, be guided by the drone fly who will, one of these days, breed in our lions' carcasses!"

"What a fine hand you have with a knot!" said the young Duke.

"Magnifico, a clip to close the nose, an air-tube of oiled linen kept above the surface of the river by a cork float on a calm, dark night; and I win you a battle!" cried Leonardo da Vinci.

"Yes, yes, yes—in a minute, in a minute!" cried the young Duke. "You muddle my head, skimming here,

there, and everywhere, all at the same time, like a water-skipper on a pond. There now, he has got *me* talking about his filthy insects! . . . First things first, Ser Leonardo. Finish what you are doing. I cannot, for the life of me, quite understand how this dancing doll of yours will work."

With a sigh, Leonardo da Vinci explained: "Much as you or I work, Magnifico, only somewhat less intricate and marvellous. See, a jerk at the thread at the back of the head brings into play other connected threads, and the doll dances."

The toy being finished and crudely coloured, he demonstrated the working of it. Delighted, the Duke snatched it from him and ran out of the room. Abstractedly, on the remains of the parchment, Leonardo da Vinci, with his silver pencil, made a rough diagram. It represented the head and shoulders of a man, wearing a peculiar mask which covered his nose and mouth, and was fastened with a buckle at the back of his skull. From the centre of this mask protruded a jointed tube which went up vertically, terminating in a large cork disc like a fisherman's float. To indicate that this man was under water, he added a fish and (he always loved the fantastic) a squid.

This engrossed him. He began to think of the Cave of Dogs, which is filled, to a certain level, with carbon dioxide, so that a man may walk in it without danger, while the dog at his heels will die, asphyxiated. He thought: *For any considerable period under the water, a man*

would need two tubes; one to inhale through, and the other to exhale through . . . since air, once breathed, puts out the little candle that burns within us. . . Wait a moment, now! A helmet, perhaps? The water spider makes a bubble, and carries her atmosphere with her into the depths. Then, why not——

But then the young Duke came back. He took from his finger a gold ring set with rubies and pearls, and gave it to Leonardo, saying: "My little Ercole is crowing like a young cock over your dancing doll. Thanks. You must make him some more, Leonardo *mio*!"

"Now, touching the matter of breathing under the water," said Leonardo da Vinci. "Since there is only a matter of five hundred paces to go, and no great depth of river—and, at this season of the year, no strong current —pick yourself only fifty good men. Mask them, and provide them with breathing tubes, such as I have drawn here, and on the next moonless night march them across the river into the enemy's camp. Preferably, two hours before dawn, when life ebbs and fear hangs heavy. Then, fall on them like Gideon, and you will cut them to pieces."

The Duke said: "Well, perhaps there is no harm in trying . . ."

Five days later he put Leonardo da Vinci's scheme into practice. One of his captains led fifty tried men-at-arms across the river, breathing through jointed reeds covered with oiled linen. They came out of the water like demons, being half-crazed with fear of the dark,

cold depths, and charged where the camp fires burned brightest. They scattered the terrified mercenaries of the enemy, and took the camp. The battle was won.

Leonardo da Vinci waited for his patron to fill his cupped hands with gold. But the young Duke, though in high good humour, spoke to him almost severely:

"I have been speaking to Dr. Theophrastus about that trick of yours under water. Beetles do it. Spiders do it. Anyway, Pliny thought of it a thousand years ago. Here is work more in your line: paint me a picture of my little Ercole playing with that dancing doll of yours, and I will pay you well."

So Leonardo da Vinci put the diagrams of his diving suits into a portfolio, and went back to his brushes and pigments, thinking: *It would be possible to put fifty men-at-arms into a kind of brass carcase. . . .*

He was about to invent a submarine, only he did not have the time to spare.

Buried Treasure

YOU may like sordid realism or wild fantasy, sticky romance or spicy sex drama, horror or rosebuds, love or hate, misery or joy—the greatest composer of stories is life itself, and the greatest teller of stories is the man who clings faithfully to life as it is lived. The most ingenious and tortuous brilliance of man can never equal the overwhelming creative combinations of the living moment.

Truth is not only stranger than fiction, it is infinitely greater; for the finest fiction can never be more than an interpretation or a reflection of something real, and the fact must always be more vital than its image. There are in existence certain sets of peculiar charts in which every possible permutation and combination of every situation in fiction is carefully laid out. Men rack their brains to discover new angles, new twists, little crumbs of novelty that may make old plots go down more smoothly. A great deal of the craft of fiction is, in effect, the discovering of new spices and sauces with which one may disguise the familiar flavours of the three or four brands of butcher's meat that make up everyday life.

The story that I am going to tell you today comes, I assure you, direct from its source. Yet I have, at the back of my mind, a feeling that I have heard it before.

Never mind. As far as I am concerned, it is true; inasmuch as I had it from the man who intended to make it true.

I met him in London a few years ago. He was, as one says, getting on in years. I do not believe that he was as old as he looked. He was one of those little men, that shrivel very quickly. He might have been fifty, or even sixty. He was, I fear, over-fond of cocktail bars, where he passed a considerable part of every day. I met him in a famous old bar. He was not completely sober. Turning to me, and pointing to a little show-card or sign which said something about wines and spirits, he said: "Do you believe in spirits?"

I said: "I don't quite know. I am perfectly prepared to believe in them, or in anything else. In general, I believe in them rather than deny them, because I think that unconsidered denial is stupid. Everything is possible—that is the one thing life has taught me."

He said: "My wife believes in spirits. And that is why I am here, in pursuit of a different kind of spirits . . ."

He went on:

My wife is a terrible woman. She doesn't like me, and I don't very much like her. She is what I might describe as a crank. I am not blaming her for that. Perhaps it is my fault for not making her life more interesting for her in general. But for the last thirty years or more she has devoted herself body and soul to every new bit of nonsense that has come her way. Well . . . well . . .

one is entitled to pursue one's own interests, and God forbid that I should stand in the way of a legitimate enquiring mind.

But listen. Work this out for yourself. I am a well-to-do man. I didn't get my money out of thin air. I worked hard for it and got it honestly. I began life with all kinds of nice, shiny, fresh ideals. I wanted to be a great lawyer and defend the rights of the poor and be a benefactor to my fellowmen. But my wife talked me out of that. That's not her fault, but mine. I shouldn't have let anybody talk me out of that. She wanted money. So I devoted myself to getting it. I went into business, and sweated and struggled like the devil to get her what she wanted. And all the while, while I was working ten, twelve, sixteen hours a day and wearing myself out, she was giving herself over to all kinds of foolishness.

First of all, she went in for some ridiculous missionary scheme for putting trousers on cannibals who are very much better off without trousers. That cost me plenty. Then, all of a sudden, she drops the cannibals' trousers and takes to Oriental religions. She brought some kind of a Hindu holy man into the house and made life a perfect misery for nearly twelve months. She and a lot of other foolish women used to worship him like a god, and I was not allowed to smoke in the house, or drink in the house, or have any friends of my own in the house; and she scarcely spoke to me because she found my conversation unsympathetic and, I suppose, unholy. Her holy man, however, did not find my money unholy, and

he ended by running off with some of it together with some of my wife's jewels. Well, I didn't mind that, so long as I was rid of the fellow. I thought that I might look forward to a little peace and quiet in the home, but I had no such luck. My wife went from one thing to another as easily as I go from one drink to another. She immediately developed a new circle of friends; I believe they were interested in . . . I forget what it was, but I think it had something to do with the education of mothers, or what have you. My wife never had any children: she was too busy. When I suggested that it might be a fairly good thing to try and have a child before it was too late, she asked me whether I thought that it was a woman's function to degrade herself to the level of a domestic slave . . . and then she got hold of a new religion, the name of which I forgot . . . and so it went on, year in and year out, and I found that my life was really quite empty.

Then she got another bug. This time, it was spirits. Well, I'm like yourself. I don't know anything at all about spirits, but I'm perfectly willing to believe in them. I dare say there is an after-life, and I can't reconcile myself to the belief that everything ends in the grave. But, as an ordinary reasonable man, I think it unfair to expect me to swallow everything the mediums and what-not tell me. Once, for example, my wife's little circle got through to the soul of Voltaire. He said, in a Lancashire accent if I've ever heard one, that he was very happy. I spoke to him in French, but he

didn't understand a word of it. Now is this reasonable? I think not.

I said so, and was severely told off. The whole circle fell upon me like hens on a duckling and nearly pecked me to death. I am not attacking spiritualists or spiritualism: I don't know anything at all about it, and there's the end of it. But a lot of very dreary quarrels broke out between my wife and me, and in the end she said some very hard things. To crown it all, a week or two ago she told me that she had only married me *faute de mieux*, and that in actual fact she had always been in love with somebody else. That, somehow, wounded me more than anything else; because if I had known it before, I wouldn't have stayed, but I'd have found some better way of living.

But I said nothing. And my wife—a middle-aged woman, mind!—sat at the feet of her medium friends, and paid quite heavily for the privilege of doing so. There are mediums who are not interested in money; but my wife's pals were definitely not of that kind.

So I determined to try a little experiment. I have been feeling rather dickey lately, and my doctor tells me that one of these days I shall pop off like a penny balloon. I don't care much. But I thought I might as well go out with a little joke, and a little experiment. I made my will. My wife hasn't seen it yet. . . .

The old man began to laugh, and the laugh became a cough, and when he had got his breath again, he said:

"I have left her £250 a year free of tax. But I have also left £250,000 in securities. They are in an air-tight box, and they are buried in a place that Sherlock Holmes himself couldn't find. I have left word in my will that this sum of money, if discovered through the agency of a medium, goes to my wife to do with as she pleases. The pity of it is, of course, that I shall not be alive to see the fun. But if, as I say in my will, my wife gets in touch with me after I pass on—why, I shall be glad to tell her where the money is buried. It seems to me that this is only fair . . ."

When I left the old man, he was still laughing.

One Case in a Million

THE mind of Poindexter, the old hangman, wandered a little a few hours before he died—but never far from his work. He sent for Balsam, his First Assistant, so that they might talk shop.

Balsam, walking on the tips of his pigeon-toes, his elbows curiously squared, came and sat by Poindexter's bed. "How are you feeling, Mr. Poindexter?" he asked, with some anxiety. "Anything you fancy? What do you say to a bit of brandy?" He drew a half bottle of Old Three Star from one of his capacious pockets.

But old Poindexter shook his head, saying: "I promised my dear old mother I'd never drink spirits, and I'm not going to break the pledge now. Anyway, it always disagreed with me; and you mark my words, the drink leads to no good. You ought to know that yourself without me telling you. Why, a good four out of every ten clients wouldn't have come our way, Balsam, if it hadn't been for drinking spirits. A glass of beer, as my dear old mother always used to say, never did anybody much harm. . . . No thanks, Balsam; not even a bottle of stout—it might upset my stomach. I'll drink an egg beaten up in warm milk, with a little sugar in it. You can have some brandy, if you like, though, mind you, I advise against it. I've always advised against it,

specially before a job—any job—let alone a world-famous one like you've got to do, Balsam, my boy,"

Balsam said: "I know, Mr. Poindexter. You've been like a father to me, always."

The old hangman, Poindexter, said: "Well, as one might say, I always regarded you as, sort of, a son. I learned you your craft, didn't I? They may say what they like about me, but I'll go down in history as the First Scientific Executioner. You know that. The others, well, they hanged a man: me, I *executed* him. Why, it must have been about the time of the Brunswick Place Murder when I perfected what they call Poindexter's Drop. Remember?"

"I was an apprentice, then," said Balsam, "and the Poindexter Drop was a little before my time, Mr. Poindexter; but I remember all right. It was you who trained me—I ought to know, didn't I, Mr. Poindexter?"

Half-pleading, yet with a certain severity—somewhat as an anxious teacher talks to a nervous pupil on the eve of a Final Examination, as if fearing to be let down, and, therefore, offering encouragement mixed with admonition, Poindexter said: "You've got to understand that this is one case in a million. And I shan't be there to see the Operation through. That's what the newspapers call 'An Irony of Fate.' You're a lucky boy, young Balsam, a lucky boy!"

Balsam said: "I hate the job, to tell you the truth. I had half a mind to go sick, and let somebody else do it."

Poindexter sat up, and his voice was urgent as he cried: "No! That would be slacking, and you must never do that! No malingering, Balsam, or I'll . . ." Plaintively: "Who would take your place?" he asked. "Bill Vince? Bill Vince is a nervous boy. Twice, he fumbled the straps. Once, when he was pulling the hood over the head of Littlecrown, who did the Sheffield Hatchet Murder, he scratched Littlecrown's lip with his thumb-nail. Littlecrown let out a yell, and turned half-sideways as I pulled the bolt. And that was the only job I ever bungled; and it was all Vince's fault. . . . No, Balsam, if it's with my last breath that I say it: I look to you to keep my reputation clean."

"Mr. Poindexter, I won't let you down," said Balsam. "Only I wish you could be behind me!"

Soothingly, Poindexter said: "Enough of that, my boy. I felt pretty much as you do, now, when I executed Mrs. Neighbour for murdering her husband fifteen years ago. I had nerves, then, upon my word! Between hanging a woman and hanging a man, there's a certain difference, you understand. I hope you never have to hang a woman! Let's not go into details, son; but Mrs. Neighbour was on my mind for quite a little while after that. . . . The fact is, you know, I've got a soft heart. I always think of my dear old mother, you understand. I never could bear to hurt a woman, Balsam!"

Balsam said: "It said in the Record '*Death Inst.*', didn't it?"

"Very likely," said Poindexter, "very likely. I always

put Death down as *Inst*. Very likely it is *inst*. Instantaneous, *inst*. . . . I never could bring myself to hurt anybody, you know—that's why I worked out the Poindexter Drop, and tried to arrange matters so that everything would be over in a second—head covered, arms tied, legs tied, rope adjusted—simultaneous!—and, *click*!"

Balsam said: "The way I work it out, Mr. Poindexter, it can't hurt."

"No, no," said Poindexter, eagerly, "not half so much as a toothache. As I conceive it, it must feel like a quick blow under the ear. You simply see stars, and then comes the dark. Later you wake up. Ah, but where? And it's *after* you wake up that the pain comes on, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes, but——"

"No, but wait a minute! I had a dream, the other night—last night, to be exact—a dream of falling. I was going up, and up, and up a ladder, and all of a sudden I stepped on a rung that was not there, and fell a thousand miles before I hit the bed I had never left. That was a bad 'un! And yet it only lasted half a quarter of a second. Then *Death Inst*.! I ask myself—'is it, though?' "

"*Inst*.," Balsam insisted, "I swear, Mr. Poindexter, *inst*.!"

The old hangman shook his head, and said: "I ask you, what is *inst*.? You can live a lifetime in a second, in a dream . . . and what is a dream? *Inst*. . . . However my boy, this is beside the point. I shan't be at your

shoulder to give you the office, so I must rely on you to take your own initiative, and not to let me down, young Balsam." He became brisk: "Come on now, sonny boy. Have you got your weights and measures right, first and foremost?"

"Height, five foot eight and a half inches," said Balsam. "Weight, thirteen stone ten and a half pounds."

"Neck?"

"Seventeen inches, Mr. Poindexter, sir."

"Right you are, Balsam. Muscular?"

"Not very muscular, no."

"What drop will you allow?" asked old Poindexter.

Uncertainly, Balsam said: "I would have said six foot."

Poindexter cried: "Wait a minute! The client is a bit too heavy for the musculature of the neck. Allow a five foot drop."

"You're the boss, Mr. Poindexter."

Apropos of nothing, as it seemed, Poindexter said: "You know, that Mrs. Neighbour—I never could get her out of my mind."

Balsam said: "She was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until she was dead, and the Lord have mercy upon her soul, for poisoning her husband with arsenic."

"Weed-killer," said Poindexter, correcting him. "You know, she was a kind-hearted woman. Long-suffering, too. Another woman would have done it with a coke-hammer, or a chopper, or a knife. Only she was sensitive. That was her downfall. You know what?

You might say that Neighbour worried himself and his wife to death. It might happen to anyone with a kind heart, don't you think, Balsam. Take the case of my Clara. She was a soft-hearted woman, and I kept her believing I was a tobacconist, to spare her feelings, you know. But when she found out why I had to go away every so often, she pined away. Another woman would have left me. Not Clara—she stayed, and she suffered. So what could I do but put something in her cocoa, to put her out of her misery? I ask you, now!"

Balsam said: "I must go, Mr. Poindexter. Are you sure you wouldn't like the brandy?"

"No thanks, my boy. Too old to learn new habits. See you at eight o'clock in the Yard. Keep a steady hand, remember, and synchronise, always synchronise. And oh, by the way—just to be on the safe side, better make that drop five foot six," said Mr. Poindexter. "No point in tearing the skin. Don't let me down, now. Good-night."

GERALD KERSH

THEY DIE WITH
THEIR BOOTS CLEAN

NIGHT AND THE CITY

THE SONG OF THE FLEA

THE THOUSAND DEATHS
OF Mr. SMALL

THE BRAZEN BULL

THE GREAT WASH

THE BRIGHTON MONSTER
AND OTHERS

GUTTERSNIPE
Little Novels

HEINEMANN

GERALD KERSH

"Mr. Gerald Kersh is the delight of his admirers because he is one of the comparatively few living novelists in this country who write with energy and originality."

The Times Literary Supplement

"As a surgeon exposing the inner malaise of some of our citizens, Kersh wields the keenest scalpel since Huxley and Waugh were at work in the 'twenties."

JOSEPH TAGGART, *Star*

"He is the real successor of Kipling; not a successor by imitation, but a successor by temperament."

FRANK O'CONNOR, *Evening News*

"Gerald Kersh is that rare combination, a master craftsman with the popular touch; he can satisfy highbrow and lowbrow alike."

JOHN BROPHY, *Sunday Graphic*

HEINEMANN