



Pan Books

THE SECOND PAN BOOK OF

HORROR STORIES

**Selected by
Herbert van Thal**



THE SECOND PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Herbert van Thal has compiled a number of anthologies which include some of the writings of James Agate, Ernest Newman and Hilaire Belloc as well as a volume on Victorian Travellers. He has also resuscitated the works of many neglected Victorian writers. In 1971 his autobiography, *The Tops of the Mulberry Trees*, was published, as well as *The Music Lovers' Companion* (with Gervase Hughes). He has just completed a 'biographical anthology' of Walter Savage Landor and is preparing a biography of Caroline of Anspach, Queen Consort of George II.

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THE SECOND PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Edited by
HERBERT VAN THAL



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PIECE-MEAL

by Oscar Cook

WARWICK PUT down his drink, lighted a cigarette, looked round the club smoking-room to discover that, in our corner, at least, we were alone. Then, leaning towards me, he asked in that abrupt, disturbing manner of his:

“What happened to Mendingham?”

I was startled; the more so as at that moment the threatening storm broke with a streak of forked lightning and a clap of thunder that seemed right overhead. Then the deluge came.

I looked at Warwick with a feeling of dismay, for I knew the expression on his face, the set of his lips and jaw, and the curious rigidity that somehow seemed to stiffen even his ears. There was no gainsaying him—if he meant to learn Mendingham’s fate, nothing I could say would put him off; also, as it happened, we both had time hanging on our hands.

And yet . . .

It was on just such a night as this, stormy, wild, ‘filthy’, in sailor parlance, that I found him. The memory of that discovery would never die, but a storm always accentuated it.

“What happened?” Warwick repeated. “Out with the story, for I mean to know. I’m hard up for copy, and the stream of ideas is low. They’re bread and butter to me in the writing trade, so . . .” The gesture of his hands was more eloquent than words.

I signed to him to draw his chair closer, called a waiter to replenish our glasses. Then, and not till then, I began the story.

"I'm going to tell you, Warwick," I began, "one of the most gruesome stories the world has ever known."

He rubbed his hands together and looked very pleased.

"So gruesome," I went on, "that I won't even extract from you a promise not to make use of it, for I feel certain you'll never want to write it up. You remember Gregory?"

"Yes," Warwick nodded. "Met him quite a lot at one time. Then he seemed to fade away. He'd a most wonderfully and gorgeously beautiful wife."

"Exactly. She was the cause of the mystery."

Warwick chuckled. "Then there *was* a mystery. I thought so."

"Yes, but not in the way you imagine. You went abroad a good while before their divorce case."

"*Cherchez la femme!* I always thought Gregory too careless and too cold-blooded to have such an attractive piece of goods about. He was asking for trouble."

"Perhaps. But Mendingham was, after all, his greatest friend."

"And thundering good-looking, with a taking air and an eye for the ladies, eh?"

"As you say, but that's no excuse. Mendingham was a friend of mine, but I can't hold him guiltless in this matter. Some things just aren't done."

"Such as?"

"Making love to and running off with your best friend's wife, even if she weren't happy with her husband."

Warwick gave vent to a low whistle.

"That was at the bottom of the trouble, was it?" he stated rather than asked.

I nodded, and he went on: "Well, I'm not surprised. What did and still does surprise me is how on earth Moyra married Gregory. He was a queer fish always: a great brain full of medicine and surgical ideas, but the coldest, most calculating human being I've ever met—

and I've travelled a lot and met some. Ever seen him in the operating theatre?"

I started. He put the question with that sudden disconcerting manner of his. It almost made me think he knew more than he admitted, while it brought back with redoubled intensity that awful final scene when . . . but I'm rattling on too fast.

I took a long pull at my whisky and soda. Warwick saw my agitation and smiled.

"Don't worry," he said. "Tell me the story in your own way. From now on I'll try and not interrupt, but for heaven's sake, man, keep the tension strong and hot: at present you're about as exciting as Tennyson's 'Brook'."

I made no comment: the desire for super-horrors among the present day host of sensation-monger suppliers masquerading as journalists—once members of an honourable profession—is beyond my powers of speech.

Instead I settled down as comfortably as my own prickly memories and the raging storm would let me to tell the story in my own way. And I must admit that it was a relief to get the gruesome tragedy off my chest: for up to now I'd shared a solitary secret, as the affair was somehow kept out of the Press.

"Gregory had planned a great tour," I began, "into the heart of Dutch Borneo, one of the few places of the earth today still really unknown. He was intrigued with the idea of finding the race of natives, the most backward in the world, which is reputed to be possessed of tails not less than three inches long, who live in trees, and who still practise cannibalism. He was going alone—that is, Moyra was not to accompany him. It was no journey for her."

Warwick smiled his cynical grin. "Mendingham's opportunity."

I paid no heed. "Gregory was away a little over a year. On his return he wirelessly Moyra two days out

of Liverpool to meet him. She was not at the quayside when the steamer berthed. Arrived in London, he went straight to his house in Harley Street. It was shut up and showed no sign of life. He got in with his own key. Most of the furniture was gone: only his bedroom, consulting room, and smoking room were furnished. The house was otherwise completely empty: more, it was thick with dust. That night he slept at his club, and early the next morning went round to the house agents. They knew nothing, save that the rent had been regularly paid by a cheque from the bank. The bank and solicitors could be no more explanatory or communicative."

I paused to light a cigarette, and in doing so took a long look at Warwick. He was thrilled. There was no mistaking the expression of beatific glee on his face as he listened to the sensational tragedy of his one-time friend.

"Where did you learn all this?" he asked.

"From Gregory himself," I answered, having blown out the match. "I saw a lot of him in the time that followed, when he was hunting for his wife."

"And Mendingham?" Warwick pointedly asked.

"That's what gave him the clue. Mendingham was absent quite a lot from his favourite haunts, and when they met he seemed distraught. What gave Gregory an inkling was the fact that Mendingham never once mentioned Moyra's name, whereas previously he had always asked after her and joked about her being Beauty and Gregory the Beast. Gregory put a detective on to him. The rest was easy. They were living together in a minute lonely cottage in the New Forest."

Warwick took a long gulp at his drink.

"Cut the cackle and get to the 'osses," he snapped, as he put the glass down. "You can skip the intervening bit—I can find it any day in the back files of any newspaper catering for the public that likes 'spice'. Like the little girl with her new story book, I want to hear the end."

At that moment the little liking I ever had for Warwick nearly died. He was positively revelling in anticipatory horrors. It revolted me. It was, however, my turn to smile.

"You'd search the papers in vain," I said rather acidly. "The suit was undefended, so there was nothing to report. It was from that time onwards, though, that things began to happen. In due time the decree was made absolute, and Mendingham and Moyra married and even talked of coming back to town."

"And Gregory?" Warwick interpolated with that almost fiendish quickness of his for seizing upon the heart of a story.

"Gregory," I continued slowly, "was gradually becoming a recluse. He gave up coming to the club, sold the lease of his house, and acquired a dilapidated house-boat on a little-known and unfrequented backwater on the Thames. Here he 'did' for himself, once a week bought his stores from the village, and in this seclusion wrote the *magnum opus*—an account of his Dutch Borneo trip. From the point of view of ethnology it is unsurpassed."

"You've read it?" Warwick shot the question at me.

"Of course. Then for some time I practically lost all touch with him, though I occasionally saw the other two, who were tremendously happy. Moyra absolutely adored Mendingham. Then one day I heard from Gregory that he was going abroad. I asked him to dine with me on his last night in England, but he refused, and I never saw him again, until . . ."

Just then a terrific clap of thunder made me start, and I spilt a lot of my drink. Warwick was frankly impatient.

"It is certain," I continued, "that he bought tickets for the Congo, but whether he went is another matter. All I know is that, as far as I am concerned and others interested in him also, he completely disappeared into the blue."

"A monomaniac, nursing his grievance," Warwick sneered. "What an end to a great brain! But where does Mendingham fit in with all this?"

His devilish persistence annoyed me.

"I'm coming to that now," I answered. "Only, for God's sake, don't interrupt. It was nearly three months after Gregory supposedly went abroad that Mendingham became missing."

"You mean dead?" Warwick asked.

I turned on him in fury. "No!" I snapped. "I don't. I mean missing. He went out one morning as usual, and was never seen again."

"Never?" Warwick's eyes were bulging out of his head, and he was breathing hard in his excitement.

"Not till I found him," I answered slowly, "or, to be accurate, his remains—the little that was left of him."

"A rotten mass of decomposing flesh, or just dried bones?" Warwick asked, almost licking his lips in ecstasy.

"Neither," I replied, and then lapsed into silence as the poignant memory, coupled with a nausea for the human ghoul alongside me, nearly proved more than I could bear. At length, however, I was able to continue, strengthened by the desire to share, at last, my terrible secret.

"Moyra, as you may imagine, was frantic, and the strain and suspense nearly killed her. But she survived, chiefly, I think, on account of an indomitable desire to get to the bottom of the mystery. There was no question, you must understand, of desertion for another woman. Mendingham was this time really and truly in love. I saw a lot of Moyra during this time, and helped all I could, but all in vain. The police, the wireless, the motor associations, all were roped in, all did their utmost, but Mendingham was not to be found."

"Not a trace?" Warwick's tone was a mixture of scepticism and glee.

"Not a trace, but rumours by the score. He had been

seen in every part of England: every report and identification tallied, yet it was never he. There must be hundreds of 'doubles' in the country, were it known.

"The next item of interest, at the time seeming quite irrelevant, was Gregory's return. This was about a month—a little less, perhaps—after Mendingham's disappearance. Though not really as sociable as of old, he was not so hermit-like as before he went abroad. He took a room at his club, and was seen now and again about town—a theatre, an exhibition and suchlike, but he still owned the houseboat, where he admitted to spending a lot of time.

"About three days after his return, Moyra telephoned me. She was hysterical—that was clear over the wire. She wanted me to go round to her at once; she had a—I never heard what, for her voice died away in a choking groan. I hurried round. She was beside herself. She couldn't speak, but with white, frozen face, with wide-open eyes and bloodless lips, she pointed to a parcel that lay open on the divan in her drawing room. I crossed over and picked it up; then, although braced up for something uncanny or dangerous like a bomb or a snake, I dropped it with a startled cry, for it contained—a hand."

"Just one?" There was actually disappointed interest in Warwick's tone.

"God, man!" I burst out. "Wasn't that enough to send by post? A dried, fleshless, skinless hand! Imagine Moyra opening it! The shock, and then—and this is the awful part of it—finding it to be Mendingham's hand, with his signet ring, one she had given him, on the little finger!"

For the fraction of a second I noticed Warwick wilt; then he was himself again.

"Nothing else inside?" he asked. "Not even the usual printed note or mystic sign?"

"Not a line—just the hand and the ring. I got someone to come and stay with Moyra, collected the parcel

and its gruesome contents, and then took them to Scotland Yard. That's all there was to be done—all they could do. There wasn't a fingerprint or clue, though the postmark was Balham."

"What next?" Warwick inquired, and I was glad to notice even he was a little subdued.

"A week later," I continued, after following his example and emptying my glass, "Moyra received another parcel. This one contained the other hand and Mendingham's fountain-pen—his initials were on the gold band, and Moyra had no doubts in identifying it. It had been posted in a W.C. district, and bore the label of a shop at which she had the day before bought some wool. So when she opened it she was not suspicious."

"She sent for you?"

I nodded.

"And you? What did you do?" Warwick asked, with hardly suppressed excitement.

"Same as before," I replied. "And the result was the same—no clues."

"But she was being watched?" Warwick's tone was vibrant. "The rest was easy."

"That's what the police thought: but they made a mistake. How could they watch everybody who came into contact with Moyra or passed her in a shop, in a train, or a bus? There were a hundred people a day to watch. They had to give it up. Moyra went away to the country, and for a month nothing happened. I had to stay in town, and, as it chanced, twice met Gregory, but we never mentioned the subject. When Mendingham first disappeared he had made some quite appropriate remarks, but naturally it wasn't for me to refer to the subject."

"Hardly!" Warwick offered me a cigarette, and threw away an unlighted one that he had chewed to bits.

"Then," I continued, "Moyra received a foot by post—the other foot by special messenger. She was nearly mad, and I don't wonder. Then the right fore-

arm, and later the left leg to above the knee, and in each case a little personal belonging of Mendingham's was included, though there was no need for such refinement of cruelty."

"Pointing the moral with a vengeance, what?" Warwick said a little unsteadily.

"Exactly. But the last parcel proved too much. Moyra collapsed and was taken to a nursing home, and from there to a lunatic asylum, where her one idea is that she is the farmer's wife, her one cry and plea is for a carving knife, and her only exercise running after 'three blind mice'."

I paused and put my hand up to my eyes—I was fond of Moyra, and had once been more than that. For a little while only the thunder rumbled and the lightning cracked, while the rain sizzled down. Then Warwick broke the silence.

"Is that all?" he asked.

I took my hand from my eyes. "I wish to God it were!" I cried. "Do you want the rest?"

"You may as well get it off your chest," he answered quietly. "But it's the toughest, saddest story I ever heard."

I pulled myself together. There wasn't much more to tell, and I'd get it over, and then we could have another drink.

"Well, from the time Moyra went into the nursing home the parcels stopped coming. She had letters, even in the asylum, but no more gruesome parcels. Suddenly that fact struck me, and the one word 'revenge' blazed into my mind."

"Gregory!" The word was a breathless whisper from Warwick.

"Yes. That's how I saw it. He was cold-blooded, but in a possessive manner he had loved Moyra. She and Mendingham had, vulgarly speaking, 'done him down'. He would be revenged on both—a cruel, subtle, lingering revenge. Then came another thought. Was

Mendingham by any chance alive? Gregory was a surgeon, one of the cleverest of his day. Mendingham had never been found, and no vital part of his body had been contained in those parcels. Another point in favour of this idea, mad as it seemed, was the lapse of time between the receipt of the parcels. It would have given Mendingham time to get strong enough to bear another operation.

"That very day I was dining with Gregory, the first meal we'd had together since he had gone abroad. Casually, I noticed that he missed the meat course, but in every other way made a good meal. I referred to Mendingham, but he was merely polite. I mentioned Moyra, but he would not be drawn. Then we fell to discussing his book. Over this he became thoroughly enthusiastic and communicative. He waxed emphatic on the morality of those natives, who, he maintained, neither lied nor stole, and who considered adultery the deadliest sin. Murder with them was a just punishment if any crime deserved it. They were, according to him, not immoral but unmoral, and to emphasize the point he referred to a particularly nasty divorce case which was at the time something of a *cause célèbre*. 'In such a case——' he began, then suddenly stopped, passed a hand wearily over his head, and went deadly white. After a minute or two he got up, made an excuse about having forgotten an appointment, and hurriedly left the club. I was frankly curious and full of my idea, so I decided to try and follow him. It was a ghastly night, raining hell for leather, thundering and lightning."

"Like this?" Warwick was sitting bolt upright, and his hands gripped his knees so tightly that the knuckles shone white.

"Worse," I answered, and went on: "I got to the backwater by the houseboat an hour and a half later, and there met a check. Gregory crossed to the far side in a dinghy. I had no means of getting over. It took me half an hour to find a boat and another quarter to row

upstream, but eventually I got alongside. In one window through the gaps of closely drawn curtains I could see a light. I had no need to go quietly, for the storm drowned all noise. I crept on deck and tried to peer in, but all I could see was an empty corner of a room. Yet I waited, fascinated, glued to the spot. Then I became conscious of a smell—a cooking, roasting smell, and in a lull of the storm I could have sworn that I heard a horrible laugh. I never quite knew how long I waited, but suddenly I became aware of the most severe cramp. I tried to move; my leg refused to support me, and I fell with a crash against the long french window. The latch failed to withstand the shock, and I was pitchforked into the room. In an instant I was on my feet, cramp or no cramp, and was standing face to face with Gregory, who looked like an incarnate fiend.

“Behind him was an old-fashioned open grate built in the far side of the houseboat. The fire was burning, a big, glowing mass now, and on a huge grid was what I took to be a side or half-side of beef.”

For a second I paused to moisten my lips. Warwick’s face was ghastly to look at, and from his parched mouth he just managed to gasp: “Go on!”

“Without a word Gregory sprang at me with a huge butcher’s knife in his hand. Somehow I dodged him and it, and as I sidestepped I struck him with all my force. He fell down, completely stunned. That he was mad I realized almost at once—almost as quickly as I realized he *had* something in the houseboat he wished to hide. What?”

“Mendingham?” Warwick whispered through trembling lips.

For a moment I could not answer. All I was capable of, so acute was memory, was to nod. Then at last I found my voice.

“That joint, roasting over the fire, was Mendingham—all that was left of him—his trunk. Hanging from the roof, like a round ball of fly-catching paper, was his

severed head. God! But it was awful—utter hell. I was sick. Just as I recovered, Gregory came to. He staggered up, first to his knees, then to his feet, laughing and chuckling all the time. He came slowly towards me, while I waited. Nearer he came, nearer, the long knife in his hand. I seemed frozen with fear and sheer horror. Nearer, two more paces, and . . . he slipped in a pool of blood on the floor that had dripped from the newly severed head and fell face downwards into the fire."

"Yes?" In his excitement Warwick had clutched both of my wrists, and his eyes were burning into mine. "What next?"

"I had no time to think," I whispered hoarsely. "It was my chance. My life or his, and he was mad, and a cannibal. There was no doubt of this. I put my foot on the back of his head and pressed and pressed."

Warwick let go my wrists, and a great sigh escaped him.

"Good man!" he said at last. "You've got pluck. What about the rest? You couldn't leave it at that?"

"No," I answered. "For my own sake as well as for his. I looked around, and found two kerosene tins, full. I used them and put a match to the lot. But before doing so I saw Gregory's book lying open on a table in another room. A passage was underlined: the passage in which he said the only time he found those natives addicted to cannibalism was as a solemn ritual. It was the tribal punishment for adultery, and . . ."

Warwick put out a hand.

"Enough," he said. "For heaven's sake, man, order another drink!"

THE FLY

by George Langelaan

TELEPHONES AND telephone bells have always made me uneasy. Years ago, when they were mostly wall fixtures, I disliked them, but nowadays, when they are planted in every nook and corner, they are a downright intrusion. We have a saying in France that a coalman is master in his own house; with the telephone that is no longer true, and I suspect that even the Englishman is no longer king in his own castle.

At the office, the sudden ringing of the telephone annoys me. It means that, no matter what I am doing, in spite of the switchboard operator, in spite of my secretary, in spite of doors and walls, some unknown person is coming into the room and on to my desk to talk right into my very ear, confidentially—and that whether I like it or not. At home, the feeling is still more disagreeable, but the worst is when the telephone rings in the dead of night. If anyone could see me turn on the light and get up blinking to answer it, I suppose I would look like any other sleepy man annoyed at being disturbed. The truth in such a case, however, is that I am struggling against panic, fighting down a feeling that a stranger has broken into the house and is in my bedroom. By the time I manage to grab the receiver and say: "*Ici Monsieur Delambre. Je vous ecoute,*" I am outwardly calm, but I only get back to a more normal state when I recognize the voice at the other end and when I know what is wanted of me.

This effort at dominating a purely animal reaction and fear had become so effective that when my sister-in-law called me at two in the morning, asking me to

come over, but first to warn the police that she had just killed my brother, I quietly asked her how and why she had killed André.

"But, François! . . . I can't explain all that over the telephone. Please call the police and come quickly."

"Maybe I had better see you first, Hélène?"

"No, you'd better call the police first; otherwise they will start asking you all sorts of awkward questions. They'll have enough trouble as it is to believe that I did it alone. . . . And, by the way, I suppose you ought to tell them that André . . . André's body, is down at the factory. They may want to go there first."

"Did you say that André is at the factory?"

"Yes . . . under the steam-hammer."

"Under the what?"

"The steam-hammer! But don't ask so many questions. Please come quickly François! Please understand that I'm afraid . . . that my nerves won't stand it much longer!"

Have you ever tried to explain to a sleepy police officer that your sister-in-law has just phoned to say that she has killed your brother with a steam-hammer? I repeated my explanation, but he would not let me.

"*Oui, Monsieur, oui*, I hear . . . but who are you? What is your name? Where do you live? I said, where do you live!"

It was then that Commissaire Charas took over the line and the whole business. He at least seemed to understand everything. Would I wait for him? Yes, he would pick me up and take me over to my brother's house. When? In five or ten minutes.

I had just managed to pull on my trousers, wriggle into a sweater and grab a hat and coat, when a black Citroën, headlights blazing, pulled up at the door.

"I assume you have a night watchman at your factory, Monsieur Delambre. Has he called you?" asked Commissaire Charas, letting in the clutch as I sat down beside him and slammed the door of the car.

"No, he hasn't. Though of course my brother could have entered the factory through his laboratory where he often works late at night . . . all night sometimes."

"Is Professor Delambre's work connected with your business?"

"No, my brother is, or was, doing research work for the Ministère de l'Air. As he wanted to be away from Paris and yet within reach of where skilled workmen could fix up or make gadgets big and small for his experiments, I offered him one of the old workshops of the factory and he came to live in the first house built by our grandfather on the top of the hill at the back of the factory."

"Yes, I see. Did he talk about his work? What sort of research work?"

"He rarely talked about it, you know; I suppose the Air Ministry could tell you. I only know that he was about to carry out a number of experiments he had been preparing for some months, something to do with the disintegration of matter, he told me."

Barely slowing down, the Commissaire swung the car off the road, slid it through the open factory gate and pulled up sharp by a policeman apparently expecting him.

I did not need to hear the policeman's confirmation. I knew now that my brother was dead, it seemed that I had been told years ago. Shaking like a leaf, I scrambled out after the Commissaire.

Another policeman stepped out of a doorway and led us towards one of the shops where all the lights had been turned on. More policemen were standing by the hammer, watching two men setting up a camera. It was tilted downward, and I made an effort to look.

It was far less horrid than I had expected. Though I had never seen my brother drunk, he looked just as if he were sleeping off a terrific binge, flat on his stomach across the narrow line on which the white-hot slabs of metal were rolled up to the hammer. I saw at a glance

that his head and arm could only be a flattened mess, but that seemed quite impossible; it looked as if he had somehow pushed his head and arm right into the metallic mass of the hammer.

Having talked to his colleagues, the Commissaire turned towards me:

"How can we raise the hammer, Monsieur Delambre?"

"I'll raise it for you."

"Would you like us to get one of your men over?"

"No, I'll be all right. Look, here is the switchboard. It was originally a steam-hammer, but everything is worked electrically here now. Look, Commissaire, the hammer has been set at fifty tons and its impact at zero."

"At zero . . .?"

"Yes, level with the ground if you prefer. It is also set for single strokes, which means that it has to be raised after each blow. I don't know what Hélène, my sister-in-law, will have to say about all this, but one thing I am sure of: she certainly did not know how to set and operate the hammer."

"Perhaps it was set that way last night when work stopped?"

"Certainly not. The drop is never set at zero, Monsieur le Commissaire."

"I see. Can it be raised gently?"

"No. The speed of the upstroke cannot be regulated. But in any case it is not very fast when the hammer is set for single strokes."

"Right. Will you show me what to do? It won't be very nice to watch, you know."

"No, no, Monsieur le Commissaire. I'll be all right."

"All set?" asked the Commissaire of the others. "All right then, Monsieur Delambre. Whenever you like."

Watching my brother's back, I slowly but firmly pushed the upstroke button.

The unusual silence of the factory was broken by the

sigh of compressed air rushing into the cylinders, a sigh that always makes me think of a giant taking a deep breath before solemnly socking another giant, and the steel mass of the hammer shuddered and then rose swiftly. I also heard the sucking sound as it left the metal base and thought I was going to panic when I saw André's body heave forward as a sickly gush of blood poured all over the ghastly mess bared by the hammer.

"No danger of it coming down again, Monsieur Delambre?"

"No, none whatever," I mumbled as I threw the safety switch and, turning around, I was violently sick in front of a young green-faced policeman.

* * *

For weeks after, Commissaire Charas worked on the case, listening, questioning, running all over the place, making out reports, telegraphing and telephoning right and left. Later, we became quite friendly and he owned that he had for a long time considered me as suspect number one, but had finally given up that idea because, not only was there no clue of any sort, but not even a motive.

Hélène, my sister-in-law, was so calm throughout the whole business that the doctors finally confirmed what I had long considered the only possible solution: that she was mad. That being the case, there was of course no trial.

My brother's wife never tried to defend herself in any way and even got quite annoyed when she realized that people thought her mad, and this of course was considered proof that she was indeed mad. She owned up to the murder of her husband and proved easily that she knew how to handle the hammer; but she would never say why, exactly how, or under what circumstances she had killed my brother. The great mystery was how and why had my brother so obligingly stuck

his head under the hammer, the only possible explanation for his part in the drama.

The night watchman had heard the hammer all right; he had even heard it twice, he claimed. This was very strange, and the stroke-counter which was always set back to naught after a job, seemed to prove him right, since it marked the figure two. Also, the foreman in charge of the hammer confirmed that after cleaning up the day before the murder, he had as usual turned the stroke-counter back to naught. In spite of this, Hélène maintained that she had only used the hammer once, and this seemed just another proof of her insanity.

Commissaire Charas who had been put in charge of the case at first wondered if the victim were really my brother. But of that there was no possible doubt, if only because of the great scar running from his knee to his thigh, the result of a shell that had landed within a few feet of him during the retreat in 1940; and there were also the fingerprints of his left hand which corresponded to those found all over his laboratory and his personal belongings up at the house.

A guard had been put on his laboratory and the next day half a dozen officials came down from the Air Ministry. They went through all his papers and took away some of his instruments, but before leaving they told the Commissaire that the most interesting documents and instruments had been destroyed.

The Lyons police laboratory, one of the most famous in the world, reported that André's head had been wrapped up in a piece of velvet when it was crushed by the hammer, and one day Commissaire Charas showed me a tattered drapery which I immediately recognized as the brown velvet cloth I had seen on a table in my brother's laboratory, the one on which his meals were served when he could not leave his work.

After only a very few days in prison, Hélène had been transferred to a nearby asylum, one of the three in

France where insane criminals are taken care of. My nephew Henri, a boy of six, the very image of his father, was entrusted to me, and eventually all legal arrangements were made for me to become his guardian and tutor.

Hélène, one of the quietest patients of the asylum, was allowed visitors and I went to see her on Sundays. Once or twice the Commissaire had accompanied me and, later, I learned that he had also visited Hélène alone. But we were never able to obtain any information from my sister-in-law who seemed to have become utterly indifferent. She rarely answered my questions and hardly ever those of the Commissaire. She spent a lot of her time sewing, but her favourite pastime seemed to be catching flies which she invariably released unharmed after having examined them carefully.

Hélène only had one fit of raving—more like a nervous breakdown than a fit said the doctor who had administered morphia to quieten her—the day she saw a nurse swatting flies.

The day after Hélène's one and only fit, Commissaire Charas came to see me.

"I have a strange feeling that there lies the key to the whole business, Monsieur Delambre," he said.

I did not ask him how it was that he already knew all about Hélène's fit.

"I do not follow you, Commissaire. Poor Madame Delambre could have shown an exceptional interest for anything else, really. Don't you think that flies just happen to be the border-subject of her tendency to raving?"

"Do you believe she is really mad?" he asked.

"My dear Commissaire, I don't see how there can be any doubt. Do you doubt it?"

"I don't know. In spite of all the doctors say, I have the impression that Madame Delambre has a very clear brain . . . even when catching flies."

"Supposing you were right, how would you explain

her attitude with regard to her little boy? She never seems to consider him as her own child."

"You know, Monsieur Delambre, I have thought about that also. She may be trying to protect him. Perhaps she fears the boy or, for all we know, hates him?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand, my dear Commissaire."

"Have you noticed, for instance, that she never catches flies when the boy is there?"

"No. But come to think of it, you are quite right. Yes, that is strange. . . . Still, I fail to understand."

"So do I, Monsieur Delambre. And I'm very much afraid that we shall never understand, unless perhaps your sister-in-law should *get better*."

"The doctors seem to think that there is no hope of any sort, you know."

"Yes. Do you know if your brother ever experimented with flies?"

"I really don't know, but I shouldn't think so. Have you asked the Air Ministry people? They knew all about the work."

"Yes, and they laughed at me."

"I can understand that."

"You are very fortunate to understand anything. Monsieur Delambre. I do not . . . but I hope to some day."

* * *

"Tell me, Uncle, do flies live a long time?"

We were just finishing our lunch and, following an established tradition between us, I was just pouring some wine into Henri's glass for him to dip a biscuit in.

Had Henri not been staring at his glass gradually being filled to the brim, something in my look might have frightened him.

This was the first time that he had ever mentioned flies, and I shuddered at the thought that Commissaire Charas might quite easily have been present. I could

imagine the glint in his eye as he would have answered my nephew's question with another question. I could almost hear him saying:

"I don't know, Henri. Why do you ask?"

"Because I have again seen the fly that *Maman* was looking for."

And it was only after drinking off Henri's own glass of wine that I realized that he had answered my spoken thought.

"I did not know that your mother was looking for a fly."

"Yes, she was. It has grown quite a lot, but I recognized it all right."

"Where did you see this fly, Henri, and . . . how did you recognize it?"

"This morning on your desk, Uncle François. Its head is white instead of black, and it has a funny sort of leg."

Feeling more and more like Commissaire Charas, but trying to look unconcerned, I went on:

"And when did you see this fly for the first time?"

"The day that Papa went away. I had caught it, but *Maman* made me let it go. And then after, she wanted me to find it again. She'd changed her mind." And shrugging his shoulders just as my brother used to, he added, "You know what women are."

"I think that fly must have died long ago, and you must be mistaken, Henri," I said, getting up and walking to the door.

But as soon as I was out of the dining room, I ran up the stairs to my study. There was no fly anywhere to be seen.

I was bothered, far more than I cared to even think about. Henri had just proved that Charas was really closer to a clue than had seemed when he told me about his thoughts concerning Hélène's pastime.

For the first time I wondered if Charas did not really know much more than he let on. For the first time also,

ful one—up to the time of his end. About his death, however, all that she would say was that she had killed him with the steam-hammer, but she refused to say why, what had led up to the drama and how she got my brother to put his head under it. She never actually refused outright; she would just go blank and, with no apparent emotion, would switch over to, "I cannot answer that question."

Hélène, as I have said, had shown the Commissaire that she knew how to set and operate the steam-hammer.

Charas could only find one single fact which did not coincide with Hélène's declarations, the fact that the hammer had been used twice. Charas was no longer willing to attribute this to insanity. That evident flaw in Hélène's stonewall defence seemed a crack which the Commissaire might possibly enlarge. But my sister-in-law finally cemented it by acknowledging:

"All right, I lied to you. I did use the hammer twice. But do not ask me why, because I cannot tell you."

"Is that your only . . . mis-statement, Madame Delambre?" had asked the Commissaire, trying to follow up what looked at last like an advantage.

"It is . . . and you know it, Monsieur le Commissaire."

And, annoyed, Charas had seen that Hélène could read him like an open book.

I had thought of calling on the Commissaire, but the knowledge that he would inevitably start questioning Henri made me hesitate. Another reason also made me hesitate, a vague sort of fear that he would look for and find the fly Henri had talked of. And that annoyed me a good deal because I could find no satisfactory explanation for that particular fear.

André was definitely not the absent-minded sort of professor who walks about in pouring rain with a rolled umbrella under his arm. He was human, had a keen sense of humour, loved children and animals and could

not bear to see anyone suffer. I had often seen him drop his work to watch a parade of the local fire brigade, or see the *Tour de France* cyclists go by, or even follow a circus parade all around the village. He liked games of logic and precision, such as billiards and tennis, bridge and chess.

How was it then possible to explain his death? What could have made him put his head under that hammer? It could hardly have been the result of some stupid bet or a test of his courage. He hated betting and had no patience with those who indulged in it. Whenever he heard a bet proposed, he would invariably remind all present that, after all, a bet was but a contract between a fool and a swindler, even if it turned out to be a toss-up as to which was which.

It seemed there were only two possible explanations to André's death. Either he had gone mad, or else he had a reason for letting his wife kill him in such a strange and terrible way. And just what could have been his wife's role in all this? They surely could not have been both insane?

Having finally decided not to tell Charas about my nephew's innocent revelations, I thought I myself would try to question Héléne.

She seemed to have been expecting my visit for she came into the parlour almost as soon as I had made myself known to the matron and been allowed inside.

"I wanted to show you my garden," explained Héléne as I looked at the coat slung over her shoulders.

As one of the 'reasonable' inmates, she was allowed to go into the garden during certain hours of the day. She had asked for and obtained the right to a little patch of ground where she could grow flowers, and I had sent her seeds and some rosebushes out of my garden.

She took me straight to a rustic wooden bench which had been made in the men's workshop and only just set up under a tree close to her little patch of ground.

Searching for the right way to broach the subject of André's death, I sat for a while tracing vague designs on the ground with the end of my umbrella.

"François, I want to ask you something," said Hélène after a while.

"Anything I can do for you, Hélène?"

"No, just something I want to know. Do flies live very long?"

Staring at her, I was about to say that her boy had asked the very same question a few hours earlier when I suddenly realized that here was the opening I had been searching for and perhaps even the possibility of striking a great blow, a blow perhaps powerful enough to shatter her stonewall defence, be it sane or insane.

Watching her carefully, I replied:

"I don't really know, Hélène; but the fly you were looking for was in my study this morning."

No doubt about it I had struck a shattering blow. She swung her head round with such force that I heard the bones crack in her neck. She opened her mouth, but said not a word; only her eyes seemed to be screaming with fear.

Yes, it was evident that I had crashed through something, but what? Undoubtedly, the Commissaire would have known what to do with such an advantage; I did not. All I knew was that he would never have given her time to think, to recuperate, but all I could do, and even that was a strain, was to maintain my best poker-face, hoping against hope that Hélène's defences would go on crumbling.

She must have been quite a while without breathing, because she suddenly gasped and put both her hands over her still open mouth.

"François. . . Did you kill it?" she whispered, her eyes no longer fixed, but searching every inch of my face.

"No."

"You have it then. . . You have it on you! Give it

to me!" she almost shouted touching me with both her hands, and I knew that had she felt strong enough, she would have tried to search me.

"No, Hélène, I haven't got it."

"But you know now. . . . You have guessed, haven't you?"

"No, Hélène. I only know one thing, and that is that you are not insane. But I mean to know all, Hélène, and, somehow, I am going to find out. You can choose: either you tell me everything and I'll see what is to be done, or . . ."

"Or what? Say it!"

"I was going to say it, Hélène . . . or I assure you that your friend the Commissaire will have that fly first thing tomorrow morning."

She remained quite still, looking down at the palms of her hands on her lap and, although it was getting chilly, her forehead and hands were moist.

Without even brushing aside a wisp of long brown hair blown across her mouth by the breeze, she murmured:

"If I tell you . . . will you promise to destroy that fly before doing anything else?"

"No, Hélène. I can make no such promise before knowing."

"But François, you must understand. I promised André that fly would be destroyed. That promise must be kept and I can say nothing until it is."

I could sense the deadlock ahead. I was not yet losing ground, but I was losing the initiative. I tried a shot in the dark.

"Hélène, of course you understand that as soon as the police examine that fly, they will know that you are not insane, and then . . ."

"François, no! For Henri's sake! Don't you see? I was expecting that fly; I was hoping it would find me here but it couldn't know what had become of me. What else could it do but go to others it loves, to Henri,

to you . . . you who might know and understand what was to be done!"

Was she really mad, or was she simulating again? But mad or not, she was cornered. Wondering how to follow up and how to land the knockout blow without running the risk of seeing her slip away out of reach, I said very quietly:

"Tell me all, Hélène. I can then protect your boy."

"Protect my boy from what? Don't you understand that if I am here, it is merely so that Henri won't be the son of a woman who was guillotined for having murdered his father? Don't you understand that I would by far prefer the guillotine to the living death of this lunatic asylum?"

"I understand, Hélène, and I'll do my best for the boy whether you tell me or not. If you refuse to tell me, I'll still do the best I can to protect Henri, but you must understand that the game will be out of my hands, because Commissaire Charas will have the fly."

"But why must you know?" said, rather than asked, my sister-in-law, struggling to control her temper.

"Because I must and will know how and why my brother died, Hélène."

"All right. Take me back to the . . . house. I'll give you what your Commissaire would call my 'Confession'."

"Do you mean to say that you have written it!"

"Yes. It was not really meant for you, but more likely for *your friend*, the Commissaire. I had foreseen that, sooner or later, he would get too close to the truth."

"You then have no objection to his reading it?"

"You will act as you think fit, François. Wait for me a minute."

Leaving me at the door of the parlour, Hélène ran upstairs to her room. In less than a minute she was back with a large brown envelope.

"Listen, François; you are not nearly as bright as was your poor brother, but you are not unintelligent. All I

ask is that you read this alone. After that, you may do as you wish."

"That I promise you, Hélène," I said taking the precious envelope. "I'll read it tonight and although tomorrow is not a visiting day, I'll come down to see you."

"Just as you like," said my sister-in-law without even saying goodbye as she went back upstairs.

* * *

It was only on reaching home, as I walked from the garage to the house, that I read the inscription on the envelope:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN
(Probably Commissaire Charas)

Having told the servants that I would have only a light supper to be served immediately in my study and that I was not to be disturbed after, I ran upstairs, threw Hélène's envelope on my desk and made another careful search of the room before closing the shutters and drawing the curtains. All I could find was a long since dead mosquito stuck to the wall near the ceiling.

Having motioned to the servant to put her tray down on a table by the fireplace, I poured myself a glass of wine and locked the door behind her. I then disconnected the telephone—I always did this now at night—and turned out all the lights but the lamp on my desk.

Slitting open Hélène's fat envelope, I extracted a thick wad of closely written pages. I read the following lines neatly centred in the middle of the top page:

This is not a confession because, although I killed my husband, I am not a murderess. I simply and very faithfully carried out his last wish by crushing his head and right arm under the steam-hammer of his brother's factory.

Without even touching the glass of wine by my elbow, I turned the page and started reading.

For very nearly a year before his death (*the manuscript began*), my husband had told me of some of his experiments. He knew full well that his colleagues of the Air Ministry would have forbidden some of them as too dangerous, but he was keen on obtaining positive results before reporting his discovery.

Whereas only sound and pictures had been, so far, transmitted through space by radio and television, André claimed to have discovered a way of transmitting matter. Matter, any solid object, placed in his 'transmitter' was instantly disintegrated and reintegrated in a special receiving set.

André considered his discovery as perhaps the most important since that of the wheel sawn off the end of a tree trunk. He reckoned that the transmission of matter by instantaneous 'disintegration-reintegration' would completely change life as we had known it so far. It would mean the end of all means of transport, not only of goods including food, but also of human beings. André, the practical scientist who never allowed theories or daydreams to get the better of him, already foresaw the time when there would no longer be any aeroplanes, ships, trains, or cars and, therefore, no longer any roads or railway lines, ports, airports, or stations. All that would be replaced by matter-transmitting and receiving stations throughout the world. Travelers and goods would be placed in special cabins and, at a given signal, would simply disappear and reappear almost immediately at the chosen receiving station.

André's receiving set was only a few feet away from his transmitter, in an adjoining room of his laboratory, and he at first ran into all sorts of snags. His first successful experiment was carried out with an ash tray taken from his desk, a souvenir we had brought back from a trip to London.

That was the first time he told me about his experiments and I had no idea of what he was talking about

the day he came dashing into the house and threw the ash tray in my lap.

"Hélène, look! For a fraction of a second, a bare ten-millionth of a second, that ash tray has been completely disintegrated. For one little moment it no longer existed! Gone! Nothing left, absolutely nothing. Only atoms travelling through space at the speed of light! And the moment after, the atoms were once more gathered together in the shape of an ash tray!"

"André, please . . . please! What on earth are you raving about?"

He started sketching all over a letter I had been writing. He laughed at my wry face, swept all my letters off the table and said:

"You don't understand? Right. Let's start all over again. Hélène, do you remember I once read you an article about the mysterious flying stones that seem to come from nowhere in particular, and which are said to occasionally fall in certain houses in India? They come flying in as though thrown from outside and that, in spite of closed doors and windows."

"Yes, I remember. I also remember that Professor Augier, your friend of the Collège de France, who had come down for a few days, remarked that if there was no trickery about it, the only possible explanation was that the stones had been disintegrated after having been thrown from outside, come through the walls, and then been reintegrated before hitting the floor or the opposite walls."

"That's right. And I added that there was, of course, one other possibility, namely the momentary and partial disintegration of the walls as the stone or stones came through."

"Yes, André. I remember all that, and I suppose you also remember that I failed to understand, and that you got quite annoyed. Well, I still do not understand why and how, even disintegrated, stones should be able to come through a wall or a closed door."

"But it is possible, H      , because the atoms that go to make up matter are not close together like the bricks of a wall. They are separated by relative immensities of space."

"Do you mean to say that you have disintegrated that ash tray, and then put it together again after pushing it through something?"

"Precisely, H      . I projected it through the wall that separates my transmitter from my receiving set."

"And would it be foolish to ask how humanity is to benefit from ash trays that can go through walls?"

Andr   seemed quite offended, but he soon saw that I was only teasing and again waxing enthusiastic, he told me of some of the possibilities of his discovery.

"Isn't it wonderful, H      ?" he finally gasped, out of breath.

"Yes, Andr  . But I hope you won't ever transmit me; I'd be too much afraid of coming out at the other end like your ash tray."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember what was written under that ash tray?"

"Yes, of course: Made in Japan. That was the great joke of our typically British souvenir."

"The words are still there, Andr  ; but . . . look!"

He took the ash tray out of my hands, frowned, and walked over to the window. Then he went quite pale, and I knew that he had seen what had proved to me that he had indeed carried out a strange experiment.

The three words were still there, but reversed and reading:

nsq  l ni       

Without a word, having completely forgotten me, Andr   rushed off to his laboratory. I only saw him the next morning, tired and unshaven after a whole night's work.

A few days later Andr   had a new reverse which put

him out of sorts and made him fussy and grumpy for several weeks. I stood it patiently enough for a while, but being myself bad tempered one evening, we had a silly row over some futile thing, and I reproached him for his moroseness.

"I'm sorry, *chérie*. I've been working my way through a maze of problems and have given you all a very rough time. You see, my very first experiment with a live animal proved a complete fiasco."

"André! You tried that experiment with Dandelo, didn't you?"

"Yes. How did you know?" he answered sheepishly. "He disintegrated perfectly, but he never reappeared in the receiving set."

"Oh, André! What became of him then?"

"Nothing . . . there is just no more Dandelo; only the dispersed atoms of a cat wandering, God knows where, in the universe."

Dandelo was a small white cat the cook had found one morning in the garden and which we had promptly adopted. Now I knew how it had disappeared and was quite angry about the whole thing, but my husband was so miserable over it all that I said nothing.

I saw little of my husband during the next few weeks. He had most of his meals sent down to the laboratory. I would often wake up in the morning and find his bed unslept in. Sometimes, if he had come in very late, I would find that storm-swept appearance which only a man can give a bedroom by getting up very early and fumbling around in the dark.

One evening he came home to dinner all smiles, and I knew that his troubles were over. His face dropped, however, when he saw I was dressed for going out.

"Oh. Were you going out, Hélène?"

"Yes, the Drillons invited me for a game of bridge, but I can easily phone them and put it off."

"No, it's all right."

"It isn't all right. Out with it, dear!"

"Well, I've at last got everything perfect and I wanted you to be the first to see the miracle."

"*Magnifique*, André! Of course I'll be delighted."

Having telephoned our neighbours to say how sorry I was and so forth, I ran down to the kitchen and told the cook that she had exactly ten minutes in which to prepare a 'celebration dinner'.

"An excellent idea, Hélène," said my husband when the maid appeared with the champagne after our candlelight dinner. "We'll celebrate with reintegrated champagne!" and taking the tray from the maid's hands, he led the way down to the laboratory.

"Do you think it will be as good as before its disintegration?" I asked, holding the tray while he opened the door and switched on the lights.

"Have no fear. You'll see! Just bring it here, will you," he said, opening the door of a telephone call-box he had bought and which had been transformed into what he called a transmitter. "Put it down on that now," he added, putting a stool inside the box.

Having carefully closed the door, he took me to the other end of the room and handed me a pair of very dark sun glasses. He put on another pair and walked back to a switchboard by the transmitter.

"Ready, Hélène?" said my husband, turning out all the lights. "Don't remove your glasses till I give the word."

"I won't budge, André. Go on," I told him, my eyes fixed on the tray which I could just see in a greenish shimmering light through the glass panelled door of the telephone booth.

"Right," said André throwing a switch.

The whole room was brilliantly illuminated by an orange flash. Inside the booth I had seen a crackling ball of fire and felt its heat on my face, neck, and hands. The whole thing lasted but the fraction of a second, and I found myself blinking at green-edged black holes like those one sees after having stared at the sun.

"*Et voila!* You can take off your glasses, Hélène."

A little theatrically perhaps, my husband opened the door of the booth. Though André had told me what to expect, I was astonished to find that the champagne, glasses, tray, and stool were no longer there.

André ceremoniously led me by the hand into the next room in a corner of which stood a second telephone booth. Opening the door wide, he triumphantly lifted the champagne tray off the stool.

Feeling somewhat like the good-natured kind-member-of-the-audience who has been dragged on to the music hall stage by the magician, I refrained from saying 'All done with mirrors', which I knew would have annoyed my husband.

"Sure it's not dangerous to drink?" I asked as the cork popped.

"Absolutely sure, Hélène," he said handing me a glass. "But that was nothing. Drink this off and I'll show you something much more astounding."

We went back into the other room.

"Oh, André! Remember poor Dandelo!"

"This is only a guinea pig, Hélène. But I'm positive it will go through all right."

He set the furry little beast down on the green enamelled floor of the booth and quickly closed the door. I again put on my dark glasses and saw and felt the vivid crackling flash.

Without waiting for André to open the door, I rushed into the next room where the lights were still on and looked into the receiving booth.

"Oh, André! *Chéri!* He's there all right!" I shouted excitedly, watching the little animal trotting round and round. "It's wonderful, André. It works! You've succeeded!"

"I hope so, but I must be patient. I'll know for sure in a few weeks' time."

"What do you mean? Look! He's as full of life as when you put him in the other booth."

"Yes, so he seems. But we'll have to see if all his organs are intact, and that will take some time. If that little beast is still full of life in a month's time, we then consider the experiment a success."

I begged André to let me take care of the guinea pig.

"All right, but don't kill it by overfeeding," he agreed with a grin for my enthusiasm.

Though not allowed to take Hop-la—the name I had given the guinea pig—out of its box in the laboratory, I tied a pink ribbon round its neck and was allowed to feed it twice a day.

Hop-la soon got used to its pink ribbon and became quite a tame little pet, but that month of waiting seemed a year.

And then one day, André put Miquette, our cocker spaniel, into his 'transmitter'. He had not told me beforehand, knowing full well that I would never have agreed to such an experiment with our dog. But when he did tell me, Miquette had been successfully transmitted half a dozen times and seemed to be enjoying the operation thoroughly; no sooner was she let out of the 'reintegrator' than she dashed madly into the next room, scratching at the 'transmitter' door to have 'another go', as André called it.

I now expected that my husband would invite some of his colleagues and Air Ministry specialists to come down. He usually did this when he had finished a research job and, before handing them long detailed reports which he always typed himself, he would carry out an experiment or two before them. But this time, he just went on working. One morning I finally asked him when he intended throwing his usual 'surprise party', as we called it.

"No, Hélène; not for a long while yet. This discovery is much too important. I have an awful lot of work to do on it still. Do you realize that there are some parts of the transmission proper which I do not yet myself fully understand? It works all right, but you see, I can't

just say to all these eminent professors that I do this and that and, poof, it works! I must be able to explain how and why it works. And what is even more important, I must be ready and able to refute every destructive argument they will not fail to trot out, as they usually do when faced with anything really good."

I was occasionally invited down to the laboratory to witness some new experiment, but I never went unless André invited me, and only talked about his work if he broached the subject first. Of course it never occurred to me that he would, at that stage at least, have tried an experiment with a human being; though, had I thought about it—knowing André—it would have been obvious that he would never have allowed anyone into the 'transmitter' before he had been through to test it first. It was only after the accident that I discovered he had duplicated all his switches inside the disintegration booth, so that he could try it out by himself.

The morning André tried this terrible experiment, he did not show up for lunch. I sent the maid down with a tray, but she brought it back with a note she had found pinned outside the laboratory door: *Do not disturb me, I am working.*

He did occasionally pin such notes on his door and, though I noticed it, I paid no particular attention to the unusually large handwriting of his note.

It was just after that, as I was drinking my coffee, that Henri came bouncing into the room to say that he had caught a funny fly, and would I like to see it. Refusing even to look at his closed fist, I ordered him to release it immediately.

"But, *Maman*, it has such a funny white head!"

Marching the boy over to the open window, I told him to release the fly immediately, which he did. I knew that Henri had caught the fly merely because he thought it looked curious or different from other flies, but I also knew that his father would never stand for any form of cruelty to animals, and that there would be

a fuss should he discover that our son had put a fly in a box or a bottle.

At dinner time that evening, André had still not shown up and, a little worried, I ran down to the laboratory and knocked at the door.

He did not answer my knock, but I heard him moving around and a moment later he slipped a note under the door. It was typewritten:

Hélène, I am having trouble. Put the boy to bed and come back in an hour's time. A.

Frightened, I knocked and called, but André did not seem to pay any attention and, vaguely reassured by the familiar noise of his typewriter, I went back to the house.

Having put Henri to bed, I returned to the laboratory where I found another note slipped under the door. My hand shook as I picked it up because I knew by then that something must be radically wrong. I read:

Hélène, first of all I count on you not to lose your nerve or do anything rash because you alone can help me. I have had a serious accident. I am not in any particular danger for the time being though it is a matter of life and death. It is useless calling to me or saying anything. I cannot answer, I cannot speak. I want you to do exactly and very carefully all that I ask. After having knocked three times to show that you understand and agree, fetch me a bowl of milk laced with rum. I have had nothing all day and can do with it.

Shaking with fear, not knowing what to think and repressing a furious desire to call André and bang away until he opened, I knocked three times as requested and ran all the way home to fetch what he wanted.

In less than five minutes I was back. Another note had been slipped under the door:

Hélène, follow these instructions carefully. When you knock I'll open the door. You are to walk over to my desk and put down the bowl of milk. You will then go into the other room where the receiver is. Look carefully and try to find a fly which ought to be there but which I am unable to find. Unfortunately I cannot see small things very easily.

Before you come in you must promise to obey me implicitly. Do not look at me and remember that talking is quite useless. I cannot answer. Knock again three times and that will mean I have your promise. My life depends entirely on the help you can give me.

I had to wait a while to pull myself together, and then I knocked slowly three times.

I heard André shuffling behind the door, then his hand fumbling with the lock, and the door opened.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that he was standing behind the door, but without looking round, I carried the bowl of milk to his desk. He was evidently watching me and I must at all costs appear calm and collected.

"*Chéri*, you can count on me," I said gently, and putting the bowl down under his desk lamp, the only one alight, I walked into the next room where all the lights were blazing.

My first impression was that some sort of hurricane must have blown out of the receiving booth. Papers were scattered in every direction, a whole row of test tubes lay smashed in a corner, chairs and stools were upset and one of the window curtains hung half torn from its bent rod. In a large enamel basin on the floor a heap of burned documents was still smouldering.

I knew that I would not find the fly André wanted me to look for. Women know things that men only suppose by reasoning and deduction; it is a form of knowledge very rarely accessible to them and which they disparage-

ingly call intuition. I already knew that the fly André wanted was the one which Henri had caught and which I had made him release.

I heard André shuffling around in the next room, and then a strange gurgling and sucking as though he had trouble in drinking his milk.

"André, there is no fly here. Can you give me any sort of indication that might help? If you can't speak, rap or something . . . you know: once for yes, twice for no."

I had tried to control my voice and speak as though perfectly calm, but I had to choke down a sob of desperation when he rapped twice for 'no'.

"May I come to you, André? I don't know what can have happened, but whatever it is, I'll be courageous, dear."

After a moment of silent hesitation, he tapped once on his desk.

At the door I stopped aghast at the sight of André standing with his head and shoulders covered by the brown velvet cloth he had taken from a table by his desk, the table on which he usually ate when he did not want to leave his work. Suppressing a laugh that might easily have turned to sobbing, I said:

"André, we'll search thoroughly tomorrow, by daylight. Why don't you go to bed? I'll lead you to the guest room if you like, and won't let anyone else see you."

His left hand tapped the desk twice.

"Do you need a doctor, André?"

"No," he rapped.

"Would you like me to call up Professor Augier? He might be of more help . . ."

Twice he rapped 'no' sharply. I did not know what to do or say. And then I told him:

"Henri caught a fly this morning which he wanted to show me, but I made him release it. Could it have been the one you are looking for? I didn't see it, but the boy said its head was white."

André emitted a strange metallic sigh, and I just had time to bite my fingers fiercely in order not to scream. He had let his right arm drop, and instead of his long-fingered muscular hand, a grey stick with little buds on it like the branch of a tree, hung out of his sleeve almost down to his knee.

"André, *mon chéri*, tell me what happened. I might be of more help to you if I knew. André . . . oh, it's terrible!" I sobbed, unable to control myself.

Having rapped once for yes, he pointed to the door with his left hand.

I stepped out and sank down crying as he locked the door behind me. He was typing again and I waited. At last he shuffled to the door and slid a sheet of paper under it.

Hélène, come back in the morning. I must think and will have typed out an explanation for you. Take one of my sleeping tablets and go straight to bed. I need you fresh and strong tomorrow, *ma pauvre chérie*.

A.

"Do you want anything for the night, André?" I shouted through the door.

He knocked twice for no, and a little later I heard the typewriter again.

The sun full on my face woke me up with a start. I had set the alarm clock for five but had not heard it, probably because of the sleeping tablets. I had indeed slept like a log, without a dream. Now I was back in my living nightmare and crying like a child I sprang out of bed. It was just on seven!

Rushing into the kitchen, without a word for the startled servants, I rapidly prepared a trayload of coffee, bread, and butter with which I ran down to the laboratory.

André opened the door as soon as I knocked and closed it again as I carried the tray to his desk. His head was still covered, but I saw from his crumpled suit and

his open camp bed that he must have at least tried to rest.

On his desk lay a typewritten sheet for me which I picked up. André opened the other door, and taking this to mean that he wanted to be left alone, I walked into the next room. He pushed the door to and I heard him pouring out the coffee as I read:

Do you remember the ash tray experiment? I have had a similar accident. I 'transmitted' myself successfully the night before last. During a second experiment yesterday a fly which I did not see must have got into the 'disintegrator'. My only hope is to find that fly and go through again with it. Please search for it carefully since, if it is not found, I shall have to find a way of putting an end to all this.

If only André had been more explicit! I shuddered at the thought that he must be terribly disfigured and then cried softly as I imagined his face inside-out, or perhaps his eyes in place of his ears, or his mouth at the back of his neck, or worse!

André must be saved! For that, the fly must be found!

Pulling myself together, I said:

"André, may I come in?"

He opened the door.

"André, don't despair; I am going to find that fly. It is no longer in the laboratory, but it cannot be very far. I suppose you're disfigured, perhaps terribly so, but there can be no question of putting an end to all this, as you say in your note; that I will never stand for. If necessary, if you do not wish to be seen, I'll make you a mask or a cowl so that you can go on with your work until you get well again. If you cannot work, I'll call Professor Augier, and he and all your other friends will save you, André."

Again I heard that curious metallic sigh as he rapped violently on his desk.

"André, don't be annoyed; please be calm. I won't do anything without first consulting you, but you must rely on me, have faith in me and let me help you as best I can. Are you terribly disfigured, dear? Can't you let me see your face? I won't be afraid . . . I am your wife, you know."

But my husband again rapped a decisive 'no' and pointed to the door.

"All right. I am going to search for the fly now, but promise me you won't do anything foolish; promise you won't do anything rash or dangerous without first letting me know all about it!"

He extended his left hand, and I knew I had his promise.

I will never forget that ceaseless day-long hunt for a fly. Back home, I turned the house inside-out and made all the servants join in the search. I told them that a fly had escaped from the Professor's laboratory and that it must be captured alive, but it was evident they already thought me crazy. They said so to the police later, and that day's hunt for a fly most probably saved me from the guillotine later.

I questioned Henri and as he failed to understand right away what I was talking about, I shook him and slapped him, and made him cry in front of the round-eyed maids. Realizing that I must not let myself go, I kissed and petted the poor boy and at last made him understand what I wanted of him. Yes, he remembered, he had found the fly just by the kitchen window; yes, he had released it immediately as told to.

Even in summer time we had very few flies because our house is on the top of a hill and the slightest breeze coming across the valley blows round it. In spite of that, I managed to catch dozens of flies that day. On all the window sills and all over the garden I had put saucers of milk, sugar, jam, meat—all the things likely to attract flies. Of all those we caught, and many others which we failed to catch but which I saw, none re-

sembled the one Henri had caught the day before. One by one, with a magnifying glass, I examined every unusual fly, but none had anything like a white head.

At lunch time, I ran down to André with some milk and mashed potatoes. I also took some of the flies we had caught, but he gave me to understand that they could be of no possible use to him.

"If that fly has not been found tonight, André, we'll have to see what is to be done. And this is what I propose: I'll sit in the next room. When you can't answer by the yes-no method of rapping, you'll type out whatever you want to say and then slip it under the door. Agreed?"

"Yes," rapped André.

By nightfall we had still not found the fly. At dinner time, as I prepared André's tray, I broke down and sobbed in the kitchen in front of the silent servants. My maid thought that I had had a row with my husband, probably about the mislaid fly, but I learned later that the cook was already quite sure that I was out of my mind.

Without a word, I picked up the tray and then put it down again as I stopped by the telephone. That this was really a matter of life and death for André, I had no doubt. Neither did I doubt that he fully intended committing suicide, unless I could make him change his mind, or at least put off such a drastic decision. Would I be strong enough? He would never forgive me for not keeping a promise, but under the circumstances, did that really matter? To the devil with promises and honour! At all costs André must be saved! And having thus made up my mind, I looked up and dialled Professor Augier's number.

"The Professor is away and will not be back before the end of the week," said a polite neutral voice at the other end of the line.

That was that! I would have to fight alone and fight I would. I would save André come what may.

All my nervousness had disappeared as André let me in and, after putting the tray of food down on his desk, I went into the other room, as agreed.

"The first thing I want to know," I said as he closed the door behind me, "is what happened exactly. Can you please tell me, André?"

I waited patiently while he typed an answer which he pushed under the door a little later.

Hélène, I would rather not tell you. Since go I must, I would rather you remember me as I was before. I must destroy myself in such a way that none can possibly know what has happened to me. I have of course thought of simply disintegrating myself in my transmitter, but I had better not because, sooner or later, I might find myself reintegrated. Some day, somewhere, some scientist is sure to make the same discovery. I have therefore thought of a way which is neither simple nor easy, but you can and will help me.

For several minutes I wondered if André had not simply gone stark raving mad.

"André," I said at last, "whatever you may have chosen or thought of, I cannot and will never accept such a cowardly solution. No matter how awful the result of your experiment or accident, you are alive, you are a man, a brain . . . and you have a soul. You have no right to destroy yourself! You know that!"

The answer was soon typed and pushed under the door.

I am alive all right, but I am already no longer a man. As to my brain or intelligence, it may disappear at any moment. As it is, it is no longer intact, and there can be no soul without intelligence . . . and you know that!

"Then you must tell the other scientists about your discovery. They will help you and save you, André!"

I staggered back frightened as he angrily thumped the door twice.

"André . . . why? Why do you refuse the aid you know they would give you with all their hearts?"

A dozen furious knocks shook the door and made me understand that my husband would never accept such a solution. I had to find other arguments.

For hours, it seemed, I talked to him about our boy, about me, about his family, about his duty to us and to the rest of humanity. He made no reply of any sort. At last I cried:

"André . . . do you hear me?"

"Yes," he knocked very gently.

"Well, listen then. I have another idea. You remember your first experiment with the ash tray? . . . Well, do you think that if you had put it through again a second time, it might possibly have come out with the letters turned back the right way?"

Before I had finished speaking, André was busily typing and a moment later I read his answer:

I have already thought of that. And that was why I needed the fly. It has got to go through with me. There is no hope otherwise.

"Try all the same, André. You never know!"

'I have tried seven times already,' was the typewritten reply I got to that.

"André! Try again, please!"

The answer this time gave me a flutter of hope, because no woman has ever understood, or will ever understand, how a man about to die can possibly consider anything funny.

I deeply admire your delicious feminine logic. We could go on doing this experiment until Doomsday. However, just to give you that pleasure, probably the very last I shall ever be able to give you, I will try

once more. If you cannot find the dark glasses, turn your back to the machine and press your hands over your eyes. Let me know when you are ready.

"Ready, André!" I shouted, without even looking for the glasses and following his instructions.

I heard him move around and then open and close the door of his 'disintegrator'. After what seemed a very long wait, but probably was not more than a minute or so, I heard a violent crackling noise and perceived a bright flash through my eyelids and fingers.

I turned around as the booth door opened.

His head and shoulders still covered with the brown velvet cloth, André was gingerly stepping out of it.

"How do you feel, André? Any difference?" I asked, touching his arm.

He tried to step away from me and caught his foot in one of the stools which I had not troubled to pick up. He made a violent effort to regain his balance, and the velvet cloth slowly slid off his shoulders and head as he fell heavily backwards.

The horror was too much for me, too unexpected. As a matter of fact, I am sure that, even had I known, the horror-impact could hardly have been less powerful. Trying to push both hands into my mouth to stifle my screams and although my fingers were bleeding, I screamed again and again. I could not take my eyes off him, I could not even close them, and yet I knew that if I looked at the horror much longer, I would go on screaming for the rest of my life.

Slowly, the monster, the thing that had been my husband, covered its head, got up and groped its way to the door and passed it. Though still screaming, I was able to close my eyes.

I who had ever been a true Catholic, who believed in God and another, better life hereafter, have today but one hope: that when I die, I really die, and that there may be no after-life of any sort because, if there is, then

I shall never forget! Day and night, awake or asleep, I see it, and I know that I am condemned to see it forever, even perhaps into oblivion!

Until I am totally extinct, nothing can, nothing will ever make me forget that dreadful white hairy head with its low flat skull and its two pointed ears. Pink and moist, the nose was also that of a cat, a huge cat. But the eyes! Or rather, where the eyes should have been were two brown bumps the size of saucers. Instead of a mouth, animal or human, was a long hairy vertical slit from which hung a black quivering trunk that widened at the end, trumpet-like, and from which saliva kept dripping.

I must have fainted, because I found myself flat on my stomach on the cold cement floor of the laboratory, staring at the closed door behind which I could hear the noise of André's typewriter.

Numb, numb and empty, I must have looked as people do immediately after a terrible accident, before they fully understand what has happened. I could only think of a man I had once seen on the platform of a railway station, quite conscious, and looking stupidly at his leg still on the line where the train had just passed.

My throat was aching terribly, and that made me wonder if my vocal cords had not perhaps been torn, and whether I would ever be able to speak again.

The noise of the typewriter suddenly stopped and I felt I was going to scream again as something touched the door and a sheet of paper slid from under it.

Shivering with fear and disgust, I crawled over to where I could read it without touching it:

Now you understand. That last experiment was a new disaster, my poor Hélène. I suppose you recognized part of Dandelo's head. When I went into the disintegrator just now, my head was only that of a fly. I now only have eyes and mouth left. The rest has been replaced by parts of the cat's head. Poor

Dandelo whose atoms had never come together. You see now that there can only be one possible solution, don't you? I must disappear. Knock on the door when you are ready and I shall explain what you have to do.

Of course he was right, and it had been wrong and cruel of me to insist on a new experiment. And I knew that there was now no possible hope, that any further experiments could only bring about worse results.

Getting up dazed, I went to the door and tried to speak, but no sound came out of my throat . . . so I knocked once!

You can of course guess the rest. He explained his plan in short typewritten notes, and I agreed, I agreed to everything!

My head on fire, but shivering with cold, like an automaton, I followed him into the silent factory. In my hand was a full page of explanations: what I had to know about the steam-hammer.

Without stopping or looking back, he pointed to the switchboard that controlled the steam-hammer as he passed it. I went no farther and watched him come to a halt before the terrible instrument.

He knelt down, carefully wrapped the cloth round his head, and then stretched out flat on the ground.

It was not difficult. I was not killing my husband. André, poor André, had gone long ago, years ago it seemed. I was merely carrying out his last wish . . . and mine.

Without hesitating, my eyes on the long still body, I firmly pushed the 'stroke' button right in. The great metallic mass seemed to drop slowly. It was not so much the resounding clang of the hammer that made me jump as the sharp cracking which I had distinctly heard at the same time. My hus . . . the thing's body shook a second and then lay still.

It was then I noticed that he had forgotten to put his

right arm, his fly leg, under the hammer. The police would never understand but the scientists would, and they must not! That had been André's last wish, also!

I had to do it and quickly, too; the night watchman must have heard the hammer and would be round any moment. I pushed the other button and the hammer slowly rose. Seeing but trying not to look, I ran up, leaned down, lifted and moved forward the right arm which seemed terribly light. Back at the switchboard, again I pushed the red button, and down came the hammer a second time. Then I ran all the way home.

You know the rest and can now do whatever you think right.

So ended Hélène's manuscript.

* * *

The following day I telephoned Commissaire Charas to invite him to dinner.

"With pleasure, Monsieur Delambre. Allow me, however, to ask: is it the Commissaire you are inviting, or just Monsieur Charas?"

"Have you any preference?"

"No, not at the present moment."

"Well then, make it whichever you like. Will eight o'clock suit you?"

Although it was raining, the Commissaire arrived on foot that evening.

"Since you did not come tearing up to the door in your black Citroën, I take it you have opted for Monsieur Charas, off duty?"

"I left the car up a side-street," mumbled the Commissaire with a grin as the maid staggered under the weight of his raincoat.

"*Merci*," he said a minute later as I handed him a glass of Pernod into which he tipped a few drops of water, watching it turn the golden amber liquid to pale blue milk.

"You heard about my poor sister-in-law?"

"Yes, shortly after you telephoned me this morning. I am sorry, but perhaps it was all for the best. Being already in charge of your brother's case, the inquiry automatically comes to me."

"I suppose it was suicide."

"Without a doubt. Cyanide the doctors say quite rightly; I found a second tablet in the unstitched hem of her dress."

"*Monsieur est servi*," announced the maid.

"I would like to show you a very curious document afterwards, Charas."

"Ah, yes. I heard that Madame Delambre had been writing a lot, but we could find nothing beyond the short note informing us that she was committing suicide."

During our tête-à-tête dinner, we talked politics, books, and films, and the local football club of which the Commissaire was a keen supporter.

After dinner, I took him up to my study where a bright fire—a habit I had picked up in England during the war—was burning.

Without even asking him, I handed him his brandy and mixed myself what he called 'crushed-bug juice in soda water'—his appreciation of whisky.

"I would like you to read this, Charas; first because it was partly intended for you and, secondly, because it will interest you. If you think Commissaire Charas has no objection, I would like to burn it after."

Without a word, he took the wad of sheets Hélène had given me the day before and settled down to read them.

"What do you think of it all?" I asked some twenty minutes later as he carefully folded Hélène's manuscript, slipped it into the brown envelope, and put it into the fire.

Charas watched the flames licking the envelope from which wisps of grey smoke were escaping, and it was

only when it burst into flames that he said slowly raising his eyes to mine:

"I think it proves very definitely that Madame Delambre was quite insane."

For a long time we watched the fire eating up Hélène's 'confession'.

"A funny thing happened to me this morning, Charas. I went to the cemetery where my brother is buried. It was quite empty and I was alone."

"Not quite, Monsieur Delambre. I was there, but I did not want to disturb you."

"Then you saw me . . ."

"Yes. I saw you bury a matchbox."

"Do you know what was in it?"

"A fly, I suppose."

"Yes. I had found it early this morning, caught in a spider's web in the garden."

"Was it dead?"

"No, not quite. I . . . crushed it . . . between two stones. Its head was . . . white . . . all white."

THE VERTICAL LADDER

by William Sansom

AS HE felt the first watery eggs of sweat moistening the palms of his hands, as with every rung higher his body seemed to weigh more heavily, this young man, Flegg, regretted in sudden desperation, but still in vain, the irresponsible events that had thrust him into his present precarious climb. Here he was, isolated on a vertical iron ladder flat to the side of a gas tank and bound now to climb higher and higher until he reached the vertiginous skyward summit.

How could he ever have wished this on himself? How easy it had been to laugh away his cautionary fears on the firm ground! Now he would give the very hands that clung to the ladder for a safe conduct to solid earth.

It had been a strong spring day, abruptly as warm as midsummer. The sun flooded the parks and streets with sudden heat—Flegg and his friends had felt stifled in their thick winter clothes. The green glare of the new leaves everywhere struck the eye too fiercely, the air seemed almost sticky from the exhalations of buds and swelling resins. Cold winter senses were overcome—the girls had complained of headaches, and their thoughts had grown confused and uncomfortable as the wool underneath against their skins. They had wandered out from the park by a back gate, into an area of back streets.

The houses there were small and old, some of them already falling into disrepair; short streets, cobbles, narrow sidewalks, and the only shops a tobacconist or a desolate drug store to colour the grey—it was the out-

crop of some industrial undertaking beyond. At first these quiet, almost deserted streets had seemed more restful than the park; but soon a dusty air of peeling plaster and powdering brick, the dark windows and the dry stone steps, the very dryness altogether, had proved more wearying than before, so that when suddenly the houses had ended and the ground had opened to reveal the yards of a disused gasworks, Flegg and his friends had welcomed the green of nettles and milkwort that grew among the scrap iron and broken brick.

They walked out into the wasteland, the two girls and Flegg and the other two boys, and stood presently before the old gas tank itself. Among the ruined sheds this was the only structure still whole; it still predominated over the yards, towering high above other buildings for hundreds of feet around. So they threw bricks against its rusted sides.

The rust flew off in flakes, and the iron rang dully. Flegg, who wished to excel in the eyes of the dark-haired girl, began throwing bricks higher than the others, at the same time lobbing them, to suggest that he knew something of grenade throwing, claiming for himself vicariously the glamour of a uniform. He felt the girl's eyes follow his shoulders; his shoulders broadened. She had black eyes, unshadowed beneath short, wide-awake lids, as bright as a boy's eyes; her lips pouted with difficulty over a scramble of irregular teeth, so that it often looked as if she were laughing; she always frowned—and Flegg liked her earnest, purposeful expression. Altogether she seemed a wide-awake girl, who would be the first to appreciate an active sort of man. Now she frowned and shouted, "Bet you can't climb as high as you can throw!"

Then there began one of those uneasy jokes, innocent at first, that, taken seriously, can accumulate an hysterical volume of spite. Everyone recognizes this underlying unpleasantness; it is plainly felt; but just because of this the joke must at all costs be pressed forward; one

becomes frightened, one laughs all the louder, pressing to drown the embarrassments of danger and guilt.

The third boy shouted instantly, "Course he can't. He can't climb no higher than himself." Flegg turned round, scoffing, so that the girl shouted again, laughing shrilly and pointing upwards. Already all five of them felt uneasy. Then in quick succession, all in a few seconds, the third boy repeated, "Course he can't." Flegg said, "Climb to the top of anything." The other boy said, "Climb to the top of my Aunt Fanny." The girl said, "Climb to the top of the gas tank, then."

Flegg said, "That's nothing." And the girl, pressing on then as she had to, suddenly introduced the inevitable detail that made these suppositions into fact: "Go on then, climb it. Here—tie my hanky on the top. Tie my flag on the top."

Even then Flegg had a second's chance. It occurred to him instantly that he could laugh it off; but hysterical emphasis now possessed the girl's face—she was dancing up and down and clapping her hands insistently—and this confused Flegg. He began stuttering after the right words. But the words refused to come. At all costs he had to cover his stuttering. So: "Off we go then!" he said. And he turned to the gas tank.

It was not, after all, so very high. It was hardly a full-size tank, its trellised iron top rail would have stood level with the roof coping of a five- or six-storey tenement. Until then Flegg had seen the gas tank as a rough mass of iron, but now every detail sprang into abrupt definition. He studied it intently, alertly considering its size and every feature of stability, the brown, rusted iron sheeting smeared here and there with red lead, a curious buckling that sometimes deflated its curved bulk as though a vacuum were collapsing it from within, and the ladders scaling the sides flush with the sheeting. The grid of girders, a complexity of struts, the bolting.

There were two ladders, one Jacob's ladder clamped fast to the side, another that was more of a staircase,

zigzagging up the belly of the tank in easy gradients and provided with a safety rail. This must have been erected later as a substitute for the Jacob's ladder, which demanded an unnecessarily stringent climb and was now in fact in disuse, for some twenty feet of its lower rungs had been torn away. However, there was apparently some painting in progress, for a painter's wooden ladder had been propped beneath with its top reaching to the undamaged bottom of the vertical ladder—the ascent was thus serviceable again. Flegg looked quickly at the foot of the wooden ladder—was it well grounded?—and then at its top farther up—was this secure?—and then way to the top, screwing his eyes to note any fault in the iron rungs reaching innumerable and indistinctly to the summit platform.

Flegg, rapidly assessing these structures, never stopped sauntering forward. He was committed, and so while deliberately sauntering to appear thus the more at ease, he knew that he must never hesitate. The two boys and his own girl kept up a chorus of encouraging abuse. "How I climbed Mount Everest," they shouted. "He'll come down quicker'n he went up." "Mind you don't bang your head on a harp, Sir Galahad." But the second girl had remained quiet throughout; she was already frightened, sensing instantly that the guilt for some tragedy was hers alone—although she never had opened her mouth. Now she chewed passionately on gum that kept her jaws firm and circling.

Suddenly the chorus rose shriller. Flegg had veered slightly towards the safer staircase. His eyes naturally had questioned this along with the rest of the gas tank, and almost unconsciously his footsteps had veered in the direction of his eyes; then this instinct had emerged into full consciousness—perhaps he could use the staircase, no one actually had mentioned the Jacob's ladder, there might yet be a chance. But the quick eyes behind him had seen, and immediately the chorus rose: "No, you don't!" "Not up those sissy stairs!"

Flegg switched his course by only the fraction that turned him again to the perpendicular ladder. "Who's talking about stairs?" he shouted back.

Behind him they still kept up a din, still kept up to pitch, worrying at him viciously. "Look at him, he doesn't know which way to go—he's like a duck's uncle without an aunt."

So that Flegg realized finally there was no alternative. He had to climb the tank by the vertical ladder. And as soon as this was finally settled, the doubt cleared from his mind. He braced his shoulders and suddenly found himself really making light of the job. After all, he thought, it isn't so high. Why should I worry? Hundreds of men climb such ladders every day, no one falls, the ladders are clamped as safe as houses. He began to smile within himself at his earlier perturbations.

Added to this, the girl now ran up to him and handed him her handkerchief. As her black eyes frowned a smile at him, he saw that her expression no longer held its vicious, laughing scorn, but had grown softer, with a look of real encouragement and even admiration. "Here's your flag," she said. And then she even added: "Tell you what—you don't really have to go! I'll believe you!" But this came too late. Flegg had accepted the climb, it was fact, and already he felt something of an exhilarating glow of glory. He took the handkerchief, blew the girl a dramatic kiss, and started up the lowest rungs of the wooden ladder at a run.

This painter's ladder was placed at a comfortable slant. Nevertheless, Flegg had climbed only some ten feet—what might correspond to the top of a first-floor window—when he began to slow up; he stopped running and gripped harder at the rungs above and placed his feet more firmly on the unseen bars below. Although he had not yet measured his distance from the ground, somehow he sensed distinctly that he was already unnaturally high, with nothing but air and a precarious

skeleton of wooden bars between him and the receding ground. He felt independent of solid support; yet, according to his eyes, which stared straight forward at the iron sheeting, he might have been still standing on the lowest rungs by the ground. The sensation of height infected him strongly; it had become an urgent necessity to maintain a balance; each muscle of his body became unnaturally alert. This was not an unpleasant feeling; he almost enjoyed a new athletic command of every precarious movement. He climbed then methodically until he reached the ladder top and the first of the perpendicular iron rungs.

Here for a moment Flegg paused. He rested his knees against the last three steps of the safely slanting wooden ladder; he grasped the two side supports of the rusted iron that led so straightly upwards. His knees then clung to the motherly wood, his hands felt the iron cold and gritty. The rust powdered off and smeared him with its red, and one large scrap flaked off and fell on to his face as he looked upwards. He wanted to brush this away from his eye, but the impulse was, to his surprise, much less powerful than the vicelike will that clutched his hand to the iron support. His hand remained firmly gripping the iron; he had to shake off the rust flake with a jerk of his head. Even then, this sharp movement nearly unbalanced him, and his stomach gulped coldly with sudden shock. He settled his knees more firmly against the wood, and though he forced himself to laugh at this sudden fear, so that in some measure his poise did really return, nevertheless he did not alter the awkward knock-kneed position of his legs patently clinging for safety. With all this he had scarcely paused. Now he pulled at the stanchions of the iron ladder; they were as firm as if they had been driven into rock.

He looked up, following the dizzying rise of the rungs to the skyline. From this angle, flat against the iron sheeting, the gas tank appeared higher than before.

The blue sky seemed to descend and almost touch it. The redness of the rust dissolved into a deepening grey shadow; the distant, curved summit loomed black and high. Although it was immensely stable, as seen in rounded perspective from a few yards away, there against the side it appeared top-heavy, so that this huge segment of sheet iron seemed to have lost the support of its invisible complement behind, the support that was now unseen and therefore unfelt, and Flegg imagined despite himself that the entire erection had become unsteady, that quite possibly the gas tank might suddenly blow over like a gigantic, top-heavy sail. He lowered his eyes quickly and concentrated on the hands gripped on the ladder before him. He began to climb.

From below there still rose a few cries from the boys. But the girl had stopped shouting—probably she was following Flegg's every step with admiring eyes. He imagined again her frown and her peculiarly pouting mouth, and from this image drew new strength with which he clutched the rungs more eagerly. But now he noticed that the cries had begun to ring with an unpleasant new echo, as though they were already far off. And Flegg could not so easily distinguish their words. Even at this height he seemed to have penetrated into a distinct stratum of separate air, for it was certainly cooler, and for the first time that day he felt the light fanning of a wind.

He looked down. His friends appeared shockingly small. Their bodies had disappeared, and he saw only their upturned faces. He wanted to wave to demonstrate in some way a carefree attitude; but then instantly he felt frustrated as his hands refused to unlock their grip. He turned to the rungs again, with the smile dying on his lips.

He swallowed uneasily and continued to tread slowly upwards, hand after hand, foot after foot. He had climbed ten rungs of the iron ladder when his hands first began to feel moist, when suddenly, as though a cata-

strophe had overtaken him not gradually but in one overpowering second, he realized that he was afraid; incontrovertibly. He could conceal it no longer; he admitted it all over his body. His hands gripped with pitiable eagerness; they were now alert to a point of shivering, as though the nerves inside them had been forced taut for so long that now they had burst beyond their strained tegument; his feet no longer trod firmly on the rungs beneath, but first stepped for their place timorously, then glued themselves to the iron. In this way his body lost much of its poise; these nerves and muscles in his two legs and two arms seemed to work independently, no longer integrated with the rhythm of his body, but moving with the dangerous, the unwilling jerk of crippled limbs.

His body hung slack away from the ladder, with nothing beneath it but a thirty-foot drop to the ground; only his hands and feet were fed with the security of an attachment, most of him lay off the ladder, hanging in space; his arms revolted at the strain of their unfamiliar angle, as though they were flies' feet denying all natural laws. For the first time, as the fear took hold of him, he felt that what he had attempted was impossible. He never could achieve the top. If at this height of only thirty feet—as it were, three stories of a building—he felt afraid, what would he feel at sixty feet? Yet he trod heavily up. He was afraid, but not desperate. He dreaded each step, yet forced himself to believe that at some time it would be over, it could not take long.

A memory crossed his mind. It occurred vividly, then flashed away, for his eyes and mind were continually concentrated on the rusted iron bars and white knuckles of his hands. But for an instant he remembered waking up long ago in the nursery and seeing that the windows were light, as if they reflected a coldness of moonlight. Only they were not so much lit by light as by a sensation of space. The windows seemed to echo with space. He crawled out of bed and climbed on to a chair that stood

below the window. It was as he had thought. Outside there was space, nothing else, a limitless area of space; yet this was not unnatural, for soon his logical eyes supplied for what had at first appeared an impossible infinity the later image of a perfectly reasonable flood. A vast plain of still water continued as far as his eyes could see. The tennis courts and the houses beyond had disappeared; they were quite submerged, motionless water spread out immeasurably to the distant arched horizon all around. It lapped silently at the sides of the house, and in the light of an unseen moon winked and washed darkly, concealing great beasts of mystery beneath its black, calm surface.

This water attracted him, he wished to jump into it from the window and immerse himself in it and allow his head to sink slowly under. However, he was perched too high. He felt, alone at the window, infinitely high, so that the flood seemed to lie in miniature at a great distance below, as later in life when he was ill he saw the objects of his bedroom grow small and infinitely remote in the fevered reflection behind his eyes. Isolated at the little window, he was frightened by the emptiness surrounding him, only the sky and the water and the marooned stone wall of the house; he was terrified yet drawn down by dread and desire.

Then a battleship sailed by. He awakened, saved by the appearance of the battleship. And now, on the ladder, he had a sudden hope that something as large and stable would intervene again to help him.

But ten rungs farther up he began to sweat more violently than ever. His hands streamed with wet rust, the flesh inside his thighs blanched. Another flake of rust fell on his forehead; this time it stuck in the wetness. He felt physically exhausted. Fear was draining all his strength, and the precarious position of his body demanded an awkward physical effort. From his outstretched arms suspended most of the weight of his body. Each stressed muscle ached. His body weighed

more heavily at each step upwards; it sagged beneath his arms like a leaden sack. His legs no longer provided their adequate support; it seemed as though they needed every pull of their muscles to force themselves, as independent limbs, close to the ladder. The wind blew faster. It dragged now at his coat, it blew its space about him, it echoed silently a lonely spaciousness. 'Don't look down,' the blood whispered in his temples, 'Don't look down, for God's sake, *don't look down.*'

Three quarters up the tank and fifty feet from the ground, Flegg grew desperate. Every other consideration suddenly left him. He wanted only to reach the ground as quickly as possible; only that. Nothing else mattered. He stopped climbing and clung to the ladder panting. Very slowly, lowering his eyes carefully so that he could raise them instantly if he saw too much, he looked down a rung, and another past his armpit, past his waist, and focused on the ground below. He looked quickly up again.

He pressed himself to the ladder. Tears started in his eyes. For a moment they reeled red with giddiness. He closed them, shutting out everything. Then instantly opened them, afraid that something might happen. He must watch his hands, watch the bars, watch the rusted iron sheeting itself; no movement should escape him. The struts might come creaking loose, the whole edifice might sway over; although a fading reason told him that the gas tank had remained firm for years and was still as steady as a cliff, his horrified senses suspected that this was the one moment in the building's life when a wind would blow that was too strong for it, some defective strut would snap, the whole structure would heel over and go crashing to the ground. This image became so clear that he could see the sheets of iron buckling and folding like cloth as the huge weight sank to the earth.

The ground had receded horribly; the drop now appeared terrifying, out of all proportion to this height he

had reached. From the ground such a height would have appeared unnoteworthy. But now, looking down, the distance seemed to have doubled. Each object familiar to his everyday eyes—his friends, the lamp-posts, a brick wall, the sidewalk—all these had grown infinitely small. His senses demanded that these objects should be of a certain accustomed size. Alternatively, the world of chimneys and attic windows and roof copings would grow unpleasantly giant as his sidewalk-bred eyes approached. Even now the iron sheeting that stretched to either side and above and below seemed to have grown; he was lost among such huge, smooth dimensions, grown smaller himself and clinging now like a child lost on some monstrous desert of red rust.

These unfamiliarities shocked his nerves more than the danger of falling. The sense of isolation was overpowering. All things were suddenly alien. Yet exposed on the iron spaces, with the unending winds blowing round him, among such free things—he felt shut in. Trembling and panting so that he stifled himself with the shortness of his own breath, he took the first step downwards.

A commotion began below. A confusion of cries came drifting up to him. Above all he could hear the single voice of the girl who so far had kept quiet. She was screaming high, a shrill scream that rose in the air incisively, like a gull's shriek. "Put it back, put it back, put it back!" the scream seemed to say. So that Flegg, thinking that these cries were to warn him of some new danger apparent only from the ground, gripped himself on to the ladder and looked down again. He glanced down for only a fraction of a second, but in that time saw enough. He saw that the quiet girl was screaming and pointing to the base of the iron ladder. He saw the others crowding round her, gesticulating. He saw that she really had been crying, "Put it back!" And he realized now what the words meant. Someone had removed the painter's ladder.

It lay clearly on the ground, outlined like a child's drawing of a ladder. The boys must have seen his first step downwards, and then, from fun or from spite, they had removed his only means of retreat. He remembered that from the base of the iron ladder to the ground the drop fell twenty feet. He considered quickly descending and appealing from the bottom of the ladder, but foresaw that for precious minutes they would jeer and argue, refusing to replace the ladder, and he felt then that he never could risk these minutes, unnerved, with his strength failing.

Besides, he already had noticed that the whole group was wandering off. The boys were driving the quiet girl away, now more concerned with her than with Flegg. The quiet girl's sense of guilt had been brought to a head by the removal of the ladder. Now she was hysterically terrified. She was yelling to them to put the ladder back. She—only she, the passive one—sensed the terror that awaited them all. But her screams defeated their own purpose. They had altogether distracted the attention of the others; now it was fun to provoke more screams, to encourage this new distraction—and they forgot about Flegg far up and beyond them. They were wandering away. They were abandoning him, casually unconcerned that he was alone and helpless up in his wide prison of rust. His heart cried out for them to stay. He forgot their scorn in new and terrible torments of self-pity. An uneasy feeling lumped his throat; his eyes smarted with dry tears.

But they were wandering away. There was no retreat. They did not even know he was in difficulties. So Flegg had no option but to climb higher. Desperately he tried to shake off his fear; he actually shook his head. Then he stared hard at the rungs immediately facing his eyes and tried to imagine that he was not high up at all. He lifted himself tentatively by one rung, then by another, and in this way dragged himself

higher and higher—until he must have been some ten rungs from the top, over the fifth storey of a house, with now perhaps only one more storey to climb. He imagined that he might then be approaching the summit platform, and to measure this last distance he looked up.

He looked up and heaved. He felt for the first time panicked beyond desperation, wildly, violently loose. He almost let go. His senses screamed to let go, yet his hands refused to open. He was stretched on a rack made by these hands that would not unlock their grip and by the panic desire to drop. The nerves left his hands, so that they might have been dried bones of fingers gripped round the rungs, hooks of bone fixed perhaps strongly enough to cling on or perhaps ready at some moment of pressure to uncurl and straighten to a drop. His insteps pricked with cold cramp. The sweat sickened him. He shivered, grew giddy, and flung himself froglike on to the narrow iron ladder.

The sight of the top of the gas tank had proved more frightful than the appearance of the drop beneath. There lay about it a sense not of material danger, not of the risk of falling, but of something removed and inhuman—a sense of appalling isolation. It echoed its elemental iron aloofness; a wind blew round it that never had known the warmth of flesh or the softness of green fibres. Its blind eyes were raised above the world. It might have been the eyeless iron vizor of an ancient god. It touched against the sky, having risen in awful perpendicular to this isolation, solitary as the grey gannet cliffs that mark the end of the northern world. It was immeasurably old, outside the connotation of time; it was nothing human, only washed by the high weather, echoing with wind, visited never, and silently alone.

And in this summit Flegg measured clearly the full distance of his climb. This close skyline emphasized the whirling space beneath him. He clearly saw a man fall

through this space, spreadeagling, to smash with the sickening force of a locomotive on the stone beneath. The man turned slowly in the air, yet his thoughts raced faster than he fell.

Flegg, clutching his body close to the rust, made small weeping sounds through his mouth. Shivering, shuddering, he began to tread up again, working his knees and elbows outwards like a frog, so that his stomach could feel the firm rungs. Were they firm? His ears filled with a hot roaring; he hurried himself; he began to scramble, wrenching at his last strength, whispering urgent, meaningless words to himself like the swift whispers that close in on a nightmare. A huge weight pulled at him, dragging him to drop.

He climbed higher. He reached the top rung—and found his face staring still at a wall of red rust. He looked, wild with terror. It was the top rung! The ladder had ended! Yet—no platform. The real top rungs were missing. The platform jutted five impassable feet above. Flegg stared dumbly, circling his head like a lost animal. Then he jammed his legs in the lower rungs and his arms past the elbows to the armpits through the top rungs, and there he hung shivering and past knowing what more he could ever do.

POLLOCK AND THE PORROH MAN

by H. G. Wells

IT WAS in a swampy village on the lagoon river behind the Turner Peninsula that Pollock's first encounter with the Porroh man occurred. The women of that country are famous for their good looks—they are Gallinas with a dash of European blood that dates from the days of Vasco da Gama and the English slave traders, and the Porroh man, too, was possibly inspired by a faint Caucasian taint in his composition. (It's a curious thing to think that some of us may have distant cousins eating men on Sherboro Island or raiding with the Sofas.) At any rate, the Porroh man stabbed the woman to the heart as though he had been a mere low-class Italian, and very narrowly missed Pollock. But Pollock, using his revolver to parry the lightning stab which was aimed at his deltoid muscle, sent the iron dagger flying, and, firing, hit the man in the hand.

He fired again and missed, knocking a sudden window out of the wall of the hut. The Porroh man stooped in the doorway, glancing under his arm at Pollock. Pollock caught a glimpse of his inverted face in the sunlight, and then the Englishman was alone, sick and trembling with the excitement of the affair, in the twilight of the place. It had all happened in less time than it takes to read about it.

The woman was quite dead, and having ascertained this, Pollock went to the entrance of the hut and looked out. Things outside were dazzling bright. Half a dozen of the porters of the expedition were standing up in a group near the green huts they occupied, and staring towards him, wondering what the shots might signify.

Behind the little group of men was the broad stretch of black fetid mud by the river, a green carpet of rafts of papyrus and water-grass, and then the leaden water. The mangroves beyond the stream loomed indistinctly through the blue haze. There were no signs of excitement in the squat village, whose fence was just visible above the cane-grass.

Pollock came out of the hut cautiously and walked towards the river, looking over his shoulder at intervals. But the Porroh man had vanished. Pollock clutched his revolver nervously in his hand.

One of his men came to meet him, and as he came, pointed to the bushes behind the hut in which the Porroh man had disappeared. Pollock had an irritating persuasion of having made an absolute fool of himself; he felt bitter, savage, at the turn things had taken. At the same time, he would have to tell Waterhouse—the moral, exemplary, cautious Waterhouse—who would inevitably take the matter seriously. Pollock cursed bitterly at his luck, at Waterhouse, and especially at the West Coast of Africa. He felt consummately sick of the expedition. And in the back of his mind all the time was a speculative doubt where precisely within the visible horizon the Porroh man might be.

It is perhaps rather shocking, but he was not at all upset by the murder that had just happened. He had seen so much brutality during the last three months, so many dead women, burnt huts, drying skeletons, up the Kittam River in the wake of the Sofa cavalry, that his senses were blunted. What disturbed him was the persuasion that this business was only beginning.

He swore savagely at the black, who ventured to ask a question, and went on into the tent under the orange-trees where Waterhouse was lying, feeling exasperatingly like a boy going into the headmaster's study.

Waterhouse was still sleeping off the effects of his last dose of chlorodyne, and Pollock sat down on a packing-case beside him, and, lighting his pipe, waited for him

to awake. About him were scattered the pots and weapons Waterhouse had collected from the Mendi people, and which he had been repacking for the canoe voyage to Sulyma.

Presently Waterhouse woke up, and after judicial stretching, decided he was all right again. Pollock got him some tea. Over the tea the incidents of the afternoon were described by Pollock, after some preliminary beating about the bush. Waterhouse took the matter even more seriously than Pollock had anticipated. He did not simply disapprove, he scolded, he insulted.

"You're one of those infernal fools who think a black man isn't a human being," he said. "I can't be ill a day without you must get into some dirty scrape or other. This is the third time in a month that you have come crossways-on with a native, and this time you're in for it with a vengeance. Porroh, too! They're down upon you enough as it is, about that idol you wrote your silly name on. And they're the most vindictive devils on earth! You make a man ashamed of civilization. To think you come of a decent family! If ever I cumber myself up with a vicious, stupid young lout like you again——"

"Steady on, now," snarled Pollock, in the tone that always exasperated Waterhouse; "steady on."

At that Waterhouse became speechless. He jumped to his feet.

"Look here, Pollock," he said, after a struggle to control his breath. "You must go home. I won't have you any longer. I'm ill enough as it is through——you"

"Keep your hair on," said Pollock, staring in front of him. "I'm ready enough to go."

Waterhouse became calmer again. He sat down on the camp-stool. "Very well," he said. "I don't want a row, Pollock, you know, but it's confoundedly annoying to have one's plans put out by this kind of thing. I'll come to Sulyma with you, and see you safe aboard——"

"You needn't," said Pollock. "I can go alone. From here."

"Not far," said Waterhouse. "You don't understand this Porroh business."

"How should I know she belonged to a Porroh man?" said Pollock bitterly.

"Well, she did," said Waterhouse; "and you can't undo the thing. Go alone, indeed! I wonder what they'd do to you? You don't seem to understand that this Porroh hokey-pokey rules this country, is its law, religion, constitution, medicine, magic. . . . They appoint the chiefs. The Inquisition, at its best, couldn't hold a candle to these chaps. He will probably set Awajale, the chief here, on to us. It's lucky our porters are Mendis. We shall have to shift this little settlement of ours. . . . Confound you, Pollock! And, of course, you must go and miss him."

He thought, and his thoughts seemed disagreeable. Presently he stood up and took his rifle. "I'd keep close for a bit, if I were you," he said, over his shoulder, as he went out. "I'm going out to see what I can find out about it."

Pollock remained sitting in the tent, meditating. "I was meant for a civilized life," he said to himself regretfully, as he filled his pipe. "The sooner I get back to London or Paris the better for me."

His eye fell on the sealed case in which Waterhouse had put the featherless poisoned arrows they had bought in the Mendi country. "I wish I had hit the beggar somewhere vital," said Pollock viciously.

Waterhouse came back after a long interval. He was not communicative, though Pollock asked him questions enough. The Porroh man, it seems, was a prominent member of that mystical society. The village was interested, but not threatening. No doubt the witchdoctor had gone into the bush. He was a great witchdoctor. "Of course, he's up to something," said Waterhouse, and became silent.

"But what can he do?" asked Pollock, unheeded.

"I must get you out of this. There's something brew-

ing, or things would not be so quiet," said Waterhouse, after a gap of silence. Pollock wanted to know what the brew might be. "Dancing in a circle of skulls," said Waterhouse; "brewing a stink in a copper pot." Pollock wanted particulars. Waterhouse was vague, Pollock pressing. At last Waterhouse lost his temper. "How the devil should *I* know?" he said to Pollock's twentieth inquiry what the Porroh man would do. "He tried to kill you off-hand in the hut. *Now*, I fancy he will try something more elaborate. But you'll see fast enough. I don't want to help unnerve you. It's probably all nonsense."

That night, as they were sitting at their fire, Pollock again tried to draw Waterhouse out on the subject of Porroh methods. "Better get to sleep," said Waterhouse, when Pollock's bent became apparent; "we start early tomorrow. You may want all your nerve about you."

"But what line will he take?"

"Can't say. They're versatile people. They know a lot of rum dodges. You'd better get that copper-devil, Shakespeare, to talk."

There was a flash and a heavy bang out of the darkness behind the huts, and a clay bullet came whistling close to Pollock's head. This, at least, was crude enough. The blacks and half-breeds sitting and yarning round their own fire jumped up, and someone fired into the dark.

"Better go into one of the huts," said Waterhouse quietly, still sitting unmoved.

Pollock stood up by the fire and drew his revolver. Fighting, at least, he was not afraid of. But a man in the dark is in the best of armour. Realizing the wisdom of Waterhouse's advice, Pollock went into the tent and lay down there.

What little sleep he had was disturbed by dreams, variegated dreams, but chiefly of the Porroh man's face, upside down, as he went out of the hut, and looked up

under his arm. It was odd that this transitory impression should have stuck so firmly in Pollock's memory. Moreover, he was troubled by queer pains in his limbs.

In the white haze of the early morning, as they were loading the canoes, a barbed arrow suddenly appeared quivering in the ground close to Pollock's foot. The boys made a perfunctory effort to clear out the thicket, but it led to no capture.

After these two occurrences, there was a disposition on the part of the expedition to leave Pollock to himself, and Pollock became, for the first time in his life, anxious to mingle with blacks. Waterhouse took one canoe, and Pollock, in spite of a friendly desire to chat with Waterhouse, had to take the other. He was left all alone in the front part of the canoe, and he had the greatest trouble to make the men—who did not love him—keep to the middle of the river, a clear hundred yards or more from either shore. However, he made Shakespeare, the Freetown half-breed, come up to his own end of the canoe and tell him about Porroh, which Shakespeare, failing in his attempts to leave Pollock alone, presently did with considerable freedom and gusto.

The day passed. The canoe glided swiftly along the ribbon of lagoon water, between the drift of water-figs, fallen trees, papyrus, and palm-wine palms, and with the dark mangrove swamp to the left, through which one could hear now and then the roar of the Atlantic surf. Shakespeare told in his soft, blurred English of how the Porroh could cast spells; how men withered up under their malice; how they could send dreams and devils; how they tormented and killed the sons of Ijibu; how they kidnapped a white trader from Sulyma who had maltreated one of the sect, and how his body looked when it was found. And Pollock after each narrative cursed under his breath at the want of missionary enterprise that allowed such things to be, and at the inert British Government that ruled over this dark heathendom of Sierra Leone. In the evening they came to the

Kasi Lake, and sent a score of crocodiles lumbering off the island on which the expedition camped for the night.

The next day they reached Sulyma, and smelt the sea breeze, but Pollock had to put up there for five days before he could get on to Freetown. Waterhouse, considering him to be comparatively safe here, and within the pale of Freetown influence, left him and went back with the expedition to Gbemma, and Pollock became very friendly with Perea, the only resident white trader at Sulyma—so friendly, indeed, that he went about with him everywhere. Perea was a little Portuguese Jew, who had lived in England, and he appreciated the Englishman's friendliness as a great compliment.

For two days nothing happened out of the ordinary; for the most part Pollock and Perea played Nap—the only game they had in common—and Pollock got into debt. Then, on the second evening, Pollock had a disagreeable intimation of the arrival of the Porroh man in Sulyma by getting a flesh wound in the shoulder from a lump of filed iron. It was a long shot, and the missile had nearly spent its force when it hit him. Still it conveyed its message plainly enough. Pollock sat up in his hammock, revolver in hand, all that night, and next morning confided, to some extent, in the Anglo-Portuguese.

Perea took the matter seriously. He knew the local customs pretty thoroughly. "It is a personal question, you must know. It is revenge. And of course he is hurried by your leaving de country. None of de natives or half-breeds will interfere wid him very much—unless you make it wort deir while. If you come upon him suddenly, you might shoot him. But den he might shoot you.

"Den dere's dis—infernal magic," said Perea. "Of course, I don't believe in it—superstition—but still it's not nice to tink dat wherever you are, dere is a black man, who spends a moonlight night now and den

a-dancing about a fire to send you bad dreams. . . . Had any bad dreams?"

"Rather," said Pollock. "I keep on seeing the beggar's head upside down grinning at me and showing all his teeth as he did in the hut, and coming close up to me, and then going ever so far off, and coming back. It's nothing to be afraid of, but somehow it simply paralyses me with terror in my sleep. Queer things—dreams. I know it's a dream all the time, and I can't wake up from it."

"It's probably only fancy," said Perea. "Den my niggers say Porroh men can send snakes. Seen any snakes lately?"

"Only one. I killed him this morning, on the floor near my hammock. Almost trod on him as I got up."

"Ah!" said Perea, and then, reassuringly, "Of course it is a—coincidence. Still I would keep my eyes open. Den dere's pains in de bones."

"I thought they were due to miasma," said Pollock.

"Probably dey are. When did dey begin?"

Then Pollock remembered that he first noticed them the night after the fight in the hut. "It's my opinion he don't want to kill you," said Perea—"at least not yet. I've heard deir idea is to scare and worry a man wid deir spells, and narrow misses, and rheumatic pains, and bad dreams, and all dat, until he's sick of life. Of course, it's all talk, you know. You mustn't worry about it. . . . But I wonder what he'll be up to next."

"I shall have to be up to something first," said Pollock, staring gloomily at the greasy cards that Perea was putting on the table. "It don't suit my dignity to be followed about, and shot at, and blighted in this way. I wonder if Porroh hokey-pokey upsets your luck at cards."

He looked at Perea suspiciously.

"Very likely it does," said Perea warmly, shuffling.

"Dey are wonderful people."

That afternoon Pollock killed two snakes in his ham-

mock, and there was also an extraordinary increase in the number of red ants that swarmed over the place; and these annoyances put him in a fit temper to talk over business with a certain Mendi rough he had interviewed before. The Mendi rough showed Pollock a little iron dagger, and demonstrated where one struck in the neck, in a way that made Pollock shiver, and in return for certain considerations Pollock promised him a double-barrelled gun with an ornamental lock.

In the evening, as Pollock and Perea were playing cards, the Mendi rough came in through the doorway, carrying something in a blood-soaked piece of native cloth.

"Not here!" said Pollock very hurriedly. "Not here!"

But he was not quick enough to prevent the man, who was anxious to get to Pollock's side of the bargain, from opening the cloth and throwing the head of the Porroh man upon the table. It bounded from there on to the floor, leaving a red trail on the cards, and rolled into a corner, where it came to rest upside down, but glaring hard at Pollock.

Perea jumped up as the thing fell among the cards, and began in his excitement to gabble in Portuguese. The Mendi was bowing, with the red cloth in his hand. "De gun!" he cried. Pollock stared back at the head in the corner. It bore exactly the expression it had in his dreams. Something seemed to snap in his own brain as he looked at it.

Then Perea found his English again.

"You got him killed?" he said. "You did not kill him yourself?"

"Why should I?" said Pollock.

"But he will not be able to take it off now!"

"Take *what* off?" said Pollock.

"And all dese cards are spoiled!"

"*What* do you mean by taking off?" said Pollock.

"You must send me a new pack from Freetown. You can buy dem dere."

"But—'take it off'?"

"It is only superstition. I forgot. De niggers say dat if de witches—he was a witch—— But it is rubbish. . . . You must make de Porroh man take it off, or kill him yourself. . . . It is very silly."

Pollock swore under his breath, still staring hard at the head in the corner.

"I can't stand that glare," he said. Then suddenly he rushed at the thing and kicked it. It rolled some yards or so, and came to rest in the same position as before, upside down, and looking at him.

"He is ugly," said the Anglo-Portuguese. "Very ugly. Dey do it on deir faces with little knives."

Pollock would have kicked the head again, but the Mendi man touched him on the arm. "De gun?" he said, looking nervously at the head.

"Two—if you will take that beastly thing away," said Pollock.

The Mendi shook his head, and intimated that he only wanted one gun now due to him, and for which he would be obliged. Pollock found neither cajolery nor bullying any good with him. Perea had a gun to sell (at a profit of three hundred per cent), and with that the man presently departed. Then Pollock's eyes, against his will, were recalled to the thing on the floor.

"It is funny dat his head keeps upside down," said Perea, with an uneasy laugh. "His brains must be heavy, like de weight in de little images one sees dat keep always upright wid lead in dem. You will take him wiv you when you go presently. You might take him now. De cards are all spoilt. Dere is a man sell dem in Freetown. De room is in a filthy mess as it is. You should have killed him yourself."

Pollock pulled himself together, and went and picked up the head. He would hang it up by the lamp hook in the middle of the ceiling of his room, and dig a grave for it at once. He was under the impression that he hung it up by the hair, but that must have been wrong,

for when he returned for it, it was hanging by the neck upside down.

He buried it before sunset on the north side of the shed he occupied, so that he should not have to pass the grave after dark when he was returning from Perea's. He killed two snakes before he went to sleep. In the darkest part of the night he awoke with a start, and heard a pattering sound and something scraping on the floor. He sat up noiselessly and felt under his pillow for his revolver. A mumbling growl followed, and Pollock fired at the sound. There was a yelp, and something dark passed for a moment across the hazy blue of the doorway. "A dog!" said Pollock, lying down again.

In the early dawn he awoke again with a peculiar sense of unrest. The vague pain in his bones had returned. For some time he lay watching the red ants that were swarming over the ceiling, and then, as the light grew brighter, he looked over the edge of his hammock and saw something dark on the floor. He gave such a violent start that the hammock overset and flung him out.

He found himself lying, perhaps, a yard away from the head of the Porroh man. It had been disinterred by the dog, and the nose was grievously battered. Ants and flies swarmed over it. By an odd coincidence, it was still upside down, and with the same diabolical expression in the inverted eyes.

Pollock sat paralyzed, and stared at the horror for some time. Then he got up and walked round it—giving it a wide berth—and out of the shed. The clear light of the sunrise, the living stir of vegetation before the breath of the dying land breeze, and the empty grave with the marks of the dog's paws, lightened the weight upon his mind a little.

He told Perea of the business as though it was a jest—a jest to be told with white lips. "You should not have frighten de dog," said Perea, with poorly simulated hilarity.

The next two days, until the steamer came, were

spent by Pollock in making a more effectual disposition of his possession. Overcoming his aversion to handling the thing, he went down to the river mouth and threw it into the sea water, but by some miracle it escaped the crocodiles, and was cast up by the tide on the mud a little way up the river, to be found by an intelligent Arab half-breed, and offered for sale to Pollock and Perea as a curiosity, just on the edge of night. The native hung about in the brief twilight, making lower and lower offers, and at last, getting scared in some way by the evident dread these wise white men had for the thing, went off, and, passing Pollock's shed, threw his burden in there for Pollock to discover in the morning.

At this Pollock got into a kind of frenzy. He would burn the thing. He went out straightway into the dawn, and had constructed a big pyre of brushwood before the heat of the day. He was interrupted by the hooter of the little paddle steamer from Monrovia to Bathurst, which was coming through the gap in the bar. "Thank Heaven!" said Pollock, with infinite piety, when the meaning of the sound dawned upon him. With trembling hands he lit his pile of wood hastily, threw the head upon it, and went away to pack his portmanteau and make his adieux to Perea.

That afternoon, with a sense of infinite relief, Pollock watched the flat swampy foreshore of Sulyma grow small in the distance. The gap in the long line of white surge became narrower and narrower. It seemed to be closing in and cutting him off from his trouble. The feeling of dread and worry began to slip from him bit by bit. At Sulyma belief in Porroh malignity and Porroh magic had been in the air, his sense of Porroh had been vast, pervading, threatening, dreadful. Now manifestly the domain of Porroh was only a little place, a little black band between the sea and the blue cloudy Mendi uplands.

"Goodbye, Porroh!" said Pollock. "Goodbye—certainly not *au revoir*."

The captain of the steamer came and leant over the rail beside him, and wished him good evening, and spat at the froth of the wake in token of friendly ease.

"I picked up a rummy curio on the beach this go," said the captain. "It's a thing I never saw done this side of Indy before."

"What might that be?" said Pollock.

"Pickled 'ed," said the captain.

"*What!*" said Pollock.

"'Ed—smoked. 'Ed of one of these Porroh chaps, all ornamented with knife cuts. Why! What's up? Nothing? I shouldn't have took you for a nervous chap. Green in the face. By gosh! you're a bad sailor. All right, eh? Lord, how funny you went! . . . Well, this 'ed I was telling you of is a bit rum in a way. I've got it, along with some snakes, in a jar of spirit in my cabin what I keeps for such curios, and I'm hanged if it don't float upsy down. Hullo!"

Pollock had given an incoherent cry, and had his hands in his hair. He ran towards the paddle-boxes with a half-formed idea of jumping into the sea, and then he realized his position and turned back towards the captain.

"Here!" said the captain. "Jack Philips, just keep him off me! Stand off! No nearer, mister! What's the matter with you? Are you mad?"

Pollock put his hand to his head. It was no good explaining. "I believe I am pretty nearly mad at times," he said. "It's a pain I have here. Comes suddenly. You'll excuse me, I hope."

He was white and in a perspiration. He saw suddenly very clearly all the danger he ran of having his sanity doubted. He forced himself to restore the captain's confidence, by answering his sympathetic inquiries, noting his suggestions, even trying a spoonful of neat brandy in his cheek, and, that matter settled, asking a number of questions about the captain's private trade in curiosities. The captain described the head in detail. All the

while Pollock was struggling to keep under a preposterous persuasion that the ship was as transparent as glass, and that he could distinctly see the inverted face looking at him from the cabin beneath his feet.

Pollock had a worse time almost on the steamer than he had at Sulyma. All day he had to control himself in spite of his intense perception of the imminent presence of that horrible head that was overshadowing his mind. At night his old nightmare returned, until, with a violent effort, he would force himself awake, rigid with the horror of it, and with the ghost of a hoarse scream in his throat.

He left the actual head behind at Bathurst, where he changed ship for Teneriffe, but not his dreams nor the dull ache in his bones. At Teneriffe Pollock transferred to a Cape liner, but the head followed him. He gambled, he tried chess, he even read books, but he knew the danger of drink. Yet whenever a round black shadow, a round black object came into his range, there he looked for the head, and—saw it. He knew clearly enough that his imagination was growing traitor to him, and yet at times it seemed the ship he sailed in, his fellow passengers, the sailors, the wide sea, were all part of a filmy phantasmagoria that hung, scarcely veiling it, between him and a horrible real world. Then the Porroh man, thrusting his diabolical face through that curtain, was the one real and undeniable thing. At that he would get up and touch things, taste something, gnaw something, burn his hand with a match, or run a needle into himself.

So, struggling grimly and silently with his excited imagination, Pollock reached England. He landed at Southampton, and went on straight from Waterloo to his banker's in Cornhill in a cab. There he transacted some business with the manager in a private room, and all the while the head hung like an ornament under the black marble mantel and dripped upon the fender. He could hear the drops fall, and see the red on the fender.

"A pretty fern," said the manager, following his eyes. "But it makes the fender rusty."

"Very," said Pollock; "a *very* pretty fern. And that reminds me. Can you recommend me a physician for mind troubles? I've got a little—what is it?—hallucination."

The head laughed savagely, wildly. Pollock was surprised the manager did not notice it. But the manager only stared at his face.

With the address of a doctor, Pollock presently emerged in Cornhill. There was no cab in sight, and so he went on down to the western end of the street, and essayed the crossing opposite the Mansion House. The crossing is hardly easy even for the expert Londoner; cabs, vans, carriages, mail carts, omnibuses go by in one incessant stream; to anyone fresh from the malarious solitudes of Sierra Leone it is a boiling, maddening confusion. But when an inverted head suddenly comes bouncing, like an India-rubber ball, between your legs, leaving distinct smears of blood every time it touches the ground, you can scarcely hope to avoid an accident. Pollock lifted his feet convulsively to avoid it, and then kicked at the thing furiously. Then something hit him violently in the back, and a hot pain ran up his arm.

He had been hit by the pole of an omnibus, and three of the fingers of his left hand smashed by the hoof of one of the horses—the very fingers, as it happened, that he shot from the Porroh man. They pulled him out from between the horses' legs, and found the address of the physician in his crushed hand.

For a couple of days Pollock's sensations were full of the sweet, pungent smell of chloroform, of painful operations that caused him no pain, of lying still and being given food and drink. Then he had a slight fever, and was very thirsty, and his old nightmare came back. It was only when it returned that he noticed it had left him for a day.

"If my skull had been smashed instead of my fingers,

it might have gone altogether," said Pollock, staring thoughtfully at the dark cushion that had taken on for the time the shape of the head.

Pollock at the first opportunity told the physician of his mind trouble. He knew clearly that he must go mad unless something should intervene to save him. He explained that he had witnessed a decapitation in Dahomey, and was haunted by one of the heads. Naturally, he did not care to state the actual facts. The physician looked grave.

Presently he spoke hesitatingly. "As a child, did you get very much religious training?"

"Very little," said Pollock.

A shade passed over the physician's face. "I don't know if you have heard of the miraculous cures—it may be, of course, they are not miraculous—at Lourdes."

"Faith-healing will hardly suit me, I am afraid," said Pollock, with his eye on the dark cushion.

The head distorted its scarred features in an abominable grimace. The physician went upon a new track. "It's all imagination," he said, speaking with sudden briskness. "A fair case for faith-healing, anyhow. Your nervous system has run down, you're in that twilight state of health when the bogles come easiest. The strong impression was too much for you. I must make you up a little mixture that will strengthen your nervous system—especially your brain. And you must take exercise."

"I'm no good for faith-healing," said Pollock.

"And therefore we must restore tone. Go in search of stimulating air—Scotland, Norway, the Alps——"

"Jericho, if you like," said Pollock, "where Naaman went."

However, so soon as his fingers would let him, Pollock made a gallant attempt to follow out the doctor's suggestion. It was now November. He tried football, but to Pollock the game consisted in kicking a furious inverted head about a field. He was no good at the

game. He kicked blindly, with a kind of horror, and when they put him back into goal, and the ball came swooping down upon him, he suddenly yelled and got out of its way. The discreditable stories that had driven him from England to wander in the tropics shut him off from any but men's society, and now his increasingly strange behaviour made even his man friends avoid him. The thing was no longer a thing of the eye merely; it gibbered at him, spoke to him. A horrible fear came upon him that presently, when he took hold of the apparition, it would no longer become some mere article of furniture, but would *feel* like a real dissevered head. Alone, he would curse at the thing, defy it, entreat it; once or twice, in spite of his grim self-control, he addressed it in the presence of others. He felt the growing suspicion in the eyes of the people that watched him—his landlady, the servant, his man.

One day early in December his cousin Arnold—his next of kin—came to see him and draw him out, and watch his sunken yellow face with narrow eager eyes. And it seemed to Pollock that the hat his cousin carried in his hand was no hat at all, but a Gorgon head that glared at him upside down, and fought with its eyes against his reason. However, he was still resolute to see the matter out. He got a bicycle, and, riding over the frosty road from Wandsworth to Kingston, found the thing rolling along at his side, and leaving a dark trail behind it. He set his teeth and rode faster. Then suddenly, as he came down the hill towards Richmond Park, the apparition rolled in front of him and under his wheel, so quickly that he had no time for thought, and, turning quickly to avoid it, was flung violently against a heap of stones and broke his left wrist.

The end came on Christmas morning. All night he had been in a fever, the bandages encircling his wrist like a band of fire, his dreams more vivid and terrible than ever. In the cold, colourless, uncertain light that came before the sunrise, he sat up in his bed, and saw

the head upon the bracket in the place of the bronze jar that had stood there overnight.

"I know that is a bronze jar," he said, with a chill doubt at his heart. Presently the doubt was irresistible. He got out of bed slowly, shivering, and advanced to the jar with his hand raised. Surely he would see now his imagination had deceived him, recognize the distinctive sheen of bronze. At last, after an age of hesitation, his fingers came down on the patterned cheek of the head. He withdrew them spasmodically. The last stage was reached. His sense of touch had betrayed him.

Trembling, stumbling against the bed, kicking against his shoes with his bare feet, a dark confusion eddying round him, he groped his way to the dressing table, took his razor from the drawer, and sat down on the bed with this in his hand. In the looking glass he saw his own face, colourless, haggard, full of the ultimate bitterness of despair.

He beheld in swift succession the incidents in the brief tale of his experience. His wretched home, his still more wretched schooldays, the years of vicious life he had led since then, one act of selfish dishonour leading to another: it was all clear and pitiless now, all its squalid folly, in the cold light of the dawn. He came to the hut, to the fight with the Porroh man, to the retreat down the river to Sulyma, to the Mendi assassin and his red parcel, to his frantic endeavours to destroy the head, to the growth of his hallucination. It was a hallucination! He *knew* it was. A hallucination merely. For a moment he snatched at hope. He looked away from the glass, and on the bracket, the inverted head grinned and grimaced at him. . . . With the stiff fingers of his bandaged hand he felt at his neck for the throb of his arteries. The morning was very cold, the steel blade felt like ice.

THE INN

by Guy Preston

THE LIFE of a country doctor is apt to prove rather strenuous, particularly when his practice extends over an area of twenty square miles, and his sole vehicle happens to be a worn-out bicycle of antediluvian manufacture; consequently it was with an exclamation of annoyance that Dr Sutton awoke, at about half past four one winter's morning, to hear the front doorbell ringing furiously. His only servant had departed the previous day on a long-promised visit to her mother in Keswick, and as he was a bachelor he was, of course, alone in the house.

"Let them ring, confound them," he muttered to himself, "disturbing a hard-working body at this ungodly hour! And," he added, "after all the rumpus, I suppose it's the usual cry of 'Come at once—Willie has a pain in the toe.' Some folks seem to think a doctor has no right to a few hours' sleep."

He snuggled himself still farther under the bed-clothes, and tried to ignore the bell and the knocker, which had now come into play, but to no purpose.

BANG! BANG! BANG! Whoever it was out there had no intention of being denied, for the house shook under the thunder of the knocking, and at last Dr Sutton rose, and slipping on his dressing-gown, went grumbling to the door.

As he opened it, peering into the darkness, a figure darted through into the house, slamming the door to after him, and clutched at the doctor's arm with a trembling hand.

The doctor made to free himself, but the stranger

clung the tighter. "I was told a doctor lives here," he gasped, his breath coming in great gulps, that made a hoarse tearing sound in his throat. "Dr Sutton! Are you the doctor? I want a doctor!"

The doctor surveyed him calmly before leading the way to his study. The surgery was a sort of outhouse and as cold as an ice-well, but here, in the doctor's private study, a few embers still glowed despite the lateness of the hour, and the room was still warm.

"Yes, I am he," he replied, and threw a log on the fire.

"Then for God's sake, tell me—am I *mad*?"

Dr Sutton looked at him before replying. He presented an extraordinary appearance. His hair was wild and thick with dust and sweat, his clothes torn, and his face, which normally would be pleasing, was now cut and bleeding and begrimed with filth. A wild look was in his eyes, but in his voice was such a note of anxious pleading that, startled as he was by the stranger's queer aspect, the doctor was reassured.

"You have had a bad scare," was his answer. He motioned the man to a chair, into which he immediately collapsed, and went to the bureau upon which reposed half a dozen bottles and a siphon.

"Drink this!"

The man swallowed the brandy gratefully, and gradually the colour crept back into his cheeks.

The doctor regarded him keenly during the few moments of silence that followed. There was no need to hurry him; he would tell his own story when he had sufficiently recovered. He now lolled back in the chair, his right hand thrust deep into his coat pocket, his left tapping nervously on the arm, and from time to time wiping imaginary stains from off his coat and the knees of his trousers.

Obviously he was in great distress, and his nerves had been taxed to their utmost.

Presently he began to speak, and this is the tale that he told.

* * *

"My name is Methuen—Frank Methuen—and I travel in photographic accessories. My firm—Messrs Bardsey and Black—switched me up to this district only a fortnight ago. Previously I had done only the South Coast towns, and I may say that I disliked intensely shooting up to Cumberland, away from all my friends, to break entirely fresh ground with my goods. However, somebody had to go, and as luck would have it I was the one to be chosen."

He paused, and the doctor nodded encouragingly.

"We all have to do things occasionally that go against the grain," he said. "It was not my choice to be buried in the moors like this, with a practice stretching from Gretna half way to Whitehaven. Speaking figuratively, of course," he added with a smile, as Methuen looked incredulous. "There are times when I long for the bustle and noise of a big town, and would willingly exchange this house, cosy as it is, for a flat and a practice among the slums of Glasgow."

"Then you can imagine how I felt, a Londoner, used to travelling as I am, when I found myself deposited by the LNER at a dirty little station near Cockermouth—Hayra, I think it was called."

The doctor nodded again and poured out two more drinks. He was becoming interested in the man who had so unfeelingly dragged him from his bed before even the dawn had come. There were few new faces in his life, and one could get so stale with only farm labourers and petty shopkeepers to talk to. Besides, he was feeling wide awake now, and cold, despite the burning log which had now caught and was roaring up the chimney. Yes, a drink was clearly indicated.

Methuen thanked him and continued:

"I spent the first week trying to persuade a Cumbrian

of Scotch ancestry to start a new line of P.O.P., but could make as much impression on him as I could on a piece of concrete by beating it with a feather. The next few days I wandered about the neighbouring villages, pushing the same and other articles, but without much success, and at last I decided to make for the Workington and Whitehaven district. Accordingly I mounted my motor bike late last night in an endeavour to reach the Royal Hotel, Whitehaven, in time for a bath and a good night's rest before starting early the next morning on my rounds; but Fate was against me.

"I was in the middle of a desolate tract of moorland when my bike conked out, and on dismounting I found that somehow my petrol tank had received a dinge, whether my fault or through the carelessness of the people at the last garage, I don't know, and was leaking badly. It was, in fact, entirely empty; and on examining my spare tin, which I always carry, I discovered that someone had been liberally helping himself, and there were only a few drops left. I plugged the hole as best I could with a piece of chewing-gum—useful stuff that—and refilling with my remaining spot of juice, recommenced my journey. I had got no farther than a quarter of a mile or so when the darn thing petered out again; my mending had been futile, I was stranded.

"It was by now about ten o'clock at night, pitch dark, and as far as I could estimate, at least six miles to the nearest village. I looked about for a house or farm of some sort, but could see nothing, and to add to my discomfort a thick moorland mist began to creep up."

He broke off.

"You know this country well, I presume?"

"Passably," admitted the doctor.

"Well, I don't, and I don't mind confessing that I found myself growing horribly afraid. Here was I, a stranger, landed miles from anywhere, absolutely alone on the Cumberland moors, without a sight or a sound

of a living human being, and that accursed mist growing denser every second. It was ghastly!"

Methuen stopped, and putting his left hand before his eyes made a movement as though to wipe away the recollection. Then he seemed to steady himself with an effort, and resumed:

"I am not considered a coward so far as I know by my acquaintances, but here, somehow, I seemed to get an impression of evil—*intense evil*, as though something malevolent was with me, watching me, gloating over my inability to get away. I could almost feel its vile breath upon me, the pressure of something like tentacles stealing softly about my body with a sickening gentleness, like some loathsome caress, luring me, urging me, forcing me onward towards a gap in the hedge. I struggled, but to resist was useless. I was powerless in the grasp of this strange malign influence.

"Imagine my joy, then, when on reaching the gap and stepping through I felt this evil presence slip from my shoulders like a discarded mantle, and saw facing me the very shelter that I sought—an inn. It was like a friendly gesture in a foreign country!

"It stood, it is true, entirely in darkness, but I had no doubt that I could soon rouse the landlord, and visions of a hearty supper of ham and eggs, well fried, with perhaps a tankard of ale, rose rapidly before my eyes.

"This side of the hedge the feeling of fear had entirely vanished, and I laughed at myself for my qualms of a few moments before. The path to the inn lay almost hidden among a mass of straggling undergrowth, and this and the overhanging trees must have accounted for my not noticing it from the road.

"It was quite a fair-sized building, a low, rambling structure of old-world design, and swinging creakily in the cool night air I recognized a painted signboard, though it was too dark for me to read its portent from where I was standing. Though I noticed nothing unusual at the time, I may say that since it has struck me

forcibly that there was something uncanny in the fact that, although the other side of the hedge the mist was thick and the air still as death, here, in what might be called the garden of the inn, there was no mist, and little currents of wind eddied about through the trees, fanning my face and swinging the great signboard with a strange persistency. I went up to the door and knocked loudly. My motor bike could remain where I had left it, for I had quite made up my mind that wild horses would not drag me back into that ghastly atmosphere I had just encountered in the road.

"At first there was no response, and I repeated the summons, examining the old tavern more closely during the period I was kept waiting. Here, under the eaves of the porch, I could now discern—my eyes having become accustomed to the darkness—some semblance of a picture half-obliterated by exposure to many seasons of wind and rain, upon the inn sign. This was in the nature of a coffin supported by six headless bearers goose-stepping towards a white headstone, and underneath this somewhat forbidding daub with grim irony ran the legend: 'Ye Journey's End'.

"Evidently the landlord was a man with either a peculiar sense of humour or gifted with an enormous propensity for continuing a tradition, for it was plain that the inn was a relic of ancient and more stirring days, and it was possible that his love of old things made him hesitate to change this gruesome, though exceedingly interesting, old sign.

"While I was thus conjecturing I heard a movement within the house, and a faint glimmer of light appeared from behind one of the windows above the porch to my right. After an appreciable pause this was suddenly extinguished, and I concluded that whoever was within the inn had decided they had imagined my knocking and retired to bed again. I had just raised my hand to deliver a sound drubbing to the massive front door when I sensed, rather than heard, a faint *flip-flop* of

loosely slippered feet approaching the door from the inside. The next instant came the welcome sound of heavy iron bolts being withdrawn, and the big door swung slowly inwards.

"The man who confronted me was a singularly unprepossessing individual, and I had a sensation, as I viewed him, as though someone had lightly run a brush fitted with many sharp-pointed and icy bristles down my spinal column.

"He stood squarely before me, a short squat man, with a smooth round face white as a full moon and entirely hairless. An old-fashioned nightcap covered his scalp, and about his shoulders depended a long cloak of some dark colour. But what struck the greatest chill of all was this—*he had no eyes!*

"From the bald place where the eyebrows should have been, to the top of the puffy cheeks, stretched a thick layer of parchment-like skin, and he groped before him with his hands, using them like the antennae of some fat white slug. Ugh!"

Methuen shivered, and the doctor leaned forward in his chair. "Go on!" he said.

"Behind him stood a woman holding an old-fashioned candlestick, and the contrast between them was extraordinary. She was of middle height and of a good figure, and was draped in a kind of wrapper of filmy texture. A very goddess of a creature!

"She was handsome in a rather impudent, bold way, full-lipped and black browed, and her large eyes seemed to glow with a strange lustre as she stood there watching me.

"I explained my circumstances and asked for shelter, and at the sound of my voice the landlord—for I presume it was he—reached out for my face, feeling it all over with his pulpy fingers as if to satisfy himself as to my appearance.

"I suppose the woman must have seen the look of disgust upon my features, for she called out to him, 'Let

him enter, he will do well enough', and at the words he stood aside and beckoned me in. I may as well tell you now that had there been anything, even a barn or a fowl house, in the neighbourhood where I could have spent the night secure from the cold and the penetrating damp of the mist, I would have sought it rather than pass an hour here. But this was no time to indulge fancies. I was a stranger and must count myself lucky to be admitted, and if my landlord filled me with a strange, unaccountable dread, I should have to put up with it unless I wished once more to face the terrors of that awful road outside.

"I entered, and the woman silently conducted me to a bedroom on the first floor. I should have stated before that the inn had only the two storeys, and I was now immediately below the roof. At my request for some supper and a bath she shook her head, and concluding that probably she was tired, I let it go at that, after first regretting that I had disturbed her slumbers, and wishing her a 'goodnight'. She smiled mysteriously and withdrew with a little curtsy, closing the door after her. I was alone in the room.

"I glanced round it; it was bare enough but it would do. In one corner was a small washhand-stand and towels, a couple of chairs stood against one wall, and against another was a massive oak chest. A huge four-poster bed occupied nearly the whole of one side of the room, and the remaining side was entirely bare except for a small door, which, on my trying it, refused to yield. I put my eye to the keyhole and peeped through, but of course could make out nothing because of the darkness.

"Well, I was tired and began to undress. My one illumination was a vast bronze lamp, so heavy that it must have taken three men to place it where it now stood on a pedestal in the corner near the window, and the bad light it gave made me wish my hosts had a little less love of the antique and little more of ordinary every-

day comfort. As I gratefully threw off my clothes, I considered. Surely that bold beauty who had guided me to my room could not be the wife of that monstrosity who had met me at the door? And if so, what a terrible existence for her! To be shut up with such a creature alone on these desolate moors—what wrong could a mere girl do to merit such a diabolical punishment? It was against the laws of Nature! It was an outrage! Thus my chivalrous spirit took up the cause of beauty, and condemned the beast.

“At last, when I was ready for bed, the yearning for a bath once more came over me.

“I wondered—was it possible?—and crossed once more to the little door in the wall. Yes, it was locked, but that alone would not deter me. I have always made a point of carrying with me any old keys that I have ever used or even found, in case they may come in useful later on. My idiosyncrasy was rewarded, and on trying one of my bunch in the lock, to my joy I found it fitted.

“I turned it and the door opened. Rapture—a bathroom! Dirty, ill-kept, but still the joy of all Englishmen—a *bathroom*! I glanced round for a candle, as the lamp was too heavy to shift, but, as usual, when one needs a thing it is never to be found anywhere. Well, I would bathe in the dark, that was all!

“I turned on the tap. Even in the gloom, with only the light which escaped from my bedroom to see by, I could see that the water ran dark with iron, or, more probably, rust from disuse and the old pipes and cistern which wheezed and gurgled over my head. The bath itself was an iron one of primitive construction, not like the enamelled luxuries we are used to today. I returned to my room while the water ran, or, rather, trickled, and tried my bed.

“Here at any rate was comfort, and again I laughed at my earlier fears. I might fare a great deal worse than spend a night on this feathered mattress, and if I filched

a bath, even a cold one, and no one the wiser—well, it was all to the good. I began at last to consider myself in luck's way. I whistled cheerfully as I returned to the bathroom and slipped off my dressing-gown; I chuckled at my deceit as I turned off the water and stepped into the bath. Then I caught my breath, transfixed. God in heaven! What was this?

"The sides and bottom of the bath were thick and slippery with blood!" I reeled and leapt out, and then for a moment I think I must have fainted.

"When I recovered I was lying at the side of that foul receptacle, and my feet and ankles were red with the rapidly congealing fluid, which something told me was unquestionably the lifeblood of a human being.

At first I was too dazed to think coherently. The macabre ablutions I had so nearly performed were too hideous to contemplate. When at last my strength had returned sufficiently to permit me to regain my own room and wipe the malodorous beastliness, now grown sticky and glutinous, from my feet with my towel, I felt better, and tried to consider the whole affair in a calm light. It seemed impossible! Yet there were the vile stains upon my towel to convince me that I had suffered no monstrous hallucination. It was real! It was horrible! It was harrowing, revolting, but undeniably true!

"For how long I remained sitting hunched upon my bed, striving to collect my scattered wits, I do not know. It may have been five minutes, but it seemed an eternity.

"At last I gathered my things together and began to dress. To sleep was impossible with the knowledge of that horror lying so near and so silent in the next room. For that the body was concealed somewhere within that fatal bathroom I had no doubt; the body of the poor victim drained of his blood as though he had been sucked dry by some mighty leech, which in turn had disgorged its ghastly meal into that reeking bath.

"A leech! In a flash it came to me, the simile I had sought to fit to my blind landlord. That was what it was he reminded me of so forcibly—a great loathsome white leech, glutted with blood, and greedy, greedy for *more*!

"Who would be next? I shuddered, then I flew to the window. No! Escape that way was out of the question, for I saw now what had previously eluded my notice. From top to bottom of my window, fixed firmly into the masonry, ran six stout iron bars, and whatever else in the inn might have fallen into decay, these remained in a perfect state of preservation.

"I ran to the door—*it was locked*! I was a prisoner!

"Then as I stood there wondering what to do, I heard again the steady *flip-flop, flip-flop* of loosely fitting slippers on the stairs. They came nearer, nearer; they reached my door; they ceased!

"Watching with eyes dilated with fear, I saw the lock slip noiselessly back in its socket and the door knob begin to turn slowly, almost imperceptibly, round.

"I stood rooted to the spot, paralyzed with terror, my heart pounding in my throat, the blood hammering in my temples with the noise of muffled drums.

"The silence was awful!

"Not a sound broke the stillness save the whistling of my breath between my teeth and the slow drip-drip-drip from the bathroom tap. Then I felt a tremor of icy air fan my cheek, which gradually grew to a steady draught—the door was stealthily opening!

"Somehow I found my voice.

"'Go away!' I screamed, a thin, unnatural sound, and threw my whole weight against this last barrier between myself and—*What*? I felt a moment's resistance, then it yielded and shut, and as I lay clawing at the panels in a paroxysm of fright, I heard the shuffling footsteps recede until once more absolute stillness reigned. For some minutes longer I lay there panting, cursing myself for a coward, and wondering why I had

not brained the blind horror and made good my escape, but somehow it seemed that in the presence of this creature every vestige of manliness was drained from me, and I was left a craven, cowed by the awful sense of evil that emanated from him.

"After a little while I plucked up my courage and opened the door. The landing was in darkness, but what was more important the key was missing from the other side of the door. It was consequently impossible for me to lock myself in, and not for a kingdom would I risk an attempt to get out that way.

"I closed the door again, and, crossing the room, tried to shift the great oak chest. With a big effort I found this to be possible, so bit by bit, I eased it nearer, until at last it rested across my threshold, and I heaved a sigh of relief.

"Here at any rate was a barrier to be reckoned with! Now there was nothing for it but to wait until daylight, and leaving the lamp still burning, I flung myself down fully dressed on the bed, resolved to bear with the circumstances as best I could.

"I have mentioned that the bed was an old four-poster one, and it was hung with faded green curtains which depended in the usual style from the canopy overhead to my right and left and round at the back, excluding all draught.

"As I lay there I examined these with idle interest, casting my eyes up until I reached the canopy itself.

"I am not fastidious, as you may have guessed, but if there is one insect which fills me with more disgust than another it is a spider, and there, dangling by a single thread immediately above my face, was a great fat monster of the species. A long point of metal stuck down from the middle of the canopy, which had been used, I conjectured, at some time for forming the base of a swinging lantern, and from this the insect had spun its web across to one of the poles at the head of the bed.

He had now returned to the centre of his trap, and as I have said, dangled precariously over my face.

"I watched him, fascinated, but by now I was worn out, and from time to time caught myself dozing. I strove to keep awake, but Nature asserted herself, and at last I succumbed to her wooing. I slept.

"The next thing I remember was feeling the plop of the wretched insect as it landed on my cheek and scuttled down my neck. With a smothered cry I leapt from my bed, and as I did so the long metal point fell with a swish and embedded itself in the depression just vacated by my body. I tell you, sir, that spider saved my life!

"Wondering, and not a little afraid, I ungratefully brushed the creature from my person and approached the bed. Then I think I realized what it meant. That metal point was part of a long spear-like contrivance, whose shaft vanished through a small hole in the ceiling, the whole being the most damnable invention for murder ever conceived by the brain of a fiend!

"Its fall had broken the web, and, presumably, the preliminary trembling of the shaft before its release had frightened the spider, which had alighted on my face, warning me in its turn.

"A Providential escape!

"As I paused irresolute in the middle of the room I thought I heard a slight movement outside the door, but may have been mistaken. I waited a few moments longer to reassure myself that this was but the outcome of extreme nervous tension, and stood listening intently. Then from behind the wall at the side of the bed there came the unmistakable sound of something scratching softly, scratching and fumbling, and the sound of a click.

"I wheeled round.

"Slowly, very slowly, a crack appeared in the wall itself, and from within showed the faint glimmer of a light.

"In a trice I was across the room and had put out my lamp. This time I had no intention of letting my fears overcome my faculties. With the courage born of desperation I forced myself again to enter that loathsome bathroom and pushed the door to, taking care to leave it just sufficiently ajar to enable me to watch whatever might be about to occur, while at the same time keeping myself free from observation. From my new point of vantage I saw the gap in the panel widen. I saw the pulpy hands like the antennae of a huge slug come feeling along the wall, and then, like the obscene figment of an unhealthy imagination, my landlord stepped into the room. For a moment he paused, listening, his hands pawing the air before him as if uncertain of his direction, and then stealthily, noiselessly he turned and moved, groping towards my bed.

"Behind him, framed in the space of the open panel, stood the woman, her hand still grasping the candle in the same way in which she had met me at the door, but on her face was such an expression of ghoulish exultation that I shivered, for only a devil could exult as she did then.

"By now the man had reached the side of the bed, and softly his hands felt over the sheets, groping, groping. They touched the spear-shaft, and with a sound like the contented purr of a giant cat he slid his hands down the shaft, feeling for the body which had so lately lain there.

"Suddenly he snarled and started back, and at the sound the woman came into the room. With one glance she comprehended the situation and seized him by the arm.

"'Quick! The bathroom!' she whispered, and half pushing, half dragging the blind, groping creature, moved swiftly in my direction. There was no time to lose. Like a flash I cast round for some means of egress from this charnel-house. Above the cistern, which was over the bath, something winked and twinkled—a star.

Like lightning I clawed my way up the pipes to the skylight, and lay there gasping. A foul stench assailed my nostrils, but I dare not move. Indeed, I had hardly gained the top of the cistern and flung myself flat before the door opened and my pursuers stood on the threshold. Would they see me?

"I think I prayed then as I have never prayed before. Right from my heart I sent up a cry to heaven for assistance.

"The woman said something and stooped, feeling under the bath. When she stood up again I saw that she held an axe in her hand, and she began to laugh horribly. It was like the roar of a wild animal that smells raw meat.

"'Come down!' she cried. 'You must pay for your lodging,' and, when I made no movement, thrust the candle into the man's hand and made to climb up after me.

"It was the work of a second to put my elbow through the glass and break the window, and as I struggled to get through I heard her clambering up after me with the agility of a young tigress.

"Once I slipped and fell, striking the lid of the cistern, which gave way beneath my weight, and my feet and hands came in contact with some soft and flabby substance. I looked down—horror of horrors! *I was kneeling on a heap of mutilated corpses!*

"Men and women were there, some untouched by the hand of corruption, others in the final stages of decomposition; the bodies of wayfarers like myself who had tasted the hospitality of this appalling inn.

"I scrambled out, and, reaching the window, threw myself out upon the sloping tiles of the roof. I could see the face of the woman distorted with fury, as she, too, began to squeeze her way through the skylight. I edged myself nearer the eaves to a spot where a branch of a tree overhung the roof, holding out promise of escape. I had almost grasped this blessed branch in my

hands, when suddenly my foot slipped on a piece of moss and I slithered to the edge and clung there with all my might.

"To fall now might mean a broken limb, and that spelt capture, with all that it entailed.

"I hesitated and was lost.

"With a scream of triumph the woman was upon me. Horrified, I saw her whirl the axe aloft. Hypnotized, I watched the instrument descend, relentless, cruel, and heard it swish as it cleaved the air. Then there came a stinging sensation in my right hand, and I found myself slipping, falling to the ground below.

"Somehow I staggered to my feet and fled.

"How long I ran through the night like a mad thing I don't know. I only know that when at last I did look back for a possible pursuer, the place where the inn had stood was a blaze of flame, and the sky above glowed crimson in the surrounding darkness."

Methuen ceased, and the sweat was standing out in great beads on his brow, as though he had lived again his harrowing experience.

"Very interesting," remarked the doctor. "So the inn caught fire? How was that?"

"I can only conclude that when the woman gave the blind man the candle to hold he must have placed it against his flannelette nightgown inadvertently, and blundered out of the bathroom in his panic, to come up against some such draperies as those about the four-poster."

The doctor smiled.

"You are certainly adept at explaining things," he admitted.

Methuen rose and went behind his chair. He was very pale, and placed his left hand on the back of it as though to support himself as he faced the doctor.

"So you *do* think I'm mad?" he exclaimed slowly.

The doctor shrugged.

"Then how do you account for this?"

With a sudden gesture he withdrew his right arm from his coat pocket and thrust it out before him.

All four fingers of the hand were missing, and the roughly improvised bandages hung loosely, sticky and wet with blood.

Dr Sutton caught him as he swayed and fell.

THE JUDGE'S HOUSE

by Bram Stoker

WHEN THE time for his examination drew near Malcolm Malcolmson made up his mind to go somewhere to read by himself. He feared the attractions of the seaside, and also he feared completely rural isolation, for of old he knew its charms, and so he determined to find some unpretentious little town where there would be nothing to distract him. He refrained from asking suggestions from any of his friends, for he argued that each would recommend some place of which he had knowledge, and where he had already acquaintances. As Malcolmson wished to avoid friends he had no wish to encumber himself with the attention of friends' friends, and so he determined to look out for a place for himself. He packed a portmanteau with some clothes and all the books he required, and then took a ticket for the first name on the local timetable which he did not know.

When at the end of three hours' journey he alighted at Benchurch, he felt satisfied that he had so far obliterated his tracks as to be sure of having a peaceful opportunity of pursuing his studies. He went straight to the one inn which the sleepy little place contained, and put up for the night. Benchurch was a market town, and once in three weeks was crowded to excess, but for the remainder of the twenty-one days it was as attractive as a desert. Malcolmson looked around the day after his arrival to try to find quarters more isolated than even so quiet an inn as 'The Good Traveller' afforded. There was only one place which took his fancy, and it certainly satisfied his wildest ideas regarding quiet; in fact, quiet

was not the proper word to apply to it—desolation was the only term conveying any suitable idea of its isolation. It was an old rambling, heavy-built house of the Jacobean style, with heavy gables and windows, unusually small, and set higher than was customary in such houses, and was surrounded with a high brick wall massively built. Indeed, on examination, it looked more like a fortified house than an ordinary dwelling. But all these things pleased Malcolmson. ‘Here,’ he thought, ‘is the very spot I have been looking for, and if I can only get opportunity of using it I shall be happy.’ His joy was increased when he realized beyond doubt that it was not at present inhabited.

From the post office he got the name of the agent, who was rarely surprised at the application to rent a part of the old house. Mr Carnford, the local lawyer and agent, was a genial old gentleman, and frankly confessed his delight at anyone being willing to live in the house.

“To tell you the truth,” said he, “I should be only too happy, on behalf of the owners, to let anyone have the house rent free for a term of years if only to accustom the people here to see it inhabited. It has been so long empty that some kind of absurd prejudice has grown up about it, and this can be best put down by its occupation—if only,” he added with a sly glance at Malcolmson, “by a scholar like yourself, who wants its quiet for a time.”

Malcolmson thought it needless to ask the agent about the ‘absurd prejudice’; he knew he would get more information, if he should require it, on that subject from other quarters. He paid his three months’ rent, got a receipt, and the name of an old woman who would probably undertake to ‘do’ for him, and came away with the keys in his pocket. He then went to the landlady of the inn, who was a cheerful and most kindly person, and asked her advice as to such stores and provision as he would be likely to require. She threw up her

hands in amazement when he told her where he was going to settle himself.

"Not in the Judge's House!" she said, and grew pale as she spoke. He explained the locality of the house, saying that he did not know its name. When he had finished she answered:

"Aye, sure enough—sure enough the very place! It is the Judge's House sure enough." He asked her to tell him about the place, why so called, and what there was against it. She told him that it was so called locally because it had been many years before—how long she could not say, as she was herself from another part of the country, but she thought it must have been a hundred years or more—the abode of a judge who was held in great terror on account of his harsh sentences and his hostility to prisoners at Assizes. As to what there was against the house itself she could not tell. She had often asked, but no one could inform her; but there was a general feeling that there was *something*, and for her own part she would not take all the money in Drinkwater's Bank and stay in the house an hour by herself. Then she apologized to Malcolmson for her disturbing talk.

"It is too bad of me, sir, and you—and a young gentleman, too—if you will pardon me saying it, going to live there all alone. If you were my boy—and you'll excuse me for saying it—you wouldn't sleep there a night, not if I had to go there myself and pull the big alarm bell that's on the roof!" The good creature was so manifestly in earnest, and was so kindly in her intentions, that Malcolmson, although amused, was touched. He told her kindly how much he appreciated her interest in him, and added:

"But, my dear Mrs Witham, indeed you need not be concerned about me! A man who is reading for the Mathematical Tripos has too much to think of to be disturbed by any of these mysterious 'somethings', and his work is of too exact and prosaic a kind to allow of his

having any corner in his mind for mysteries of any kind. Harmonical Progression, Permutations and Combinations, and Elliptic Functions have sufficient mysteries for me!" Mrs Witham kindly undertook to see after his commissions, and he went himself to look for the old woman who had been recommended to him. When he returned to the Judge's House with her, after an interval of a couple of hours, he found Mrs Witham herself waiting with several men and boys carrying parcels, and an upholsterer's man with a bed in a cart, for she said, though tables and chairs might be all very well, a bed that hadn't been aired for mayhap fifty years was not proper for young bones to lie on. She was evidently curious to see the inside of the house; and though manifestly so afraid of the 'somethings' that at the slightest sound she clutched on to Malcolmson, whom she never left for a moment, went over the whole place.

After his examination of the house, Malcolmson decided to take up his abode in the great dining room, which was big enough to serve for all his requirements; and Mrs Witham, with the aid of the charwoman, Mrs Dempster, proceeded to arrange matters. When the hampers were brought in and unpacked, Malcolmson saw that with much kind forethought she had sent from her own kitchen sufficient provisions to last for a few days. Before going she expressed all sorts of kind wishes; and at the door turned and said:

"And perhaps, sir, as the room is big and draughty it might be well to have one of those big screens put round your bed at night—though, truth to tell, I would die myself if I were to be so shut in with all kinds of—of 'things', that put their heads round the sides, or over the top, and look on me!" The image which she had called up was too much for her nerves, and she fled incontinently.

Mrs Dempster sniffed in a superior manner as the landlady disappeared, and remarked that for her own part she wasn't afraid of all the bogies in the kingdom.

"I'll tell you what it is, sir," she said; "bogies is all kinds and sorts of things—except bogies! Rats and mice, and beetles; and creaky doors, and loose slates, and broken panes, and stiff drawer handles, that stay out when you pull them and then fall down in the middle of the night. Look at the wainscot of the room! It is old—hundreds of years old! Do you think there's no rats and beetles there! And do you imagine, sir, that you won't see none of them? Rats is bogies, I tell you, and bogies is rats; and don't you get to think anything else!"

"Mrs Dempster," said Malcolmson gravely, making her a polite bow, "you know more than a Senior Wrangler! And let me say, that, as a mark of esteem for your indubitable soundness of head and heart, I shall, when I go, give you possession of this house, and let you stay here by yourself for the last two months of my tenancy, for four weeks will serve my purpose."

"Thank you kindly, sir!" she answered, "but I couldn't sleep away from home a night. I am in Greenhow's Charity, and if I slept a night away from my rooms I should lose all I have got to live on. The rules is very strict; and there's too many watching for a vacancy for me to run any risks in the matter. Only for that, sir, I'd gladly come here and attend on you altogether during your stay."

"My good woman," said Malcolmson hastily, "I have come here on purpose to obtain solitude; and believe me that I am grateful to the late Greenhow for having so organized his admirable charity—whatever it is—that I am perforce denied the opportunity of suffering from such a form of temptation! Saint Anthony himself could not be more rigid on the point!"

The old woman laughed harshly. "Ah, you young gentlemen," she said, "you don't fear for naught; and belike you'll get all the solitude you want here." She set to work with her cleaning; and by nightfall, when Malcolmson returned from his walk—he always had

one of his books to study as he walked—he found the room swept and tidied, a fire burning in the old hearth, the lamp lit, and the table spread for supper with Mrs Witham's excellent fare. "This is comfort, indeed," he said, as he rubbed his hands.

When he had finished his supper, and lifted the tray to the other end of the great oak dining table, he got out his books again, put fresh wood on the fire, trimmed his lamp, and set himself down to a spell of real hard work. He went on without pause till about eleven o'clock, when he knocked off for a bit to fix his fire and lamp, and to make himself a cup of tea. He had always been a tea drinker, and during his college life had sat late at work and had taken tea late. The rest was a great luxury to him, and he enjoyed it with a sense of delicious, voluptuous ease. The renewed fire leaped and sparkled and threw quaint shadows through the great old room; and as he sipped his hot tea he revelled in the sense of isolation from his kind. Then it was that he began to notice for the first time what a noise the rats were making.

'Surely,' he thought, 'they cannot have been at it all the time I was reading. Had they been, I must have noticed it!' Presently, when the noise increased, he satisfied himself that it was really new. It was evident that at first the rats had been frightened at the presence of a stranger, and the light of fire and lamp; but that as the time went on they had grown bolder and were now disporting themselves as was their wont.

How busy they were! and hark to the strange noises! Up and down behind the old wainscot, over the ceiling and under the floor they raced, and gnawed, and scratched! Malcolmson smiled to himself as he recalled to mind the saying of Mrs Dempster, 'Bogies is rats, and rats is bogies!' The tea began to have its effect of intellectual and nervous stimulus, he saw with joy another long spell of work to be done before the night was past, and in the sense of security which it gave him, he

allowed himself the luxury of a good look round the room. He took his lamp in one hand, and went all around, wondering that so quaint and beautiful an old house had been so long neglected. The carving of the oak on the panels of the wainscot was fine, and on and round the doors and windows it was beautiful and of rare merit. There were some old pictures on the walls, but they were coated so thick with dust and dirt that he could not distinguish any detail of them, though he held his lamp as high as he could over his head. Here and there as he went round he saw some crack or hole blocked for a moment by the face of a rat with its bright eyes glittering in the light, but in an instant it was gone, and a squeak and a scamper followed. The thing that most struck him, however, was the rope of the great alarm bell on the roof, which hung down in a corner of the room on the right-hand side of the fireplace. He pulled up close to the hearth a great high-backed carved oak chair, and sat down to his last cup of tea. When this was done he made up the fire, and went back to his work, sitting at the corner of the table, having the fire to his left. For a little while the rats disturbed him somewhat with their perpetual scampering, but he got accustomed to the noise as one does to the ticking of a clock or to the roar of moving water; and he became so immersed in his work that everything in the world, except the problem which he was trying to solve, passed away from him.

He suddenly looked up, his problem was still unsolved, and there was in the air that sense of the hour before the dawn, which is so dread to doubtful life. The noise of the rats had ceased. Indeed it seemed to him that it must have ceased but lately and that it was the sudden cessation which had disturbed him. The fire had fallen low, but still it threw out a deep red glow. As he looked he started in spite of his *sang froid*.

There on the great high-backed carved oak chair by the right side of the fireplace sat an enormous rat,

steadily glaring at him with baleful eyes. He made a motion to it as though to hunt it away, but it did not stir. Then he made the motion of throwing something. Still it did not stir, but showed its great white teeth angrily, and its cruel eyes shone in the lamplight with an added vindictiveness.

Malcolmson felt amazed, and seizing the poker from the hearth ran at it to kill it. Before, however, he could strike it, the rat, with a squeak that sounded like the concentration of hate, jumped upon the floor, and, running up the rope of the alarm bell, disappeared in the darkness beyond the range of the green-shaded lamp. Instantly, strange to say, the noisy scampering of the rats in the wainscot began again.

By this time Malcolmson's mind was quite off the problem; and as a shrill cock crow outside told him of the approach of morning, he went to bed and to sleep.

He slept so soundly that he was not even wakened by Mrs Dempster coming in to make up his room. It was only when she had tidied up the place and got his breakfast ready and tapped on the screen which closed in his bed that he woke. He was a little tired still after his night's hard work, but a strong cup of tea soon freshened him up, and, taking his book, he went out for his morning walk, bringing with him a few sandwiches lest he should not care to return till dinner time. He found a quiet walk between high elms some way outside the town, and here he spent the greater part of the day studying his Laplace. On his return he looked in to see Mrs Witham and to thank her for her kindness. When she saw him coming through the diamond-paned bay window of her sanctum she came out to meet him and asked him in. She looked at him searchingly and shook her head as she said:

"You must not overdo it, sir. You are paler this morning than you should be. Too late hours and too hard work on the brain isn't good for any man! But tell me, sir, how did you pass the night? Well, I hope?

But, my heart! sir, I was glad when Mrs Dempster told me this morning that you were all right and sleeping sound when she went in."

"Oh, I was all right," he answered smiling, "the 'somethings' didn't worry me, as yet. Only the rats; and they had a circus, I tell you, all over the place. There was one wicked-looking old devil that sat up on my own chair by the fire, and wouldn't go till I took the poker to him, and then he ran up the rope of the alarm bell and got to somewhere up the wall or the ceiling—I couldn't see where, it was so dark."

"Mercy on us," said Mrs Witham, "an old devil, and sitting on a chair by the fireside! Take care, sir! take care! There's many a true word spoken in jest."

"How do you mean? 'Pon my word I don't understand."

"An old devil! The old devil, perhaps. There! sir, you needn't laugh," for Malcolmson had broken into a hearty peal. "You young folks thinks it easy to laugh at things that makes older ones shudder. Never mind, sir! never mind! Please God, you'll laugh all the time. It's what I wish you myself!" and the good lady beamed all over in sympathy with his enjoyment, her fears gone for a moment.

"Oh, forgive me!" said Malcolmson presently. "Don't think me rude; but the idea was too much for me—that the old devil himself was on the chair last night!" And at the thought he laughed again. Then he went home to dinner.

This evening the scampering of the rats began earlier; indeed it had been going on before his arrival, and only ceased while his presence by its freshness disturbed them. After dinner he sat by the fire for a while and had a smoke; and then, having cleared his table, began to work as before. Tonight the rats disturbed him more than they had done on the previous night. How they scampered up and down and under and over! How they squeaked, and scratched, and gnawed! How they,

getting bolder by degrees, came to the mouths of their holes and to the chinks and cracks and crannies in the wainscoting till their eyes shone like tiny lamps as the firelight rose and fell. But to him, now doubtless accustomed to them, their eyes were not wicked; only their playfulness touched him. Sometimes the boldest of them made sallies out on the floor or along the mouldings of the wainscot. Now and again as they disturbed him Malcolmson made a sound to frighten them, smiting the table with his hand or giving a fierce "Hsh, hssh," so that they fled straightway to their holes.

And so the early part of the night wore on; and despite the noise Malcolmson got more and more immersed in his work.

All at once he stopped, as on the previous night, being overcome by a sudden sense of silence. There was not the faintest sound of gnaw, or scratch, or squeak. The silence was as of the grave. He remembered the odd occurrence of the previous night, and instinctively he looked at the chair standing close by the fireside. And then a very odd sensation thrilled through him.

There, on the great old high-backed carved oak chair beside the fireplace sat the same enormous rat, steadily glaring at him with baleful eyes.

Instinctively he took the nearest thing to his hand, a book of logarithms, and flung it at it. The book was badly aimed and the rat did not stir, so again the poker performance of the previous night was repeated; and again the rat, being closely pursued, fled up the rope of the alarm bell. Strangely too, the departure of this rat was instantly followed by the renewal of the noise made by the general rat community. On this occasion, as on the previous one, Malcolmson could not see at what part of the room the rat disappeared, for the green shade of his lamp left the upper part of the room in darkness, and the fire had burned low.

On looking at his watch he found it was close on midnight; and, not sorry for the *divertissement*, he made up

his fire and made himself his nightly pot of tea. He had got through a good spell of work, and thought himself entitled to a cigarette; and so he sat on the great carved oak chair before the fire and enjoyed it. While smoking he began to think that he would like to know where the rat disappeared to, for he had certain ideas for the morrow not entirely disconnected with a rat trap. Accordingly he lit another lamp and placed it so that it would shine well into the right-hand corner of the wall by the fireplace. Then he got all the books he had with him, and placed them handy to throw at the vermin. Finally he lifted the rope of the alarm bell and placed the end of it on the table, fixing the extreme end under the lamp. As he handled it he could not help noticing how pliable it was, especially for so strong a rope, and one not in use. 'You could hang a man with it,' he thought to himself. When his preparations were made he looked around, and said complacently:

"There now, my friend, I think we shall learn something of you this time!" He began his work again, and though as before somewhat disturbed at first by the noise of the rats, soon lost himself in his propositions and problems.

Again he was called to his immediate surroundings suddenly. This time it might not have been the sudden silence only which took his attention; there was a slight movement of the rope, and the lamp moved. Without stirring, he looked to see if his pile of books was within range, and then cast his eye along the rope. As he looked he saw the great rat drop from the rope on the oak armchair and sit there glaring at him. He raised a book in his right hand, and taking careful aim, flung it at the rat. The latter, with a quick movement, sprang aside and dodged the missile. He then took another book, and a third, and flung them one after another at the rat, but each time unsuccessfully. At last, as he stood with a book poised in his hand to throw, the rat squeaked and seemed afraid. This made Malcolmson

more than ever eager to strike, and the book flew and struck the rat a resounding blow. It gave a terrified squeak, and turning on his pursuer a look of terrible malevolence, ran up the chair back and made a great jump to the rope of the alarm bell and ran up it like lightning. The lamp rocked under the sudden strain, but it was a heavy one and did not topple over. Malcolmson kept his eyes on the rat, and saw it by the light of the second lamp leap to a moulding of the wainscot and disappear through a hole in one of the great pictures which hung on the wall, obscured and invisible through its coating of dirt and dust.

"I shall look up my friend's habitation in the morning," said the student, as he went over to collect his books. The third picture from the fireplace; I shall not forget." He picked up the books one by one, commenting on them as he lifted them. "*Conic Sections* he does not mind, nor *Cycloidal Oscillations*, nor the *Principia*, nor *Quaternions*, nor *Thermodynamics*. Now for the book that fetched him!" Malcolmson took it up and looked at it. As he did so he started, and a sudden pallor overspread his face. He looked round uneasily and shivered slightly, as he murmured to himself:

"The Bible my mother gave me! What an odd coincidence." He sat down to work again, and the rats in the wainscot renewed their gambols. They did not disturb him, however; somehow their presence gave him a sense of companionship. But he could not attend to his work, and after striving to master the subject on which he was engaged gave it up in despair, and went to bed as the first streak of dawn stole in through the eastern window.

He slept heavily but uneasily, and dreamed much; and when Mrs Dempster woke him late in the morning he seemed ill at ease, and for a few minutes did not seem to realize exactly where he was. His first request rather surprised the servant.

"Mrs Dempster, when I am out today I wish you

would get the steps and dust or wash those pictures—especially that one the third from the fireplace—I want to see what they are.”

Late in the afternoon Malcolmson worked at his books in the shaded walk, and the cheerfulness of the previous day came back to him as the day wore on, and he found that his reading was progressing well. He had worked out to a satisfactory conclusion all the problems which had as yet baffled him, and it was in a state of jubilation that he paid a visit to Mrs Witham at ‘The Good Traveller’. He found a stranger in the cosy sitting room with the landlady, who was introduced to him as Dr Thornhill. She was not quite at ease, and this, combined with the doctor’s plunging at once into a series of questions, made Malcolmson come to the conclusion that his presence was not an accident, so without preliminary he said:

“Dr Thornhill, I shall with pleasure answer you any question you may choose to ask me if you will answer me one question first.”

The doctor seemed surprised, but he smiled and answered at once, “Done! What is it?”

“Did Mrs Witham ask you to come here and see me and advise me?”

Dr Thornhill for a moment was taken aback, and Mrs Witham got fiery red and turned away; but the doctor was a frank and ready man, and he answered at once and openly:

“She did: but she didn’t intend you to know it. I suppose it was my clumsy haste that made you suspect. She told me that she did not like the idea of your being in that house all by yourself and that she thought you took too much strong tea. In fact, she wants me to advise you if possible to give up the tea and the very late hours. I was a keen student in my time, so I suppose I may take the liberty of a college man and, without offence, advise you not quite as a stranger.”

Malcolmson with a bright smile held out his hand.

"Shake! as they say in America," he said. "I must thank you for your kindness and Mrs Witham too, and your kindness deserves a return on my part. I promise to take no more strong tea—no tea at all till you let me—and I shall go to bed tonight at one o'clock at latest. Will that do?"

"Capital," said the doctor. "Now tell us all that you noticed in the old house," and so Malcolmson then and there told in minute detail all that had happened in the last two nights. He was interrupted every now and then by some exclamation from Mrs Witham, till finally when he told of the episode of the Bible the landlady's pent-up emotions found vent in a shriek; and it was not till a stiff glass of brandy and water had been administered that she grew composed again. Dr Thornhill listened with a face of growing gravity, and when the narrative was complete and Mrs Witham had been restored he asked:

"The rat always went up the rope of the alarm bell?"

"Always."

"I suppose you know," said the Doctor after a pause, "what the rope is?"

"No!"

"It is," said the doctor slowly, "the very rope which the hangman used for all the victims of the Judge's judicial rancour!" Here he was interrupted by another scream from Mrs Witham, and steps had to be taken for her recovery. Malcolmson having looked at his watch, and found that it was close to his dinner hour, had gone home before her complete recovery.

When Mrs Witham was herself again she almost assailed the doctor with angry questions as to what he meant by putting such horrible ideas into the poor young man's mind. "He has quite enough there already to upset him," she added. Dr Thornhill replied:

"My dear madam, I had a distinct purpose in it! I wanted to draw his attention to the bell rope, and to fix it there. It may be that he is in a highly overwrought

state, and has been studying too much, although I am bound to say that he seems as sound and healthy a young man, mentally and bodily, as ever I saw—but then the rats—and that suggestion of the devil.” The doctor shook his head and went on. “I would have offered to go and stay the first night with him but that I felt sure it would have been a cause of offence. He may get in the night some strange fright or hallucination; and if he does I want him to pull that rope. All alone as he is it will give us warning, and we may reach him in time to be of service. I shall be sitting up pretty late tonight and shall keep my ears open. Do not be alarmed if Benchurch gets a surprise before morning.”

“Oh, Doctor, what do you mean? What do you mean?”

“I mean this; that possibly—nay, more probably—we shall hear the great alarm bell from the Judge’s House tonight,” and the doctor made about as effective an exit as could be thought of.

When Malcolmson arrived home he found that it was a little after his usual time, and Mrs Dempster had gone away—the rules of Greenhow’s Charity were not to be neglected. He was glad to see that the place was bright and tidy with a cheerful fire and a well-trimmed lamp. The evening was colder than might have been expected in April, and a heavy wind was blowing with such rapidly increasing strength that there was every promise of a storm during the night. For a few minutes after his entrance the noise of the rats ceased; but so soon as they became accustomed to his presence they began again. He was glad to hear them, for he felt once more the feeling of companionship in their noise, and his mind ran back to the strange fact that they only ceased to manifest themselves when that other—the great rat with the baleful eyes—came upon the scene. The reading lamp only was lit and its green shade kept the ceiling and the upper part of the room in darkness, so that the cheerful light from the hearth spreading

over the floor and shining on the white cloth laid over the end of the table was warm and cheery. Malcolmson sat down to his dinner with a good appetite and a buoyant spirit. After his dinner and a cigarette he sat steadily down to work, determined not to let anything disturb him, for he remembered his promise to the doctor, and made up his mind to make the best of the time at his disposal.

For an hour or so he worked all right, and then his thoughts began to wander from his books. The actual circumstances around him, the calls on his physical attention, and his nervous susceptibility were not to be denied. By this time the wind had become a gale, and the gale a storm. The old house, solid though it was, seemed to shake to its foundations, and the storm roared and raged through its many chimneys and its queer old gables, producing strange, unearthly sounds in the empty rooms and corridors. Even the great alarm bell on the roof must have felt the force of the wind, for the rope rose and fell slightly, as though the bell were moved a little from time to time, and the limber rope fell on the oak floor with a hard and hollow sound.

As Malcolmson listened to it he bethought himself of the doctor's words, 'It is the rope which the hangman used for the victims of the Judge's judicial rancour', and he went over to the corner of the fireplace and took it in his hand to look at it. There seemed a sort of deadly interest in it, and as he stood there he lost himself for a moment in speculation as to who these victims were, and the grim wish of the Judge to have such a ghastly relic ever under his eyes. As he stood there the swaying of the bell on the roof still lifted the rope now and again; but presently there came a new sensation—a sort of tremor in the rope, as though something was moving along it.

Looking up instinctively Malcolmson saw the great rat coming slowly down towards him, glaring at him

steadily. He dropped the rope and started back with a muttered curse, and the rat turning ran up the rope again and disappeared, and at the same instant Malcolmson became conscious that the noise of the rats, which had ceased for a while, began again.

All this set him thinking, and it occurred to him that he had not investigated the lair of the rat or looked at the pictures, as he had intended. He lit the other lamp without the shade, and, holding it up, went and stood opposite the third picture from the fireplace on the right-hand side where he had seen the rat disappear on the previous night.

At the first glance he started back so suddenly that he almost dropped the lamp, and a deadly pallor overspread his face. His knees shook, and heavy drops of sweat came on his forehead, and he trembled like an aspen. But he was young and plucky, and pulled himself together, and after the pause of a few seconds stepped forward again, raised the lamp, and examined the picture which had been dusted and washed, and now stood out clearly.

It was of a judge dressed in his robes of scarlet and ermine. His face was strong and merciless, evil, crafty, and vindictive, with a sensual mouth, hooked nose of ruddy colour, and shaped like the beak of a bird of prey. The rest of the face was of a cadaverous colour. The eyes were of peculiar brilliance and with a terribly malignant expression. As he looked at them, Malcolmson grew cold, for he saw there the very counterpart of the eyes of the great rat. The lamp almost fell from his hand, he saw the rat with its baleful eyes peering out through the hole in the corner of the picture, and noted the sudden cessation of the noise of the other rats. However, he pulled himself together, and went on with his examination of the picture.

The Judge was seated in a great high-backed carved oak chair, on the right-hand side of a great stone fireplace where, in the corner, a rope hung down from the

ceiling, its end lying coiled on the floor. With a feeling of something like horror, Malcolmson recognized the scene of the room as it stood, and gazed around him in an awestruck manner as though he expected to find some strange presence behind him. Then he looked over to the corner of the fireplace—and with a loud cry he let the lamp fall from his hand.

There, in the judge's armchair, with the rope hanging behind, sat the rat with the Judge's baleful eyes, now intensified and with a fiendish leer. Save for the howling of the storm without there was silence.

The fallen lamp recalled Malcolmson to himself. Fortunately it was of metal, and so the oil was not spilt. However, the practical need of attending to it settled at once his nervous apprehensions. When he had turned it out, he wiped his brow and thought for a moment.

"This will not do," he said to himself. "If I go on like this I shall become a crazy fool. This must stop! I promised the doctor I would not take tea. Faith, he was pretty right! My nerves must have been getting into a queer state. Funny I did not notice it. I never felt better in my life. However, it is all right now, and I shall not be such a fool again."

Then he mixed himself a good stiff glass of brandy and water and resolutely sat down to his work.

It was nearly an hour when he looked up from his book, disturbed by the sudden stillness. Without, the wind howled and roared louder than ever, and the rain drove in sheets against the windows, beating like hail on the glass; but within there was no sound whatever save the echo of the wind as it roared in the great chimney, and now and then a hiss as a few raindrops found their way down the chimney in a lull of the storm. The fire had fallen low and had ceased to flame, though it threw out a red glow. Malcolmson listened attentively, and presently heard a thin, squeaking noise, very faint. It came from the corner of the room where the rope hung down, and he thought it was the creaking of the rope

on the floor as the swaying of the bell raised and lowered it. Looking up, however, he saw in the dim light the great rat clinging to the rope and gnawing it. The rope was already nearly gnawed through—he could see the lighter colour where the strands were laid bare. As he looked the job was completed, and the severed end of the rope fell clattering on the oaken floor, while for an instant the great rat remained like a knob or tassel at the end of the rope, which now began to sway to and fro. Malcolmson felt for a moment another pang of terror as he thought that now the possibility of calling the outer world to his assistance was cut off, but an intense anger took its place, and seizing the book he was reading he hurled it at the rat. The blow was well aimed, but before the missile could reach him the rat dropped off and struck the floor with a soft thud. Malcolmson instantly rushed over towards him, but it darted away and disappeared in the darkness of the shadows of the room. Malcolmson felt that his work was over for the night, and determined then and there to vary the monotony of the proceedings by a hunt for the rat, and took off the green shade of the lamp so as to insure a wider spreading light. As he did so the gloom of the upper part of the room was relieved, and in the new flood of light, great by comparison with the previous darkness, the pictures on the wall stood out boldly. From where he stood, Malcolmson saw right opposite to him the third picture on the wall from the right of the fireplace. He rubbed his eyes in surprise, and then a great fear began to come upon him.

In the centre of the picture was a great irregular patch of brown canvas, as fresh as when it was stretched on the frame. The background was as before, with chair and chimney-corner and rope, but the figure of the Judge had disappeared.

Malcolmson, almost in a chill of horror, turned slowly round, and then he began to shake and tremble like a man in a palsy. His strength seemed to have left him,

and he was incapable of action or movement, hardly even of thought. He could only see and hear.

There, on the great high-backed carved oak chair sat the Judge in his robes of scarlet and ermine, with his baleful eyes glaring vindictively, and a smile of triumph on the resolute, cruel mouth, as he lifted with his hands a *black cap*. Malcolmson felt as if the blood was running from his heart, as one does in moments of prolonged suspense. There was a singing in his ears. Without, he could hear the roar and howl of the tempest, and through it, swept on the storm, came the striking of midnight by the great chimes in the market place. He stood for a space of time that seemed to him endless, still as a statue, and with wide-open, horror-struck eyes, breathless. As the clock struck, so the smile of triumph on the Judge's face intensified, and at the last stroke of midnight he placed the black cap on his head.

Slowly and deliberately the Judge rose from his chair and picked up the piece of the rope of the alarm bell which lay on the floor, drew it through his hands as if he enjoyed its touch, and then deliberately began to knot one end of it, fashioning it into a noose. This he tightened and tested with his foot, pulling hard at it till he was satisfied and then making a running noose of it, which he held in his hand. Then he began to move along the table on the opposite side to Malcolmson keeping his eyes on him until he had passed him, when with a quick movement he stood in front of the door. Malcolmson then began to feel that he was trapped, and tried to think of what he should do. There was some fascination in the Judge's eyes, which he never took off him, and he had, perforce to look. He saw the Judge approach—still keeping between him and the door—and raise the noose and throw it towards him as if to entangle him. With a great effort he made a quick movement to one side, and saw the rope fall beside him, and heard it strike the oaken floor. Again the Judge raised the noose and tried to ensnare him, ever

keeping his baleful eyes fixed on him, and each time by a mighty effort the student just managed to evade it. So this went on for many times, the Judge seeming never discouraged nor discomposed at failure, but playing as a cat does with a mouse. At last in despair, which had reached its climax, Malcolmson cast a quick glance round him. The lamp seemed to have blazed up, and there was a fairly good light in the room. At the many rat holes and in the chinks and crannies of the wainscot he saw the rats' eyes; and this aspect, that was purely physical, gave him a gleam of comfort. He looked around and saw that the rope of the great alarm bell was laden with rats. Every inch of it was covered with them, and more and more were pouring through the small circular hole in the ceiling whence it emerged, so that with their weight the bell was beginning to sway.

Hark! it had swayed till the clapper had touched the bell. The sound was but a tiny one, but the bell was only beginning to sway, and it would increase.

At the sound the Judge, who had been keeping his eyes fixed on Malcolmson, looked up, and a scowl of diabolical anger overspread his face. His eyes fairly glowed like hot coals, and he stamped his foot with a sound that seemed to make the house shake. A dreadful peal of thunder broke overhead as he raised the rope again, while the rats kept running up and down the rope as though working against time. This time, instead of throwing it, he drew close to his victim, and held open the noose as he approached. As he came closer there seemed something paralysing in his very presence, and Malcolmson stood rigid as a corpse. He felt the Judge's icy fingers touch his throat as he adjusted the rope. The noose tightened—tightened. Then the Judge, taking the rigid form of the student in his arms, carried him over and placed him standing in the oak chair, and stepping up beside him, put his hand up and caught the end of the swaying rope of the alarm

bell. As he raised his hand the rats fled squeaking, and disappeared through the hole in the ceiling. Taking the end of the noose which was round Malcolmson's neck he tied it to the hanging-bell rope, and then descending pulled away the chair.

* * *

When the alarm bell of the Judge's House began to sound a crowd soon assembled. Lights and torches of various kinds appeared, and soon a silent crowd was hurrying to the spot. They knocked loudly at the door, but there was no reply. Then they burst in the door, and poured into the great dining room, the doctor at the head.

There at the end of the rope of the great alarm bell hung the body of the student, and on the face of the Judge in the picture was a malignant smile.

THE SPECIALITY OF THE HOUSE

by Stanley Ellin

"AND THIS," said Laffler, "is Sbirro's." Costain saw a square brownstone façade identical with the others that extended from either side into the clammy darkness of the deserted street. From the barred windows of the basement at his feet, a glimmer of light showed behind heavy curtains.

"Lord," he observed, "it's a dismal hole, isn't it?"

"I beg you to understand," said Laffler stiffly, "that Sbirro's is the restaurant without pretensions. Besieged by these ghastly, neurotic times, it has refused to compromise. It is perhaps the last important establishment in this city lit by gas jets. Here you will find the same honest furnishings, the same magnificent Sheffield service, and possibly, in a far corner, the very same spider webs that were remarked by the patrons of a half century ago!"

"A doubtful recommendation," said Costain, "and hardly sanitary."

"When you enter," Laffler continued, "you leave the insanity of this year, this day, and this hour, and you find yourself for a brief span restored in spirit, not by opulence, but by dignity, which is the lost quality of our time."

Costain laughed uncomfortably. "You make it sound more like a cathedral than a restaurant," he said.

In the pale reflection of the street lamp overhead, Laffler peered at his companion's face. "I wonder," he said abruptly, "whether I have not made a mistake in extending this invitation to you."

Costain was hurt. Despite an impressive title and

large salary, he was no more than clerk to this pompous little man, but he was impelled to make some display of his feelings. "If you wish," he said coldly, "I can make other plans for my evening with no trouble."

With his large, cowlike eyes turned up to Costain, the mist drifting into the ruddy, full moon of his face, Laffler seemed strangely ill at ease. Then "No, no," he said at last, "absolutely not. It's important that you dine at Sbirro's with me." He grasped Costain's arm firmly and led the way to the wrought-iron gate of the basement. "You see, you're the sole person in my office who seems to know anything at all about good food. And on my part, knowing about Sbirro's but not having some appreciative friend to share it is like having a unique piece of art locked in a room where no one else can enjoy it."

Costain was considerably mollified by this. "I understand there are a great many people who relish that situation."

"I'm not one of that kind!" Laffler said sharply. "And having the secret of Sbirro's locked in myself for years has finally become unendurable." He fumbled at the side of the gate and from within could be heard the small, discordant jangle of an ancient pull-bell. An interior door opened with a groan, and Costain found himself peering into a dark face whose only discernible feature was a row of gleaming teeth.

"Sair?" said the face.

"Mr Laffler and a guest."

"Sair," the face said again, this time in what was clearly an invitation. It moved aside and Costain stumbled down a single step behind his host. The door and gate creaked behind him, and he stood blinking in a small foyer. It took him a moment to realize that the figure he now stared at was his own reflection in a gigantic pier glass that extended from floor to ceiling. "Atmosphere," he said under his breath and chuckled as he followed his guide to a seat.

He faced Laffler across a small table for two and peered curiously around the dining room. It was no size at all, but the half-dozen guttering gas jets which provided the only illumination threw such a deceptive light that the walls flickered and faded into uncertain distance.

There were no more than eight or ten tables about, arranged to insure the maximum privacy. All were occupied, and the few waiters serving them moved with quiet efficiency. In the air were a soft clash and scrape of cutlery and a soothing murmur of talk. Costain nodded appreciatively.

Laffler breathed an audible sigh of gratification. "I knew you would share my enthusiasm," he said. "Have you noticed, by the way, that there are no women present?"

Costain raised inquiring eyebrows.

"Sbirro," said Laffler, "does not encourage members of the fair sex to enter the premises. And, I can tell you, his method is decidedly effective. I had the experience of seeing a woman get a taste of it not long ago. She sat at a table for not less than an hour waiting for service which was never forthcoming."

"Didn't she make a scene?"

"She did." Laffler smiled at the recollection. "She succeeded in annoying the customers, embarrassing her partner, and nothing more."

"And what about Mr Sbirro?"

"He did not make an appearance. Whether he directed affairs from behind the scenes, or was not even present during the episode, I don't know. Whichever it was, he won a complete victory. The woman never reappeared nor, for that matter, did the witless gentleman who by bringing her was really the cause of the entire contretemps."

"A fair warning to all present," laughed Costain.

A waiter now appeared at the table. The chocolate-dark skin, the thin, beautifully moulded nose and lips,

the large liquid eyes, heavily lashed, and the silver white hair so heavy and silken that it lay on the skull like a cap, all marked him definitely as an East Indian of some sort, Costain decided. The man arranged the stiff table linen, filled two tumblers from a huge, cut-glass pitcher, and set them in their proper places.

"Tell me," Laffler said eagerly, "is the special being served this evening?"

The waiter smiled regretfully and showed teeth as spectacular as those of the majordomo. "I am so sorry, sair. There is no special this evening."

Laffler's face fell into lines of heavy disappointment. "After waiting so long. It's been a month already, and I hoped to show my friend here . . ."

"You understand the difficulties, sair."

"Of course, of course." Laffler looked at Costain sadly and shrugged. "You see, I had in mind to introduce you to the greatest treat that Sbirro's offers, but unfortunately it isn't on the menu this evening."

The waiter said, "Do you wish to be served now, sair?" and Laffler nodded. To Costain's surprise the waiter made his way off without waiting for any instructions.

"Have you ordered in advance?" he asked.

"Ah," said Laffler, "I really should have explained. Sbirro's offers no choice whatsoever. You will eat the same meal as everyone else in this room. Tomorrow evening you would eat an entirely different meal, but again without designating a single preference."

"Very unusual," said Costain, "and certainly unsatisfactory at times. What if one doesn't have a taste for the particular dish set before him?"

"On that score," said Laffler solemnly, "you need have no fears. I give you my word that no matter how exacting your tastes, you will relish every mouthful you eat in Sbirro's."

Costain looked doubtful, and Laffler smiled. "And consider the subtle advantages of the system," he said.

"When you pick up the menu of a popular restaurant, you find yourself confronted with innumerable choices. You are forced to weigh, to evaluate, to make uneasy decisions which you may instantly regret. The effect of all this is a tension which, however slight, must make for discomfort.

"And consider the mechanics of the process. Instead of a hurly-burly of sweating cooks rushing about a kitchen in a frenzy to prepare a hundred varying items, we have a chef who stands serenely alone, bringing all his talents to bear on one task, with all assurance of a complete triumph!"

"Then you have seen the kitchen?"

"Unfortunately, no," said Laffler sadly. "The picture I offer is hypothetical, made of conversational fragments I have pieced together over the years. I must admit, though, that my desire to see the functioning of the kitchen here comes very close to being my sole obsession nowadays."

"But have you mentioned this to Sbirro?"

"A dozen times. He shrugs the suggestion away."

"Isn't that a rather curious foible on his part?"

"No, no," Laffler said hastily, "a master artist is never under the compulsion of petty courtesies. Still," he sighed, "I have never given up hope."

The waiter now reappeared bearing two soup bowls which he set in place with mathematical exactitude, and a small tureen from which he slowly ladled a measure of clear, thin broth. Costain dipped his spoon into the broth and tasted it with some curiosity. It was delicately flavoured, bland to the verge of tastelessness. Costain frowned, tentatively reached for the salt and pepper cellars, and discovered there were none on the table. He looked up, saw Laffler's eyes on him, and although unwilling to compromise with his own tastes, he hesitated to act as a damper on Laffler's enthusiasm. Therefore he smiled and indicated the broth.

"Excellent," he said.

Laffler returned his smile. "You do not find it excellent at all," he said coolly. "You find it flat and badly in need of condiments. I know this," he continued as Costain's eyebrows shot upwards, "because it was my own reaction many years ago, and because like yourself I found myself reaching for salt and pepper after the first mouthful. I also learned with surprise that condiments are not available in Sbirro's."

Costain was shocked. "Not even salt!" he exclaimed.

"Not even salt. The very fact that you require it for your soup stands as evidence that your taste is unduly jaded. I am confident that you will now make the same discovery that I did: by the time you have nearly finished your soup, your desire for salt will be nonexistent."

Laffler was right; before Costain had reached the bottom of his plate, he was relishing the nuances of the broth with steadily increasing delight. Laffler thrust aside his own empty bowl and rested his elbows on the table. "Do you agree with me now?"

"To my surprise," said Costain, "I do."

As the waiter busied himself clearing the table, Laffler lowered his voice significantly. "You will find," he said, "that the absence of condiments is but one of several noteworthy characteristics which mark Sbirro's. I may as well prepare you for these. For example, no alcoholic beverages of any sort are served here, nor for that matter any beverage except clear, cold water, the first and only drink necessary for a human being."

"Outside of mother's milk," suggested Costain dryly.

"I can answer that in like vein by pointing out that the average patron of Sbirro's has passed that primal stage of his development."

Costain laughed. "Granted," he said.

"Very well. There is also a ban on the use of tobacco in any form."

"But good heavens," said Costain, "doesn't that make

Sbirro's more a teetotaller's retreat than a gourmet's sanctuary?"

"I fear," said Laffler solemnly, "that you confuse the words, *gourmet* and *gourmand*. The *gourmand*, through glutting himself, requires a wider and wider latitude of experience to stir his surfeited senses, but the very nature of the gourmet is simplicity. The ancient Greek in his coarse chiton savoring the ripe olive; the Japanese in his bare room contemplating the curve of a single flower stem—these are the true gourmets."

"But an occasional drop of brandy or pipeful of tobacco," said Costain dubiously, "are hardly over-indulgences."

"By alternating stimulant and narcotic," said Laffler, "you seesaw the delicate balance of your taste so violently that it loses its most precious quality: the appreciation of fine food. During my years as a patron of Sbirro's, I have proved this to my satisfaction."

"May I ask," said Costain, "why you regard the ban on these things as having such deep aesthetic motives? What about such mundane reasons as the high cost of a liquor licence, or the possibility that patrons would object to the smell of tobacco in such confined quarters?"

Laffler shook his head violently. "If and when you meet Sbirro," he said, "you will understand at once that he is not the man to make decisions on a mundane basis. As a matter of fact, it was Sbirro himself who first made me cognizant of what you call 'aesthetic' motives."

"An amazing man," said Costain as the waiter prepared to serve the entrée.

Laffler's next words were not spoken until he had savoured and swallowed a large portion of meat. "I hesitate to use superlatives," he said, "but to my way of thinking, Sbirro represents man at the apex of his civilization!"

Costain cocked an eyebrow and applied himself to

his roast which rested in a pool of stiff gravy ungarished by green or vegetable. The thin steam rising from it carried to his nostrils a subtle, tantalizing odour which made his mouth water. He chewed a piece as slowly and thoughtfully as if he were analyzing the intricacies of a Mozart symphony. The range of taste he discovered was really extraordinary, from the pungent nip of the crisp outer edge of the peculiarly flat yet soul-satisfying ooze of blood which the pressure of his jaws forced from the half-raw interior.

Upon swallowing he found himself ferociously hungry for another piece, and then another, and it was only with an effort that he prevented himself from wolfing down all his share of the meat and gravy without waiting to get the full voluptuous satisfaction from each mouthful. When he had scraped his platter clean, he realized that both he and Laffler had completed the entire course without exchanging a single word. He commented on this, and Laffler said: "Can you see any need for words in the presence of such food?"

Costain looked around at the shabby, dimly lit room, the quiet diners, with a new perception. "No," he said humbly, "I cannot. For any doubts I had I apologize unreservedly. In all your praise of Sbirro's there was not a single word of exaggeration."

"Ah," said Laffler delightedly. "And that is only part of the story. You heard me mention the special which unfortunately was not on the menu tonight. What you have just eaten is as nothing when compared to the absolute delights of that special!"

"Good Lord!" cried Costain. "What is it? Nightingale's tongues? Fillet of unicorn?"

"Neither," said Laffler. "It is lamb."

"Lamb?"

Laffler remained lost in thought for a minute. "If," he said at last, "I were to give you in my own unstinted words my opinion of this dish, you would judge me completely insane. That is how deeply the mere

thought of it affects me. It is neither the fatty chop, nor the too solid leg; it is, instead, a select portion of the rarest sheep in existence and is named after the species—lamb Amirstan.”

Costain knit his brows. “Amirstan?”

“A fragment of desolation almost lost on the border which separates Afghanistan and Russia. From chance remarks dropped by Sbirro, I gather it is no more than a plateau which grazes the pitiful remnants of a flock of superb sheep. Sbirro, through some means or other, obtained rights to the traffic in this flock and is, therefore, the sole restaurateur ever to have lamb Amirstan on his bill of fare. I can tell you that the appearance of this dish is a rare occurrence indeed, and luck is the only guide in determining for the clientele the exact date when it will be served.”

“But surely,” said Costain, “Sbirro could provide some advance knowledge of this event.”

“The objection to that is simply stated,” said Laffler. “There exists in this city a huge number of professional gluttons. Should advance information slip out, it is quite likely that they will, out of curiosity, become familiar with the dish and thenceforth supplant the regular patrons at these tables.

“But you don’t mean to say,” objected Costain, “that these few people present are the only ones in the entire city, or for that matter, in the whole wide world, who know of the existence of Sbirro’s!”

“Very nearly. There may be one or two regular patrons who, for some reason, are not present at the moment.”

“That’s incredible.”

“It is done,” said Laffler, the slightest shade of menace in his voice, “by every patron making it his solemn obligation to keep the secret. By accepting my invitation this evening you automatically assume that obligation. I hope you can be trusted with it.”

Costain flushed. “My position in your employ should

vouch for me. I only question the wisdom of a policy which keeps such magnificent food away from so many who would enjoy it."

"Do you know the inevitable result of the policy *you* favour?" asked Laffler bitterly. "An influx of idiots who would nightly complain that they are never served roast duck with chocolate sauce. Is that picture tolerable to you?"

"No," admitted Costain, "I am forced to agree with you."

Laffler leaned back in his chair wearily and passed his hand over his eyes in an uncertain gesture. "I am a solitary man," he said quietly, "and not by choice alone. It may sound strange to you, it may border on eccentricity, but I feel to my depths that this restaurant, this warm haven in a coldly insane world, is both family and friend to me."

And Costain, who to this moment had never viewed his companion as other than tyrannical employer or officious host, now felt an overwhelming pity twist inside his comfortably expanded stomach.

* * *

By the end of two weeks the invitations to join Laffler at Sbirro's had become something of a ritual. Every day, at a few minutes after five, Costain would step out into the office corridor and lock his cubicle behind him; he would drape his overcoat neatly over his left arm, and peer into the glass of the door to make sure his Homburg was set at the proper angle. At one time he would have followed this by lighting a cigarette, but under Laffler's prodding he had decided to give abstinence a fair trial. Then he would start down the corridor, and Laffler would fall in step at his elbow, clearing his throat. "Ah, Costain. No plans for this evening, I hope."

"No," Costain would say, "I'm footloose and fancy-free," or "At your service," or something equally inane.

He wondered at times whether it would not be more tactful to vary the ritual with an occasional refusal, but the glow with which Laffler received his answer, and the rough friendliness of Laffler's grip on his arm, forestalled him.

Among the treacherous crags of the business world, reflected Costain, what better way to secure your footing than friendship with one's employer. Already, a secretary close to the workings of the inner office had commented publicly on Laffler's highly favourable opinion of Costain. That was all to the good.

And the food! The incomparable food at Sbirro's! For the first time in his life, Costain, ordinarily a lean and bony man, noted with gratification that he was certainly gaining weight; within two weeks his bones had disappeared under a layer of sleek, firm flesh, and here and there were even signs of incipient plumpness. It struck Costain one night, while surveying himself in his bath, that the rotund Laffler, himself, might have been a spare and bony man before discovering Sbirro's.

So there was obviously everything to be gained and nothing to be lost by accepting Laffler's invitations. Perhaps after testing the heralded wonders of lamb Amirstan and meeting Sbirro, who thus far had not made an appearance, a refusal or two might be in order. But certainly not until then.

That evening, two weeks to a day after his first visit to Sbirro's, Costain had both desires fulfilled: he dined on lamb Amirstan, and he met Sbirro. Both exceeded all his expectations.

When the waiter leaned over their table immediately after seating them and gravely announced: "Tonight is special, sair," Costain was shocked to find his heart pounding with expectation. On the table before him he saw Laffler's hands trembling violently. But it isn't natural, he thought suddenly. Two full grown men, presumably intelligent and in the full possession of their

senses, as jumpy as a pair of cats waiting to have their meat flung to them!

"This is it!" Laffler's voice startled him so that he almost leaped from his seat. "The culinary triumph of all times! And faced by it you are embarrassed by the very emotions it distills."

"How did you know that?" Costain asked faintly.

"How? Because a decade ago I underwent your embarrassment. Add to that your air of revulsion and it's easy to see how affronted you are by the knowledge that man has not yet forgotten how to slaver over his meat."

"And these others," whispered Costain, "do they all feel the same thing?"

"Judge for yourself."

Costain looked furtively around at the nearby tables. "You are right," he finally said. "At any rate, there's comfort in numbers."

Laffler inclined his head slightly to the side. "One of the numbers," he remarked, "appears to be in for a disappointment."

Costain followed the gesture. At the table indicated a grey-haired man sat conspicuously alone, and Costain frowned at the empty chair opposite him.

"Why, yes," he recalled, "that very stout, bald man, isn't it? I believe it's the first dinner he's missed here in two weeks."

"The entire decade more likely," said Laffler sympathetically. "Rain or shine, crisis or calamity, I don't think he's missed an evening at Sbirro's since the first time I dined here. Imagine his expression when he's told that, on his very first defection, lamb Amirstan was the *plat du jour*."

Costain looked at the empty chair again with a dim discomfort. "His very first?" he murmured.

"Mr Laffler! And friend! I am so pleased. So very, very pleased. No, do not stand; I will have a place made." Miraculously a seat appeared under the figure standing there at the table. "The lamb Amirstan

will be an unqualified success, hurr? I myself have been stewing in the miserable kitchen all the day, prodding the foolish chef to do everything just so. The just so is the important part, hurr? But I see your friend does not know me. An introduction, perhaps?"

The words ran in a smooth, fluid eddy. They rippled, they purred, they hypnotized Costain so that he could do no more than stare. The mouth that uncoiled this sinuous monologue was alarmingly wide, with thin mobile lips that curled and twisted with every syllable. There was a flat nose with a straggling line of hair under it; wide-set eyes, almost oriental in appearance, that glittered in the unsteady flare of gaslight; and long, sleek hair that swept back from high on the unwrinkled forehead—hair so pale that it might have been bleached of all colour. An amazing face surely, and the sight of it tortured Costain with the conviction that it was somehow familiar. His brain twitched and prodded but could not stir up any solid recollection.

Laffler's voice jerked Costain out of his study. "Mr Sbirro. Mr Costain, a good friend and associate." Costain rose and shook the proffered hand. It was warm and dry, flint-hard against his palm.

"I am so very pleased, Mr Costain. So very, very pleased," purred the voice. "You like my little establishment, hurr? You have a great treat in store, I assure you."

Laffler chuckled. "Oh, Costain's been dining here regularly for two weeks," he said. "He's by way of becoming a great admirer of yours, Sbirro."

The eyes were turned on Costain. "A very great compliment. You compliment me with your presence and I return same with my food, hurr? But the lamb Amirstan is far superior to anything of your past experience, I assure you. All the trouble of obtaining it, all the difficulty of preparation, is truly merited."

Costain strove to put aside the exasperating problem of that face. "I have wondered," he said, "why with

all these difficulties you mention, you even bother to present lamb Amirstan to the public. Surely your other dishes are excellent enough to uphold your reputation."

Sbirro smiled so broadly that his face became perfectly round. "Perhaps it is a matter of the psychology, hurr? Someone discovers a wonder and must share it with others. He must fill his cup to the brim, perhaps, by observing the so evident pleasure of those who explore it with him. Or," he shrugged, "perhaps it is just a matter of good business."

"Then in the light of all this," Costain persisted, "and considering all the conventions you have imposed on your customers, why do you open the restaurant to the public instead of operating it as a private club?"

The eyes abruptly glinted into Costain's, then turned away. "So perspicacious, hurr? Then I will tell you. Because there is more privacy in a public eating place than in the most exclusive club in existence! Here no one inquires of your affairs; no one desires to know the intimacies of your life. Here the business is eating. We are not curious about names and addresses or the reasons for the coming and going of our guests. We welcome you when you are here; we have no regrets when you are here no longer. That is the answer, hurr?"

Costain was startled by his vehemence. "I had no intention of prying," he stammered.

Sbirro ran the tip of his tongue over his thin lips. "No, no," he reassured, "you are not prying. Do not let me give you that impression. On the contrary, I invite your questions."

"Oh, come, Costain," said Laffler. "Don't let Sbirro intimidate you. I've known him for years and I guarantee that his bark is worse than his bite. Before you know it, he'll be showing you all the privileges of the house—outside of inviting you to visit his precious kitchen, of course."

"Ah," smiled Sbirro, "for that, Mr Costain may have to wait a little while. For everything else I am at his beck and call."

Laffler slapped his hand jovially on the table. "What did I tell you!" he said. "Now let's have the truth, Sbirro. Has anyone, outside of your staff, ever stepped into the sanctum sanctorum?"

Sbirro looked up. "You see on the wall above you," he said earnestly, "the portrait of one to whom I did the honour. A very dear friend and a patron of most long standing, he is evidence that my kitchen is not inviolate."

Costain studied the picture and started with recognition. "Why," he said excitedly, "that's the famous writer—you know the one, Laffler—he used to do such wonderful short stories and cynical bits and then suddenly took himself off and disappeared in Mexico!"

"Of course!" cried Laffler, "and to think I've been sitting under his portrait for years without even realizing it!" He turned to Sbirro. "A dear friend, you say? His disappearance must have been a blow to you."

Sbirro's face lengthened. "It was, it was, I assure you. But think of it this way, gentlemen: he was probably greater in his death than in his life, hurr? A most tragic man, he often told me that his only happy hours were spent here at this very table. Pathetic, is it not? And to think the only favour I could ever show him was to let him witness the mysteries of my kitchen, which is, when all is said and done, no more than a plain, ordinary kitchen."

"You seem very certain of his death," commented Costain. "After all, no evidence has ever turned up to substantiate it."

Sbirro contemplated the picture. "None at all," he said softly. "Remarkable, hurr?"

With the arrival of the entrée Sbirro leaped to his feet and set about serving them himself. With his eyes alight he lifted the casserole from the tray and sniffed

at the fragrance from within with sensual relish. Then, taking great care not to lose a single drop of gravy, he filled two platters with chunks of dripping meat. As if exhausted by this task, he sat back in his chair, breathing heavily. "Gentlemen," he said "to your good appetite."

Costain chewed his first mouthful with great deliberation and swallowed it. Then he looked at the empty tines of his fork with glazed eyes.

"Good God!" he breathed.

"It is good, hurr? Better than you imagined?"

Costain shook his head dazedly. "It is impossible," he said slowly, "for the uninitiated to conceive the delights of lamb Amirstan as for mortal man to look into his own soul."

"Perhaps"—Sbirro thrust his head so close that Costain could feel the warm, fetid breath tickle his nostrils—"perhaps you have just had a glimpse into your soul, hurr?"

Costain tried to draw back slightly without giving offence. "Perhaps." He laughed. "And a gratifying picture it made: all fang and claw. But without intending any disrespect, I should hardly like to build my church on *lamb en casserole*."

Sbirro rose and laid a hand gently on his shoulder. "So perspicacious," he said. "Sometimes when you have nothing to do, nothing, perhaps, but sit for a very little while in a dark room and think of this world—what it is and what it is going to be—then you must turn your thoughts a little to the significance of the Lamb in religion. It will be so interesting. And now"—he bowed deeply to both men—"I have held you long enough from your dinner. I was most happy," he said, nodding to Costain, "and I am sure we will meet again." The teeth gleamed, the eyes glittered, and Sbirro was gone down the aisle of tables.

Costain twisted around to stare after the retreating figure. "Have I offended him in some way?" he asked.

Laffler looked up from his plate. "Offended him? He loves that kind of talk. Lamb Amirstan is a ritual with him; get him started and he'll be back at you a dozen times worse than a priest making a conversion."

Costain turned to his meal with the face still hovering before him. "Interesting man," he reflected. "Very."

It took him a month to discover the tantalizing familiarity of that face, and when he did, he laughed aloud in his bed. Why, of course! Sbirro might have sat as the model for the Cheshire cat in *Alice*!

* * *

He passed this thought on to Laffler the very next evening as they pushed their way down the street to the restaurant against a chill, blustering wind. Laffler only looked blank.

"You may be right," he said, "but I'm not a fit judge. It's a far cry back to the days when I read the book. A far cry, indeed."

As if taking up his words, a piercing howl came ringing down the street and stopped both men short in their tracks. "Someone's in trouble there," said Laffler. "Look!"

Not far from the entrance to Sbirro's two figures could be seen struggling in the near darkness. They swayed back and forth and suddenly tumbled into a writhing heap on the sidewalk. The piteous howl went up again, and Laffler, despite his girth, ran towards it at a fair speed with Costain tagging cautiously behind.

Stretched out full length on the pavement was a slender figure with the dusky complexion and white hair of one of Sbirro's servitors. His fingers were futilely plucking at the huge hands which encircled his throat, and his knees pushed weakly up at the gigantic bulk of a man who brutally bore down with his full weight.

Laffler came up panting. "Stop this!" he shouted. "What's going on here?"

The pleading eyes almost bulging from their sockets

turned towards Laffler. "Help, sair. This man—drunk——"

"Drunk am I, ya dirty——" Costain saw now that the man was a sailor in a badly soiled uniform. The air around him reeked with the stench of liquor. "Pick me pocket and then call me drunk, will ya!" He dug his fingers in harder, and his victim groaned.

Laffler seized the sailor's shoulder. "Let go of him, do you hear! Let go of him at once!" he cried, and the next instant was sent careening into Costain, who staggered back under the force of the blow.

The attack on his own person sent Laffler into immediate and berserk action. Without a sound he leaped at the sailor, striking and kicking furiously at the unprotected face and flanks. Stunned at first, the man came to his feet with a rush and turned on Laffler. For a moment they stood locked together, and then as Costain joined the attack, all three went sprawling to the ground. Slowly Laffler and Costain got to their feet and looked down at the body before them.

"He's either out cold from liquor," said Costain, "or he struck his head going down. In any case, it's a job for the police."

"No, no, sair!" The waiter crawled weakly to his feet, and stood swaying. "No police, sair. Mr Sbirro do not want such. You understand, sair." He caught hold of Costain with a pleading hand, and Costain looked at Laffler.

"Of course not," said Laffler. "We won't have to bother with the police. They'll pick him up soon enough, the murderous sot. But what in the world started all this?"

"That man, sair. He make most erratic way while walking, and with no meaning I push against him. Then he attack me, accusing me to rob him."

"As I thought." Laffler pushed the waiter gently along. "Now go on in and get yourself attended to."

The man seemed ready to burst into tears. "To you, sair, I owe my life. If there is anything I can do——"

Laffler turned into the areaway that led to Sbirro's door. "No, no, it was nothing. You go along, and if Sbirro has any questions send him to me. I'll straighten it out."

"My life, sair," were the last words they heard as the inner door closed behind them.

"There you are, Costain," said Laffler, as a few minutes later he drew his chair under the table, "civilized man in all his glory. Reeking with alcohol, strangling to death some miserable innocent who came too close."

Costain made an effort to gloss over the nerve-shattering memory of the episode. "It's the neurotic cat that takes to alcohol," he said. "Surely there's a reason for that sailor's condition."

"Reason? Of course there is. Plain atavistic savagery!" Laffler swept his arm in an all-embracing gesture. "Why do we all sit here at our meat? Not only to appease physical demands, but because our atavistic selves cry for release. Think back, Costain. Do you remember that I once described Sbirro as the epitome of civilization? Can you now see why? A brilliant man, he fully understands the nature of human beings. But unlike lesser men he bends all his efforts to the satisfaction of our innate natures without resultant harm to some innocent bystander."

"When I think back on the wonders of lamb Amirstan," said Costain, "I quite understand what you're driving at. And, by the way, isn't it nearly due to appear on the bill of fare? It must have been over a month ago that it was last served."

The waiter, filling the tumblers, hesitated. "I am so sorry, sair. No special this evening."

"There's your answer," Laffler grunted, "and probably just my luck to miss out on it altogether the next time."

Costain stared at him. "Oh, come, that's impossible."

"No, blast it." Laffler drank off half his water at a gulp and the waiter immediately refilled the glass. "I'm off to South America for a surprise tour of inspection. One month, two months, Lord knows how long."

"Are things that bad down there?"

"They could be better." Laffler suddenly grinned. "Mustn't forget it takes very mundane dollars and cents to pay the tariff at Sbirro's."

"I haven't heard a word of this around the office."

"Wouldn't be a surprise tour if you had. Nobody knows about this except myself—and now you. I want to walk in on them completely unsuspected. Find out what flimflammy they're up to down there. As far as the office is concerned, I'm off on a jaunt somewhere. Maybe recuperating in some sanatorium from my hard work. Anyhow, the business will be in good hands. Yours, among them."

"Mine?" said Costain, surprised.

"When you go in tomorrow you'll find yourself in receipt of a promotion, even if I'm not there to hand it to you personally. Mind you, it has nothing to do with our friendship either; you've done fine work, and I'm immensely grateful for it."

Costain reddened under the praise. "You don't expect to be in tomorrow. Then you're leaving tonight?"

Laffler nodded. "I've been trying to wangle some reservations. If they come through, well, this will be in the nature of a farewell celebration."

"You know," said Costain slowly, "I devoutly hope that your reservations don't come through. I believe our dinners here have come to mean more to me than I ever dared imagine."

The waiter's voice broke in. "Do you wish to be served now, sair?" and they both started.

"Of course, of course," said Laffler sharply, "I didn't realize you were waiting."

"What bothers me," he told Costain as the waiter turned away, "is the thought of the lamb Amirstan I'm bound to miss. To tell you the truth, I've already put off my departure a week, hoping to hit a lucky night, and now I simply can't delay any more. I do hope that when you're sitting over your share of lamb Amirstan, you'll think of me with suitable regrets."

Costain laughed. "I will indeed," he said as he turned to his dinner.

Hardly had he cleared the plate when a waiter silently reached for it. It was not their usual waiter, he observed; it was none other than the victim of the assault.

"Well," Costain said, "how do you feel now? Still under the weather?"

The waiter paid no attention to him. Instead, with the air of a man under great strain, he turned to Laffler. "Sair," he whispered. "My life. I owe it to you. I can repay you!"

Laffler looked up in amazement, then shook his head firmly. "No," he said, "I want nothing from you, understand? You have repaid me sufficiently with your thanks. Now get on with your work and let's hear no more about it."

The waiter did not stir an inch, but his voice rose slightly. "By the body and blood of your God, sair, I will help you even if you do not want! *Do not go into the kitchen, sair.* I trade you my life for yours, sair, when I speak this. Tonight or any night of your life, do not go into the kitchen at Sbirro's!"

Laffler sat back, completely dumbfounded. "Not go into the kitchen? Why shouldn't I go into the kitchen if Mr Sbirro ever took it into his head to invite me there? What's all this about?"

A hard hand was laid on Costain's back, and another gripped the waiter's arm. The waiter remained frozen to the spot, his lips compressed, his eyes downcast.

"What is all *what* about, gentlemen?" purred the

voice. "So opportune an arrival. In time as ever, I see, to answer all the questions, hurr?"

Laffler breathed a sigh of relief. "Ah, Sbirro, thank heaven you're here. This man is saying something about my not going into your kitchen. Do you know what he means?"

The teeth showed in a broad grin. "But of course. This good man was giving you advice in all amiability. It so happens that my too emotional chef heard some rumour that I might have a guest into his precious kitchen, and he flew into a fearful rage. Such a rage, gentlemen! He even threatened to give notice on the spot, and you can understand what that would mean to Sbirro's, hurr? Fortunately, I succeeded in showing him what a signal honour it is to have an esteemed patron and true connoisseur observe him at his work firsthand, and now he is quite amenable. Quite, hurr?"

He released the waiter's arm. "You are at the wrong table," he said softly. "See that it does not happen again."

The waiter slipped off without daring to raise his eyes and Sbirro drew a chair to the table. He seated himself and brushed his hand lightly over his hair. "Now I am afraid that the cat is out of the bag, hurr? This invitation to you, Mr Laffler, was to be a surprise; but the surprise is gone, and all that is left is the invitation."

Laffler mopped beads of perspiration from his forehead. "Are you serious?" he said huskily. "Do you mean that we are really to witness the preparation of your food tonight?"

Sbirro drew a sharp fingernail along the tablecloth, leaving a thin, straight line printed in the linen. "Ah," he said, "I am faced with a dilemma of great proportions." He studied the line soberly. "You, Mr Laffler, have been my guest for ten long years. But our friend here——"

Costain raised his hand in protest. "I understand

perfectly. This invitation is solely to Mr Laffler, and naturally my presence is embarrassing. As it happens, I have an early engagement for this evening and must be on my way anyhow. So you see there's no dilemma at all, really."

"No," said Laffler, "absolutely not. That wouldn't be fair at all. We've been sharing this until now, Costain, and I won't enjoy this experience half as much if you're not along. Surely Sbirro can make his conditions flexible, this one occasion."

They both looked at Sbirro who shrugged his shoulders regretfully.

Costain rose abruptly. "I'm not going to sit here, Laffler, and spoil your great adventure. And then too," he bantered, "think of that ferocious chef waiting to get his cleaver on you. I prefer not to be at the scene. I'll just say goodbye," he went on, to cover Laffler's guilty silence, "and leave you to Sbirro. I'm sure he'll take pains to give you a good show." He held out his hand and Laffler squeezed it painfully hard.

"You're being very decent, Costain," he said. "I hope you'll continue to dine here until we meet again. It shouldn't be too long."

Sbirro made way for Costain to pass. "I will expect you," he said. "*Au 'voir.*"

Costain stopped briefly in the dim foyer to adjust his scarf and fix his Homburg at the proper angle. When he turned away from the mirror, satisfied at last, he saw with a final glance that Laffler and Sbirro were already at the kitchen door, Sbirro holding the door invitingly wide with one hand, while the other rested, almost tenderly, on Laffler's meaty shoulders.

THE LAST SÉANCE

by Agatha Christie

RAOUL DAUBREUIL crossed the Seine humming a little tune to himself. He was a good-looking young Frenchman of about thirty-two, with a fresh-coloured face and a little black moustache. By profession he was an engineer. In due course he reached the Cardonet and turned in at the door of No 17. The concierge looked out from her lair and gave him a grudging "Good morning," to which he replied cheerfully. Then he mounted the stairs to the apartment on the third floor. As he stood there waiting for his ring at the bell to be answered he hummed once more his little tune. Raoul Daubreuil was feeling particularly cheerful this morning. The door was opened by an elderly Frenchwoman, whose wrinkled face broke into smiles when she saw who the visitor was.

"Good morning, Monsieur."

"Good morning, Elise," said Raoul.

He passed into the vestibule, pulling off his gloves as he did so.

"Madame expects me, does she not?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Ah yes, indeed, Monsieur."

Elise shut the front door and turned towards him.

"If Monsieur will pass into the little *salon*, Madame will be with him in a few minutes. At the moment she reposes herself."

Raoul looked up sharply.

"Is she not well?"

"*Well!*"

Elise gave a snort. She passed in front of Raoul and

opened the door of the little *salon* for him. He went in and she followed him.

"*Well!*" she continued. "How should she be well, poor lamb? *Séances, Séances*, and always *Séances!* It is not right—not natural, not what the good God intended for us. For me, I say straight out, it is trafficking with the devil."

Raoul patted her on the shoulder reassuringly.

"There, there, Elise," he said soothingly, "do not excite yourself, and do not be too ready to see the devil in everything you do not understand."

Elise shook her head doubtfully.

"Ah, well," she grumbled under her breath, "Monsieur may say what he pleases, I don't like it. Look at Madame, every day she gets whiter and thinner, and the headaches!"

She held up her hands.

"Ah, no, it is not good, all this spirit business. Spirits indeed! All the good spirits are in Paradise, and the others are in Purgatory."

"Your view of life after death is refreshingly simple, Elise," said Raoul as he dropped into a chair.

The old woman drew herself up.

"I am a good Catholic, Monsieur."

She crossed herself, went to the door, then paused, her hand on the handle.

"Afterwards, when you are married, Monsieur," she said pleadingly, "it will not continue—all this?"

Raoul smiled at her affectionately.

"You are a good faithful creature, Elise," he said, "and devoted to your mistress. Have no fear, once she is my wife, all this 'spirit business' as you call it, will cease. For Madame Daubreuil there will be no more *séances.*"

Elise's face broke into smiles.

"Is it true what you say?" she asked eagerly.

The other nodded gravely.

"Yes," he said, speaking almost more to himself than

to her. "Yes, all this must end. Simone has a wonderful gift and she has used it freely, but now she has done her part. As you have justly observed, Elise, day by day she gets whiter and thinner. The life of a medium is a particularly trying and arduous one, involving a terrible nervous strain. All the same, Elise, your mistress is the most wonderful medium in Paris—more, in France. People from all over the world come to her because they know that with her there is no trickery, no deceit."

Elise gave a snort of contempt.

"Deceit! Ah, no, indeed. Madame could not deceive a new-born babe if she tried."

"She is an angel," said the young Frenchman with fervour. "And I—I shall do everything a man can to make her happy. You believe that?"

Elise drew herself up, and spoke with a certain simple dignity.

"I have served Madame for many years, Monsieur. With all respect I may say that I love her. If I did not believe that you adored her as she deserves to be adored—*eh bien*, Monsieur! I should be willing to tear you limb from limb."

Raoul laughed.

"Bravo, Elise! You are a faithful friend, and you must approve of me now that I have told you Madame is going to give up the spirits."

He expected the old woman to receive this pleasantry with a laugh, but somewhat to his surprise she remained grave.

"Suppose, Monsieur," she said hesitatingly, "the spirits will not give *her* up?"

Raoul stared at her.

"Eh! What do you mean?"

"I said," repeated Elise, "supposing the spirits will not give *her* up?"

"I thought you didn't believe in the spirits, Elise?"

"No more do I," said Elise stubbornly. "It is foolish to believe in them. All the same——"

"Well?"

"It is difficult for me to explain, Monsieur. You see, me, I always thought that these mediums, as they call themselves, were just clever cheats who imposed on the poor souls who had lost their dear ones. But Madame is not like that. Madame is good. Madame is honest, and——"

She lowered her voice and spoke in a tone of awe.

"*Things happen.* It is not trickery, things happen, and that is why I am afraid. For I am sure of this, Monsieur, it is not right. It is against Nature and le bon Dieu, and *somebody will have to pay.*"

Raoul got up from his chair and came and patted her on the shoulder.

"Calm yourself, my good Elise," he said smiling. "See, I will give you some good news. Today is the last of these séances; after today there will be no more."

"There is one today then?" asked the old woman suspiciously.

"The last, Elise, the last."

Elise shook her head disconsolately.

"Madame is not fit——" she began.

But her words were interrupted, the door opened and a tall, fair woman came in. She was slender and graceful, with the face of a Botticelli Madonna. Raoul's face lighted up, and Elise withdrew quickly and discreetly.

"Simone!"

He took both her long, white hands in his and kissed each in turn. She murmured his name very softly.

"Raoul, my dear one."

Again he kissed her hands and then looked intently into her face.

"Simone, how pale you are! Elise told me you were resting; you are not ill, my well-beloved?"

"No, not ill——" she hesitated.

He led her over to the sofa and sat down on it beside her.

"But tell me then."

The medium smiled faintly.

"You will think me foolish," she murmured.

"I? Think you foolish? Never."

Simone withdrew her hand from his grasp. She sat perfectly still for a moment or two gazing down at the carpet. Then she spoke in a low, hurried voice.

"I am afraid, Raoul."

He waited for a minute or two expecting her to go on, but as she did not he said encouragingly:

"Yes, afraid of what?"

"Just afraid—that is all."

"But——"

He looked at her in perplexity, and she answered the look quickly.

"Yes, it is absurd, isn't it, and yet I feel just that. Afraid, nothing more. I don't know what of, or why, but all the time I am possessed with the idea that something terrible—terrible, is going to happen to me. . . ."

She stared out in front of her. Raoul put an arm gently round her.

"My dearest," he said, "come, you must not give way. I know what it is, the strain, Simone, the strain of a medium's life. All you need is rest—rest and quiet."

She looked at him gratefully.

"Yes, Raoul, you are right. That is what I need, rest and quiet."

She closed her eyes and leant back a little against his arm.

"And happiness," murmured Raoul in her ear.

His arm drew her closer. Simone, her eyes still closed, drew a deep breath.

"Yes," she murmured, "yes. When your arms are round me I feel safe. I forget my life—the terrible life of a medium. You know much, Raoul, but even you do not know all it means."

He felt her body grow rigid in his embrace. Her eyes opened again, staring in front of her.

"One sits in the cabinet in the darkness, waiting, and

the darkness is terrible, Raoul, for it is the darkness of emptiness, of nothingness. Deliberately one gives oneself up to be lost in it. After that one knows nothing, one feels nothing, but at last there comes the slow, painful return, the awakening out of sleep, but so tired—so terribly tired.”

“I know,” murmured Raoul. “I know.”

“So tired,” murmured Simone again.

Her whole body seemed to droop as she repeated the words.

“But you are wonderful, Simone.”

He took her hands in his, trying to rouse her to share his enthusiasm.

“You are unique—the greatest medium the world has ever known.”

She shook her head, smiling a little at that.

“Yes, yes,” Raoul insisted.

He drew two letters from his pocket.

“See here, from Professor Roche of the *Salpêtrière*, and this one from Dr Genir at Nancy, both imploring that you will continue to sit for them occasionally.”

“Ah, no!”

Simone suddenly sprang to her feet.

“I will not, I will not. It is to be all finished—all done with. You promised me, Raoul.”

Raoul stared at her in astonishment as she stood wavering, facing him almost like a creature at bay. He got up and took her hand.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “Certainly it is finished, that is understood. But I am so proud of you, Simone, that is why I mentioned those letters.”

She threw at him a swift sideways glance of suspicion.

“It is not that you will ever want me to sit again?”

“No, no,” said Raoul, “unless perhaps you yourself would care to, just occasionally for these old friends——”

But she interrupted him, speaking excitedly.

“No, no, never again. There is danger, I tell you. I can feel it, great danger.”

She clasped her hands on her forehead a minute, then walked across to the window.

"Promise me never again," she said in a quieter voice over her shoulder.

Raoul followed her and put his arm round her shoulders.

"My dear one," he said tenderly, "I promise you after today you shall never sit again."

He felt the sudden start she gave.

"Today," she murmured. "Ah, yes—I had forgotten Madame Exe."

Raoul looked at his watch.

"She is due any minute now; but perhaps, Simone, if you do not feel well——"

Simone hardly seemed to be listening to him; she was following out her own train of thought.

"She is—a strange woman, Raoul, a very strange woman. Do you know I—I have almost a horror of her."

"Simone!"

There was reproach in his voice, and she was quick to feel it.

"Yes, yes, I know, you are like all Frenchmen, Raoul. To you a mother is sacred and it is unkind of me to feel like that about her when she grieves so for her lost child. But—I cannot explain it, she is so big and black, and her hands—have you ever noticed her hands, Raoul? Great big strong hands, as strong as a man's. Ah!"

She gave a little shiver and closed her eyes. Raoul withdrew his arm and spoke almost coldly.

"I really cannot understand you, Simone. Surely you, a woman, should have nothing but sympathy for another woman, a mother bereft of her only child."

Simone made a gesture of impatience.

"Ah, it is you who do not understand, my friend! One cannot help these things. The first moment I saw her I felt——"

She flung her hands out.

"*Fear!* You remember, it was a long time before I would consent to sit for her? I felt sure in some way she would bring me misfortune."

Raoul shrugged his shoulders.

"Whereas, in actual fact, she brought you the exact opposite," she said drily. "All the sittings have been attended with marked success. The spirit of the little Amélie was able to control you at once, and the materializations have really been striking. Professor Roche ought really to have been present at the last one."

"Materializations," said Simone in a low voice. "Tell me, Raoul, (you know that I know nothing of what takes place while I am in the trance), are the materializations really so wonderful?"

He nodded enthusiastically.

"At the first few sittings the figure of the child was visible in a kind of nebulous haze," he explained, "but at the last séance——"

"Yes?"

He spoke very softly.

"Simone, the child that stood there was an actual living child of flesh and blood. I even touched her—but seeing that the touch was acutely painful to you, I would not permit Madame Exe to do the same. I was afraid that her self-control might break down, and that some harm to you might result."

Simone turned away again towards the window.

"I was terribly exhausted when I woke," she murmured. "Raoul, are you sure—are you really sure that all this is *right*? You know what dear old Elise thinks, that I am trafficking with the devil?"

She laughed rather uncertainly.

"You know what I believe," said Raoul gravely. "In the handling of the unknown there must always be danger, but the cause is a noble one, for it is the cause of Science. All over the world there have been martyrs to Science, pioneers who have paid the price so that others may follow safely in their footsteps. For ten years now

you have worked for Science at the cost of a terrific nervous strain. Now your part is done, from today onward you are free to be happy."

She smiled at him affectionately, her calm restored. Then she glanced quickly up at the clock.

"Madame Exe is late," she murmured. "She may not come."

"I think she will," said Raoul. "Your clock is a little fast, Simone."

Simone moved about the room, rearranging an ornament here and there.

"I wonder who she is, this Madame Exe?" she observed. "Where she comes from, who her people are? It is strange that we know nothing about her."

Raoul shrugged his shoulders.

"Most people remain incognito if possible when they come to a medium," he observed. "It is an elementary precaution."

"I suppose so," agreed Simone listlessly.

A little china vase she was holding slipped from her fingers and broke to pieces on the tiles of the fireplace. She turned sharply on Raoul.

"You see," she murmured. "I am not myself. Raoul, would you think me very—very cowardly if I told Madame Exe I could not sit today?"

His look of pained astonishment made her redden.

"You promised, Simone——" he began gently.

She backed against the wall.

"I won't do it, Raoul. I won't do it."

And again that glance of his, tenderly reproachful, made her wince.

"It is not of the money I am thinking, Simone, though you must realize that the money this woman has offered you for a last sitting is enormous—simply enormous."

She interrupted him defiantly.

"There are things that matter more than money."

"Certainly there are," he agreed warmly. "That is just what I am saying. Consider—this woman is a

mother, a mother who has lost her only child. If you are not really ill, if it is only a whim on your part—you can deny a rich woman a caprice, can you deny a mother one last sight of her child?"

The medium flung her hands out despairingly in front of her.

"Oh, you torture me," she murmured. "All the same you are right. I will do as you wish, but I know now what I am afraid of—it is the word 'mother'."

"Simone!"

"There are certain primitive elementary forces, Raoul. Most of them have been destroyed by civilization, but motherhood stands where it stood at the beginning. Animals—human beings, they are all the same. A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity, it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path."

She stopped, panting a little, then turned to him with a quick, disarming smile.

"I am foolish today, Raoul. I know it."

He took her hand in his.

"Lie down for a minute or two," he urged. "Rest till she comes."

"Very well." She smiled at him and left the room.

Raoul remained for a minute or two lost in thought, then he strode to the door, opened it, and crossed the little hall. He went into a room the other side of it, a sitting room very much like the one he had left, but at one end was an alcove with a big armchair set in it. Heavy black velvet curtains were arranged so as to pull across the alcove. Elise was busy arranging the room. Close to the alcove she had set two chairs and a small round table. On the table was a tambourine, a horn, and some paper and pencils.

"The last time," murmured Elise with grim satisfaction. "Ah, monsieur, I wish it were over and done with."

The sharp ting of an electric bell sounded.

"There she is, that great gendarme of a woman," continued the old servant. "Why can't she go and pray decently for her little one's soul in a church, and burn a candle to Our Blessed Lady? Does not the good God know what is best for us?"

"Answer the bell, Elise," said Raoul peremptorily.

She threw him a look, but obeyed. In a minute or two she returned, ushering in the visitor.

"I will tell my mistress you are here, Madame."

Raoul came forward to shake hands with Madame Exe. Simone's words floated back to his memory.

'So big and so black.'

She *was* a big woman, and the heavy black of French mourning seemed almost exaggerated in her case. Her voice when she spoke was very deep.

"I fear I am a little late, Monsieur."

"A few minutes only," said Raoul, smiling. "Madame Simone is lying down. I am sorry to say she is far from well, very nervous and overwrought."

Her hand, which she was just withdrawing, closed on his suddenly like a vice.

"But she will sit?" she demanded sharply.

"Oh, yes, Madame."

Madame Exe gave a sigh of relief, and sank into a chair, loosening one of the heavy black veils that floated round her.

"Ah, Monsieur!" she murmured, "you cannot imagine, you cannot conceive the wonder and the joy of these séances to me! My little one! My Amélie! To see her, to hear her, even—perhaps—yes, perhaps to be even able to—stretch out my hand and touch her."

Raoul spoke quickly and peremptorily.

"Madame Exe—how can I explain?—on no account must you do anything except under my express directions, otherwise there is the gravest danger."

"Danger to me?"

"No, Madame," said Raoul, "to the medium. You

must understand that the phenomena that occur are explained by Science in a certain way. I will put the matter very simply, using no technical terms. A spirit, to manifest itself, has to use the actual physical substance of the medium. You have seen the vapour of fluid issuing from the lips of the medium. This finally condenses and is built up into the physical semblance of the spirit's dead body. But this ectoplasm we believe to be the actual substance of the medium. We hope to prove this some day by careful weighing and testing—but the great difficulty is the danger and pain which attends the medium or any handling of the phenomena. Were anyone to seize hold of the materialization roughly, the death of the medium might result."

Madame Exe had listened to him with close attention.

"That is very interesting, Monsieur. Tell me, shall not a time come when the materialization shall advance so far that it shall be capable of detachment from its parent, the medium?"

"That is a fantastic speculation, Madame!"

She persisted.

"But, on the facts, not impossible?"

"Quite impossible today."

"But perhaps in the future?"

He was saved from answering, for at that moment Simone entered. She looked languid and pale, but had evidently regained entire control of herself. She came forward and shook hands with Madame Exe, though Raoul noticed the faint shiver that passed through her as she did so.

"I regret, Madame, to hear that you are indisposed," said Madame Exe.

"It is nothing," said Simone rather brusquely. "Shall we begin?"

She went to the alcove and sat down in the armchair. Suddenly Raoul in his turn felt a wave of fear pass over him.

"You are not strong enough," he exclaimed. "We had better cancel the séance. Madame Exe will understand."

"Monsieur!"

Madame Exe rose indignantly.

"Yes, yes, it is better not, I am sure of it."

"Madame Simone promised me one last sitting."

"That is so," agreed Simone quietly, "and I am prepared to carry out my promise."

"I hold you to it, Madame," said the other woman.

"I do not break my word," said Simone coldly. "Do not fear, Raoul," she added gently, "after all, it is for the last time—the last time, thank God."

At a sign from her Raoul drew the heavy black curtains across the alcove. He also pulled the curtains of the window so that the room was in semi-obscurity. He indicated one of the chairs to Madame Exe and prepared himself to take the other. Madame Exe, however, hesitated.

"You will pardon me, Monsieur, but—you understand I believe absolutely in your integrity and in that of Madame Simone. All the same, so that my testimony may be the more valuable, I took the liberty of bringing this with me."

From her handbag she drew a length of fine cord.

"Madame!" cried Raoul. "This is an insult!"

"A precaution."

"I repeat it is an insult."

"I don't understand your objection, Monsieur," said Madame Exe coldly. "If there is no trickery you have nothing to fear."

Raoul laughed scornfully.

"I can assure you that I have nothing to fear, Madame. Bind me hand and foot if you will."

His speech did not produce the effect he hoped, for Madame Exe merely murmured unemotionally:

"Thank you, Monsieur," and advanced upon him with her roll of cord.

Suddenly Simone from behind the curtain gave a cry.

"No, no, Raoul, don't let her do it."

Madame Exe laughed derisively.

"Madame is afraid," she observed sarcastically.

"Yes, I am afraid."

"Remember what you are saying, Simone," cried Raoul. "Madame Exe is apparently under the impression that we are charlatans."

"I must make sure," said Madame Exe grimly.

She went methodically about her task, binding Raoul securely to his chair.

"I must congratulate you on your knots, Madame," he observed ironically when she had finished. "Are you satisfied now?"

Madame Exe did not reply. She walked round the room examining the panelling of the walls closely. Then she locked the door leading into the hall, and, removing the key, returned to her chair.

"Now," she said in an indescribable voice, "I am ready."

The minutes passed. From behind the curtain the sound of Simone's breathing became heavier and more stertorous. Then it died away altogether, to be succeeded by a series of moans. Then again there was silence for a little while, broken by the sudden clattering of the tambourine. The horn was caught up from the table and dashed to the ground. Ironical laughter was heard. The curtains of the alcove seemed to have been pulled back a little, the medium's figure was just visible through the opening, her head fallen forward on her breast. Suddenly Madame Exe drew in her breath sharply. A ribbon-like stream of mist was issuing from the medium's mouth. It condensed and began gradually to assume a shape, the shape of a little child.

"Amélie! My little Amélie!"

The hoarse whisper from Madame Exe. The hazy

figure condensed still further. Raoul stared almost incredulously. Never had there been a more successful materialization. Now, surely it was a real child, a real flesh and blood child standing there.

"Maman!"

The soft childish voice spoke.

"My child!" cried Madame Exe. "My child!"

She half rose from her seat.

"Be careful, Madame," cried Raoul warningly.

The materialization came hesitatingly through the curtains. It was a child. She stood there, her arms held out.

"Maman!"

"Ah!" cried Madame Exe.

Again she half rose from her seat.

"Madame," cried Raoul, alarmed, "the medium——"

"I must touch her," cried Madame Exe hoarsely.

She moved a step forward.

"For God's sake, Madame, control yourself," cried Raoul.

He was really alarmed now.

"Sit down at once."

"My little one, I must touch her."

"Madame, I command you, sit down!"

He was writhing desperately with his bonds, but Madame Exe had done her work well; he was helpless. A terrible sense of impending disaster swept over him.

"In the name of God, Madame, sit down!" he shouted. "Remember the medium."

Madame Exe paid no attention to him. She was like a woman transformed. Ecstasy and delight showed plainly in her face. Her outstretched hand touched the little figure that stood in the opening of the curtains. A terrible moan came from the medium.

"My God!" cried Raoul. "My God! This is terrible. The medium——"

Madame Exe turned on him with a harsh laugh.

"What do I care for your medium?" she cried. "I want my child."

"You are mad!"

"My child, I tell you. Mine! My own! My own flesh and blood! My little one back to me from the dead, alive and breathing."

Raoul opened his lips, but no words would come. She was terrible, this woman. Remorseless, savage, absorbed by her own passion. The baby lips parted, and for the third time the same word echoed:

"*Maman!*"

"Come then, my little one," cried Madame Exe.

With a sharp gesture she caught up the child in her arms. From behind the curtains came a long-drawn scream of utter anguish.

"Simone!" cried Raoul. "Simone!"

He was aware vaguely of Madame Exe rushing past him, of the unlocking of the door, of retreating footsteps down the stairs.

From behind the curtain there still sounded the terrible high long-drawn scream—such a scream as Raoul had never heard. It died away in a horrible kind of gurgle. Then there came the thud of a body falling. . . .

Raoul was working like a maniac to free himself from his bonds. In his frenzy he accomplished the impossible, snapping the rope by sheer strength. As he struggled to his feet, Elise rushed in, crying "Madame!"

"Simone!" cried Raoul.

Together they rushed forward and pulled the curtain.

Raoul staggered back.

"My God!" he murmured. "Red—all red. . . ."

Elise's voice came beside him harsh and shaking.

"So Madame is dead. It is ended. But tell me, Monsieur, what has happened. *Why is Madame all shrunken*

away—why is she half her usual size? What has been happening here?”

“I do not know,” said Raoul.

His voice rose to a scream.

“I do not know. I do not know. But I think—I am going mad. . . . Simone! Simone!”

THE BLACK CREATOR

by Vernon Routh

I SAW THE advertisement in that most conservative of professional journals, *The Medico*, and as I was at that moment looking for a chance to do some original research, I wrote to the box number given, and was by return of post invited to meet Doctor Diaz Volo at the Crasterby Hotel in Mount Street, London, W.1.

The Crasterby Hotel is a small but very exclusive and expensive place, and walking to the resident's lounge was like treading on aerated foam rubber in an opulently perfumed and warmed stillness.

There was only one person in the lounge when I entered, and he rose to greet me, holding an evening paper in one hand and removing his spectacles with the other, a homely appearance with the suggestion of the hospitality of a good and safe club member about it.

"Sit down, Doctor James," he said, with a courtesy a little too heavily ceremonious for modern taste. "You do use the title—or do you prefer the more distinguished 'mister'?"

I shrugged my shoulders to suggest indifference, and sat down in the chair, deep and comfortable, which he made the needless motion of pushing towards me. He offered me a whisky and soda and a cigarette, and then seated himself.

"I use neither of these comforts," he said, "so you will excuse me if I leave you to enjoy them without my support."

In spite of all this civility, and of the fact that he was one of the most handsome and distinguished men I had ever seen, I did not like him at all. He must have been

in his late fifties, but his manner—probably because of this smack of what is called ‘old-world courtesy’ made him seem much older, and suggested at least fifteen years more than he had.

“As you saw from my letter,” he said, “my name—Diaz Volo—is foreign, but I am as English as you are. I was born in Barnstaple—the fourth generation to be so. Beyond that lies a story common enough in those parts; and another branch of my family changed our surname to Voller. Yet another, more radically English, became Fuller, and you may see their name on fascia boards in a Midland county where they have for long been in business as coal-merchants.”

All this he told me, as if to gain my confidence in his Englishness and respectability, in a musical voice, occasionally pointing a remark with a long white hand, on one finger of which he wore a ring with a curious stone that looked like a human eye. His hair was thin and silvery: his complexion pink and white like a girl’s. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles, and the eyes behind them were blue. But it was those eyes that focused my dislike and unease. In spite of the innocence of his other features, and the associations of benevolence with silver hair and gentle voice, his eyes were hard and unsmiling. They were like expressionless blue windows in a mysterious house, full of hateful secrets—that was the simile that occurred to me as I looked at him.

“You are a specialist in plant life, I understand,” he said.

“I’ve done a good deal of work in that field,” I replied, and gave him some details of what I had been doing in the past few years.

“That sounds excellent,” he said, nodding his head. “Now, how soon can you join me?”

It was clear I had the appointment, and when he mentioned the salary, which, since the post was to be residential, was almost staggeringly munificent, I said:

“Can you give me some idea of what you are doing?”

"There'll be plenty of time for us to go into that after you've settled in," he replied. "Now, that's all arranged. I do hope you'll stay and dine with me."

There seemed no rational consideration to make me hesitate further, so I allowed his words to set the seal on our bargain, and had an excellent meal with him; and when we parted, I promised to join him at his place a week from that day.

* * *

He was the owner of an old castle on an island off the south-west coast, and it was here that he carried on the researches in which I was to join him. As I had arranged, I set off from Waterloo in a fast train one week after my meeting with him, and after a four-hour journey, left the train at the little seaside town of Mantock. Following his directions, I took a cab from the station to the quay, where, swaying on the water, was a motor boat manned by a fellow dressed like a chauffeur.

The afternoon was merging into evening. A grey drizzle had been falling all day, and the distance was hazy with it—a world of sombre greys—the wet stones of the quay, the gently heaving sea, and the very air itself. The man in his peaked cap and black oilskin climbed up on the quay and touched his hat with one finger.

"Doctor James?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

I nodded, staring at him, not because he seemed to have laryngitis, but because his cheeks had long white scars on them, so that he seemed to be decorated like a Papuan, except that it was evident to me that each of the long white scars had been made by a skilful surgeon's knife. The effect was sinister in the extreme. However, he was polite enough, and at his invitation, I stepped into the boat and he handed down my luggage. He started the engine, which clattered into life in the still grey afternoon, and we moved off smoothly out of the little harbour.

"How long before we reach Burfrey Island?" I asked.

The man looked at me with what may have been intended as a friendly smile, but appeared, owing to his disfigurement, as a fiendish grin.

"Twenty minutes—half an hour," he replied. "What's the difference? We get there sooner or later." He glanced astern for a moment, towards the coast, which had already vanished from sight in the greyness. We were travelling in a damp, grey, silent void. "My name's Porteous Malloway," he added, turning towards me again.

The association was immediate. His was the same name as that of a famous operatic tenor who had disappeared in mysterious circumstances some years before.

"Unusual," I said. He looked at me so oddly that I hastened to add: "Your name, I mean."

"You've heard it before," he said, in that hoarse whisper.

"Why, yes. It's so odd. You have the name of a great singer . . ."

"I am he," said the man, who now seemed to be either a lunatic or an aimless liar. And yet—when I looked closely at him—there was a ghastly resemblance to the great artiste who had combined a lovely voice with one of the most handsome faces ever seen on the stage or concert platform.

"You may have heard me sing," he said. To hear those words said in that hoarse whisper, and in that lonely place, was horrible. I said nothing, and suddenly, there in the drizzling void, he opened his mouth as if to sing, and there emerged from those cracked and finished vocal chords the aria every audience of his had clamoured for in encore after encore. It was dreadful, and I went colder as I watched and listened. He stopped, and only the chug of the engine and the slap of the waves broke the stillness. Then he looked at me queerly.

"I had an accident," he said sullenly.

In a few moments, the fading light revealed a more solid grey. We were near Burfrey Island. My companion switched off the engine and we slid smoothly up to a landing place of rock projecting into the sea. He rose and nodded landward.

"Get ashore," he said. "I'll bring your bags. We've a bit of a climb."

I stepped ashore, and he secured the boat and followed me with my luggage.

The grey loneliness of our surroundings was emphasized by the wet mournful music of the waves, the cries of the sadly wheeling gulls, and above all by a row of houses, empty, desolate, and decaying, on the waterfront beyond the stony wave-glistening beach. Nothing could have been more dead and sinister than these houses, with their frameless window openings, the crumbling walls, the dusty rooms with piles of rubble in their corners, and their broken roofs: murdered houses where once men, women, and children had lived their lives and enjoyed sunny days. These ruins were a symbol of the crumbled past, grey, shiny wet in the rain, empty and useless, aching with the desolation of unhappy things.

I followed Porteous Malloway up a steep rocky path, and after a breathless climb of ten minutes, we reached an ancient doorway, stout, iron-bound, and tight shut, in a high wall of stone, along the top of which, I observed, was barbed wire.

Porteous put down my bags and rang a bell, whose push was set in the wall beside the door. Almost immediately the door was opened by the largest man I had ever seen. He stood inside the door, holding it open, and I could not see his head and shoulders till I stepped inside. He was fully seven feet tall, and of an enormous physique, with hands literally like hams. One of them held a large bunch of keys. At his heels was a dog which could have belonged, in proportions, to the

same monstrous world as he, for it was the size of a pony, and of a breed I did not know, so suggestive of a leonine strain that for a moment I started back, thinking it indeed a lion.

"Go on," said Porteous, "the dog won't hurt you—unless Quilp says so. And you needn't talk to him. *He hasn't got a tongue.*"

To call this giant Quilp was a hideous joke that sorted well with all that was happening. I quelled a sudden urge to turn round and make a bolt for sanity: but it was clear that now I had come, I must stay. Besides, my curiosity was at least as strong as my growing fear.

I stepped inside and Quilp shut and locked the door behind me. I felt exactly all the sensations of being under arrest, and the full view of Quilp emphasized them. His huge head was entirely hairless, a horrible pinkish bald globe, and on his face was what I later found to be a perpetual grin, through which his huge inhuman teeth, yellow and fanged, were to be seen constantly bared like an enraged animal. His back and shoulders were hunched, no doubt in the constant effort to adjust his height to normal-sized doors and structures.

But my attention was wrenched away from him to the gardens which lay around us as we moved towards the mouldering castle in front of us. It was like a garden in some hideous fantasy.

The trees, though they were of known species, looked alien and fearsome because they were twisted into wild and strainful shapes, as if they had been wrenched into horror by a cruel mocking hand. Some of them had trunks which lay almost touching the ground in a grotesque serpentine homage, while their branches reached out in tightly screwed agony outwards and upwards. Others leaned over at fantastic angles, and my fancy almost heard their sighs and groans at their stressful positions, as if they were beasts strapped down

and racked into painful and unnatural postures. From this dreadful sight, without precedent or tolerable reason, my gaze went to what passed for flower-beds. They were placed as are those of loving gardeners who take pains to provide for their flowers geometrical shapes—diamonds, squares, circles. But the evil mockery of this planning had made these beds into monstrous shapes, patterns that mocked the very existence and sanctity of human ideas of beauty. As we walked along, I saw a group of beds in which the centre one was designed as a skull, with smaller plots around it in the form of huge bones, all filled or covered with some white substance like lime. Others bore the shape of vile creatures of the imagination, writhing snakes, prehistoric beasts, scorpions, a tortured human hand; and all these plots were planted with the ugliest of plant life, sinister, phallic, evil-smelling—the very encyclopaedia botanica must have been scoured for these horrifying species, some of which I recognized, while others were entirely strange to me: and the chilling suspicion seized my mind that these odd repulsive plant-creatures were the fruit of some obscene research, some unspeakable experiments in the cross-breeding of the ugly with the sinister to produce something more repulsive than Nature at her most cruel and mocking. But the thing that struck the greatest chill to my heart was this: the grass on the well-kept lawns was not green: *it was pure white*, as if some foul process had been discovered for making the living grass pale and bloodless.

We reached the great front door of the castle, passing over a drawbridge which spanned a shuddering ditch whose bottom was covered with green-scummed water, and I noticed with a spasm of nausea that the surface was broken and moving with some form of slothful crawling sub-aqueous life, which kept the scum softly bubbling. I shuddered involuntarily as Quilp rang the bell, his great hand on the chain.

Between me and the comfortable sanity of the main-

land lay the grey drizzling evening and the stretch of water we had crossed. Go back I could not: go forward I must. I glanced fleetingly at my silent companions, the one a gigantic monster, the other with his murderous whisper and his ruined slashed face. A panel in the door opened briefly, and we were inspected, and then the door swung slowly open.

There stood a man attired conventionally as a butler, faultlessly groomed, not a hair out of place, *but with the face and features of a dog*. I could not believe my eyes, as he bowed to me and stood aside to let me enter the hall. He pointed to Porteous Malloway and to the floor, on which my bags were deposited, my two attendants shut out, and then the dog-faced butler beckoned to me to follow him. A great log fire burned in the open hearth. Small lights glowed in sconces, and as I entered, a grandfather clock struck seven. The butler crossed the hall, knocked at a heavy door, and then opened it to let me pass into the room beyond. This room was the first civilized thing I had seen since I left the mainland.

It was evidently the dining room, beautifully and tastefully lit and furnished, and dinner was laid for two. By the fire stood Doctor Volo in evening dress, and as I stood by the door, he came forward.

"My dear Doctor James," he said, holding out his hand, "welcome indeed. I thought you would be hungry after your journey, so I ordered dinner for seven. But you'll have a drink first. Sherry? Or do you favour whisky?"

He poured me a sherry at my request, and led me to a comfortable chair by the fire. The sherry was an excellent medium wine, Amontillado, I thought. Volo looked at me from his chair.

"I always dress for dinner," he said, "and so may you . . . but don't delay the meal by changing tonight. It's a civilized usage, and cut off as I am, it would be easy to become slack. You recall Somerset Maugham's story of the white man in the wilds who dressed for

dinner by himself every night? Yes. Now if you're ready, I think we'll dine at once."

He rang a bell by the fireplace, and through a door on the far side of the room came a maid with the soup. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, and she wore a uniform of black frock and frilly cap which looked most provocative. When she had gone, Volo looked up at me from his soup as if he read my thoughts.

"Yes," he said, "I agree with you. Beatrice is a lovely and desirable creature."

As he said this, his blue eyes behind their spectacles shone with a light—not lascivious, not prurient, but in some spine-chilling way, *threatening*. My mind sought for words to crystallize my impressions, and I could only get the sense that he was a man to whom beauty was some sort of a challenge—yes—a challenge to destroy it wantonly. When Beatrice had served dinner and was about to give us coffee, Volo spoke to her.

"Beatrice," he said, "this is Doctor James, who has come to assist me in my research."

The girl bowed slightly, but did not speak. I looked at her and smiled. She certainly was a beauty, with her fair hair, her blue eyes, and her warm lips full of promise.

"Black or white?" asked Volo.

"White, please," I replied.

"Beatrice, get some hot milk," he said. "I'm sorry, James. I always take it black."

When she returned after a while with the milk, she brought it to me, and—accidentally, it seemed—knocked my table napkin off the table. She and I stooped to pick it up, and as we did so, she pushed into my hand a scrap of paper. Volo watched all this with that hateful expression in his eyes. I crushed the paper in my hand and allowed Beatrice to put the table-napkin near me. When she had gone finally, leaving us to coffee and me to brandy and a cigar, comfortably by the fire, Volo said:

"Now, my dear chap, I have some work to do. Stay here as long as you like. But when you're ready to go to your room, ring for Brady the butler to show you up. I've had a fire lit for you, and you'll find books and writing materials there. Meanwhile, there's the brandy. So . . . goodnight, and pleasant rest."

So saying, he left me, and quite soon afterwards, I rang the bell. The dog-faced butler appeared and stood attentively till I rose. Then he led me to a room on the first floor, up the wide stairs, along an uneven corridor, through a door of which time had pulled the frame out of straight. I closed the door and surveyed my quarters.

The room was comfortable, carpeted to the walls, with a modern single bed, and shelves of books all round. There was whisky on a small table, an easy chair by the fire, and cigarettes in a green jade box. My bags had been unpacked, and my pyjamas and dressing-gown put out for me. There was a hot-water bottle in the bed. Nothing was lacking for my comfort. I took a cigarette and put my hand in my pocket for my lighter. My fingers encountered the scrap of paper Beatrice had passed to me. I unscrewed it and read the words she had written:

I am Beatrice Skellimore, the film actress whose death by suicide was reported in the Press two months ago. Get away from here and bring help. There are others here in great danger.

Three things were instantly clear to me. The girl was telling the truth. My boatman was indeed the great singer, Porteous Malloway. And I must get out. I walked softly to the door and turned the handle. The door was locked from the outside. I sat down in my chair and stared at the fire. It was not fear I felt now. It was resolve. I would discover the limits of the life and activities of Doctor Diaz Volo, and I would liberate myself and other victims of his practices, whatever they

might be. I was quite calm. I was after all a scientist. This was England. Help was not far away. I thought of all I had already seen with repulsion and horror. I recalled the faces of the people I had met, and the nightmare garden, lying now outside my window, agonized, tortured, crying out in the anguish of twisted shape. After a while, I went to bed and turned off my light, determined to see this gruesome adventure to its end.

* * *

I woke early, and looking at my watch, found the time to be ten minutes past six. The room was dark and the house absolutely silent, except for a strange distant sound, faint but discordant, like faraway mill sirens. I lay still for a while, but then, as my mind was wide awake, I rose, washed and shaved, and dressed. Then I walked to and fro in my locked room, until at half past seven, my door opened and Beatrice came in with a breakfast tray. I took it from her and put it down on the table by the fireplace.

"Now," I said. "Talk."

I was going to shut the door, but she said fiercely:

"No. Leave it open."

"Why was the door locked on me?"

"Because you're a prisoner, like everyone else here."

"Nonsense. I'm free to leave when I wish."

"Are you? You'll find you're mistaken."

"I saw everything when I came. I can find my way out."

"With high walls? With electrified barbed wire on top? With monsters of his making guarding the place night and day?"

"Monsters? Of his making? What does that mean?"

"You saw Quilp? And the dog-lion? You saw Brady with his dog face?"

"Yes. I saw them."

"They're not the only ones. He bred them or made

them. They're his successes." She shuddered and put her hands to her face. I pulled them away.

"You must tell me . . . everything," I said.

"He has failures too," she said. "You saw the garden . . . oh, that beautiful word isn't right . . . you saw that field of torture . . . those twisted trees. . . ."

"Yes. I saw them."

"In the soil there are his failures . . . buried, corrupt, crawling."

She stared at me, her beautiful face wide-eyed and horror-stricken, and then said a terrible thing.

"My turn is coming. I know it is. I don't know when . . . but soon . . ."

With a moan of terror, she threw herself into my arms, and I in turn clasped her, and we embraced as if we were two souls in mortal danger, with only each other for comfort. Suddenly she looked up at me and words poured from her.

"You don't know yet. I know. I've been here two months. I met him in London, and he invited me here to work on a film. The other people he told me would be here were never asked. He only said they were. He's diabolical . . . he made it look as if I'd killed myself, and don't you see?—he only wants people who've got some beautiful thing—a voice, good looks, anything lovely, so that he can . . ." She paused and shivered.

"So that he can . . .?" I prompted.

"Turn it into ugliness. He hates beauty. He's a kind of evil god . . . a black creator. He wants a world full of hellish ugliness. Brady was once a handsome young man. Surgery made his face look like that. He's a success. The failures are under the ground, under those crippled trees. Don't you know why he wants you?"

"Tell me."

"He's always trying to make new plants and flowers that will be hideous. It's all a mockery of the beautiful world. When he succeeds he's happy for days, and looks at his work and laughs. He's got a white flower

that looks like a skull. He has a plant with leaves like broken hands and fingers. Oh . . . listen . . ."

We stood close together, motionless. The strange sound I had heard had become louder. It was a dreadful discordant cacophony, like voices of people in pain.

"He says that silence is too beautiful and must be broken. That noise goes on for hours, electrically made, and then he suddenly stops it, to make it worse when it begins again."

"Has he talked to you about these things?"

"Oh, yes. He calls it necessary teaching—the new gospel, the true light—all sorts of fine names. He makes a secret of nothing. And so I know what he's going to do to me . . . change me into something horrible, ugly, some living horror . . . unless he fails."

She hid her face on my shoulder, and I embraced her more closely, as if I would so save her. Over her head, standing at the door, I suddenly saw Volo, fully dressed, smiling, evil.

"I hoped you had breakfasted," he said, as if he had noticed nothing between Beatrice and me. "I like to start work at eight and get a good morning in. Pray join me when you are ready. Beatrice will bring you to my study."

When he had disappeared, I spoke to Beatrice.

"That's upset things," I said.

She replied with dreadful solemnity.

"Nothing upsets him," she said. "He thinks as if he were God and we were his creatures."

I poured and drank a cup of coffee.

"Take me to him now," I said. "I'll get you out of here if I have to murder him to do it."

She came into my arms again, and we kissed as if the kiss were the seal of our liberation into the world of sanity and beauty outside these obscene walls.

Volo received me in his study which was book-lined and contained microscopes and other small apparatus such as might have been expected in the room of a

scientist. He was putting on a white coat as I entered.

What I now have to tell has not even the crazy logic of the insane. It is only explicable on Beatrice's theory that Volo, for some dark and vile reason, hated beauty and responded to it by wishing to destroy it, as normal men wish to preserve and enjoy it. He turned to me now, and with that eyeless smile, said without warning or preliminaries:

"James, I think you should marry Beatrice."

Now that I had some sort of a key to this creature's mentality; now that I was fully aware that not one word he said had its face value, but belonged to the dark evil plotting world that was his twisted mind, I had at least some hope of forestalling his designs by appearing to take him as normal while watching every word and move.

As if I had been the medical attendant in charge of a particularly cunning and dangerous maniac, I determined not to show him a single sign of my real feelings about him, but to seem to accept everything I observed as quite ordinary. So to this staggering and insane proposition, I made no reply, especially as the implied closeness to Beatrice might in ways yet unforeseen further my designs of liberation for her and myself and any other of Volo's victims still saveable.

"She is lovely," he went on, his eyes glittering with the unspeakably sinister light of his madness. "You are both young, and I saw last night and this morning that you are mutually attracted. Yes. You certainly should marry, especially as you are the only eligible and desirable male she sees, perhaps."

This reference to the horrors in the castle was accompanied by a look that seemed to make his unsmiling blue eyes dilate for a moment—a sickening glance. It was so odious to me that for a wild moment of incaution, I longed to attack him, to strangle him, to shut those horrible eyes for ever, but I knew that any such overt move would bring Quilp and the dog-lion and Heaven

knew what other monstrous defences to his aid. I was dealing with the most dangerous madman, and I must operate as craftily as he if I were to escape his plans for what I was now certain would be my destruction in body, mind, and soul.

"You say nothing," he said, "and I take that for consent, in view of what I saw in your room. My chaplain will marry you, and I will arrange all the formalities. Say a week today for the ceremony, in my own chapel. Now, this will change my plans for you a little. We can hardly expect a bridegroom to do much work in the week before his marriage, can we? Besides, there will be preparations to make for Beatrice. But them you can leave to me."

These last words chilled my spine, for they contained all the threat of which Beatrice had spoken in such fear. I did not know what to say that would not precipitate action from Volo while I was still unready, from uncertainty, to counter it.

"I'd rather start work this morning," I said. "After all, that's what I came for."

It was essential to me to see more of the foul domain ruled over by this monster, and I could not but feel that he was working towards imprisoning me without, at first, the necessity of violence. His reply seemed at first to confirm my fears.

"No, no. I won't hear of work," he said, smiling evilly. "You shall have a holiday till your marriage takes place."

I risked a move towards freedom of action for myself.

"Well . . . all right. But I'd like to look round the house."

There was a long silence, while we held one another's gaze; and then his answer told me how certainly he deemed me his prisoner.

"By all means, my dear chap," he replied. "Go where you like. Everything is open. Make yourself

familiar with the place." He chuckled suddenly. "I think you'll find it most interesting. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll get along with my own work."

I was indeed anxious to make a reconnoitre of the place, and if it were possible, to see Beatrice and acquaint her, if she did not already know, with Volo's lunatic scheme to marry us. I left him in his study and went along the corridor, looking into every room, for as he had promised, they were all open. Why should they not be, I realized, for we were all, every living thing, imprisoned, and any discoveries would be potent with fear and horror, but not with escape. Besides, what had the Black Creator to hide from his creatures? Was it not part of his madness of egoism that all his works should be shown forth. He had not tried to hide a single horror from me as yet, nor to explain it. The most dreadful thing about this twisted kingdom was that it was as open as the lovely works of Nature in the world outside. He *wanted* his foul works to be seen, and so was entirely willing that I or anyone else should move freely about the castle . . . but never, never outside its walls again.

I wandered through the castle, followed its winding passages, opening doors and finding at first only normal living rooms, or wholly empty and obviously unused ones. Then, in a wing that looked as if it had been added at some fairly recent date, I found the works and black genius of Volo.

In one room, I saw a completely equipped operating theatre, empty and still. As I withdrew, my nerves jangled, for all round me, that terrible cacophony of sound suddenly began, and at these close quarters, it was like a hundred sirens of varying pitch and intensity. It was hateful, maddening, so that I wanted to shout and curse and blaspheme at it, roaring it into silence. It destroyed the power of attention and confused the mind. As suddenly as it had begun, it stopped, and left my whole frame and nervous system trembling. I felt

that in some weird way, I was being watched, and the noise turned loose on me at a selected moment.

I opened a door on my left and stood transfixed with new horror. One side of the room was a cage of iron bars, and in the cage, hurrying nervously to and fro on feet and hands, was what seemed at first glance to be a white ape, but on closer view was *a man in the semblance of an ape*. When he saw me at the door, he stopped, his hands on the bars of his cage, and to my horror, silent tears rolled down his withered cheeks, and his great tragic eyes stared at me, beseeching me, it seemed, for help.

In another room—for I left the man-ape as I was obliged to do, powerless to help him, but shocked beyond measure at the injury, final and irreparable done him by Volo—in another room I met, as I opened the door, the hot humidity of a tropical plant house, and all around me were new monstrosities of the plant world. To my recoiling horror, a long tendril *moved towards me*, and touched my face as if by will and design, and I realized intuitively that Volo was trying to produce a hideous creature that should be both plant and conscious animal. The scent of these innumerable plants was one of corruption and death, a mockery of life and nature, and I closed the door with a bang of fear and horror, to find Volo beside me in the corridor, in his white coat, a flask in his hand containing a lethal-looking green fluid.

Nothing could have indicated his sense of power over me more than his calm acceptance of the knowledge that I had seen so much, and his iron assumption that it did not matter what I saw; it could not help me now.

"I hope your tour of inspection is proving of interest," he said, as pleasantly as if we had been in the pathological laboratory of a great London hospital. He nodded and flashed his eyes at me in what looked like triumph. "Lunch in the dining room," he added, "at one . . . sharp."

He gave me no chance to make any remark to him, but moved away about whatever obscene business occupied him. As I watched him go, I had a renewed sense of his power, his conception of himself as a god, who needed to take no precautions and practise no secrecy in his hideous designs; on the contrary, I realized that he wanted his creatures to praise and worship him for his wonderful works, and the obscenity of this idea made me shudder in spite of my resolve to find a way out of my situation.

Just before lunch, I met Beatrice coming out of the dining room. I took her hands in mine.

"Listen," I whispered urgently, "I must tell you . . ."

"I know," she replied, also in a whisper. "He told me . . . as if I were going to be . . ." She shook her head and tears came into her eyes.

"We're going through with this," I said. "It may be our only chance of getting out of here."

She nodded, and then said:

"Don't worry about it binding you," she said.

"That's not his idea at all. It's some terrible plan of his own."

"Maybe," I said. "But we must go through with it as if we believed in it. I'll keep in touch somehow . . ."

Suddenly I heard Volo's voice behind me.

"Ah. The bridal couple. How nice. But let us be patient. A week is not long, compared with a whole lifetime of bliss. Meanwhile, lunch, I think. Eh?"

As we sat at table, we were in the oddest psychological situation. He knew that I was now aware of what was going on, and that my nerves were taut, and that I looked at him with hatred, fear, and disgust—a disgust the like of which I had never known, or thought possible in one human being towards another. That was my condition. His seemed to be a wicked delight in his knowledge, so that he conversed vivaciously—even normally—a fact so out of drawing with our surroundings that it was itself a fresh horror, as if a mur-

derer, his hands dripping with his victim's blood, should offer a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

In spite of some efforts, I did not see Beatrice again. It was as if she had entirely vanished from the castle. Meals were served by Brady, who took on all Beatrice's former duties. The week passed, and I was beginning to think Volo had made some sinister changes in his plan, and thought of some even viler design. But on the eve of the eighth day, I was wakened from sleep at midnight by Volo himself, attended by Quilp. I sat sharply up in bed and blinked in the light so suddenly switched on.

"What do you want?" I demanded.

Volo looked more evil at that hour and in that light than I had ever seen him look.

"You must get up and dress, James," he said. "It is the hour of your wedding."

"Very well," I said. When I heard my voice say these words, the nightmare incredibility of the position struck me like a blow. This could not, could not be happening. However, it might, if things turned out as I hoped, be the beginning of delivery. "But," I said, with a sudden hatred of Quilp, "leave me alone to dress. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

"Certainly, my dear chap," replied Volo, his whole being seeming to ripple with some interior horrible delight. "Come down to the dining room when you're ready. We'll have a drink before the . . . ceremony."

They went, leaving the door open, and when I was ready, I followed, my mind racing to find ways of using this macabre hour and occasion to my advantage. I had to pass the door of Volo's study on my way to the dining room. It stood open, and there, quite visible to me, was Beatrice, dressed in all the white panoply of a bride. I was going to speak to her, but two things halted my purpose. One was a movement she was making as I saw her. She was bending over Volo's desk, and seemed to be opening a drawer and turning

over its contents. The other was that as I hesitated whether to go to her, I heard the dining room door open, and I immediately walked on towards it. As I did so, Volo looked out.

"Come along, James," he said. "You've been an unconscionable time dressing. I don't like to see tardiness in a bridegroom. Come and have a drink."

I certainly needed one, and took a strong whisky. No sooner had I put my glass down, than Volo said impatiently:

"Now . . . let us go to the chapel."

No words can describe the horrible and fantastic atmosphere as a grotesque procession formed up, headed by Quilp and ended by Volo, with me in the middle. The hour, the sense of being in another world, the lights in the corridor, the stillness all brought irresistibly to my mind the thought of a man going to the gallows. Suddenly, in the stillness of the night, a long scream tore its way through the castle, breaking into a sobbing laughter as it died away. I faltered, my blood curdling at the sound.

"I'm afraid Simeon isn't sleeping very well," said Volo's voice with cold amusement, and I knew that he had given this name to the man-ape whose hopeless life I had seen in the cage. "Or perhaps he envies you, James. Eh?"

We walked through corridors I had never explored, and came at last to an arched door with a heavy key in its keyhole. Quilp opened it, and I saw before me an ancient chapel, dimly lit. As if for a wedding ceremony indeed, we walked slowly up the aisle, and there, on the chancel steps, was a completely hooded and gowned figure, black and motionless. I was pretty certain that all this was farcical, and that its real significance would appear later. How right I was, just as I also was in supposing the chapel to be now as secular as a picture house.

I heard the door creak open again, and turned to see

Beatrice enter, on the arm of Brady, the dog-faced butler.

Still in her bridal dress of white lace, her face was heavily veiled. She came up the aisle and stood beside me. The ceremony began and Volo acted as best man, with a simmering evil joy like a lurid light.

"Now," he said, at its end. "We will conduct the happy pair to the bridal chamber and leave them to their first night of bliss."

The macabre procession formed up, and Beatrice on my arm, we were conducted to a huge room with a four-poster bed, which perhaps had been used in the past for such a purpose, but if so, with what a world of difference.

It was clear to me now, with a dreadful clarity, that Volo's moment had arrived. It was for this, whatever horror it might be, that he had plotted. A vile excitement seemed to possess him. His movements were jerky, his words sounded thick.

"Now, James," he said. "Come, my dear fellow. Let us see you kiss your lovely bride."

"When you've gone," I said, dying to be alone with the first ally I had made in this terrible place.

"Nonsense. Nonsense," cried Volo. "We must see the kiss of peace and happiness. It's traditional. Why, on this very island, in times past, the happy couples had the advantage of being accompanied during the whole night by their friends and relations. Think of that, my dear James. But we shall let you off with a token kiss, and then we shall decently withdraw. Go on, man. Kiss her. KISS HER!"

Seeing that the only way to be rid of this foul maniac was to comply, and knowing Beatrice's beauty and friendliness, I went close to her and gently drew the bridal veil aside to kiss her. At this, Volo's excitement rose to a nervous crescendo, as if he would faint with ecstasy. But in that moment, I tasted to the full the bestial and loathsome spirit of the man. The face I saw

behind the veil was that of a woman once beautiful and attractive. But now, under Volo's defacing surgical hand, it was an inhuman obscene revolting wreck. The face was lipless. The eyes lidless, red, bare, and without life. From the mouth, a shapeless hole, showed the gums and teeth, so that the power of speech, the capacity for love was ended for ever. The poor eyes, with their red glaring sockets, stared at me unwinking. They could never close in sleep or ecstasy again. I was struck dumb. My lips, brought near to kiss her, drew back tightly across my gums without my will. I started back. I think for a moment or two I died of horror. Through the mists of my pain, I heard Volo laughing.

"Go on, man," he was saying. "Kiss her. What ails you? She expects your love. Kiss her and prepare her for the other delights which are her right."

I stood as if turned to stone, staring at this monster, human no more in anything but bodily form. Then he played his last card, took his last delicious taste of his preordained pleasure. His face suddenly became grave. He spoke to Quilp.

"Ah," he said, "I understand. They are, Quilp, an ill-matched pair. The bride's reluctance is understandable. She needs a bridegroom worthy of her beauty." He nodded. "This must be put right." Then to me: "Come, James. You saw my operating theatre. It is all ready. I will arrange this matter to the complete satisfaction of yourself and your lovely bride."

I clenched my fists. I understood perfectly. I was to be taken to the theatre, and turned into a monstrosity to feed Volo's hellish greed for vileness, to thrill him with the idea of a marriage between two once-human beings. . . . I felt my very heart turn cold as Volo said:

"Quilp. Take him."

Quilp was moving towards me when something happened to divert Volo for a moment. He saw it and raised his hand. The ruined bride began to move towards me with slow steps.

"Wait, Quilp. This is touching. The bride wishes to embrace her husband in prospect of delights to come when I have prepared him for her bed as she would wish."

I took a step back in horror as the poor creature advanced towards me, her arms out to me as if to embrace and kiss me. Horror upon horror. Volo laughed again as I stepped back until I could move no more, pinned against the wall, my hands before me to hold the woman away, God forgive me.

She reached me and put one arm around my shoulders. I shuddered and put my head down. I felt her other hand and arm moving in the recesses of her dress. She passed something to me, hard and metallic. Then I understood what I had seen in Volo's study earlier. She had sought and found his revolver, and was now pushing it into my hand.

"Splendid," I heard Volo cry. "Take her in your arms, James. She is crying for you. You see, how tenderly she embraces you."

I took the revolver firmly in my hand, under cover of the poor creature's body, and then she stepped aside, so that I could face my enemies. I saw fear, like a black wave, come upon Volo's face. He screamed an order to Quilp. The huge man advanced upon me.

"Get him, Quilp. Take him. Tear him to pieces," Volo shouted.

I was dealing with a monster, not a man, and I pulled the trigger without compunction, once, twice, three times. Quilp staggered, threw up his arms, and fell to the floor without a sound. A lust of anger filled me now that I was alone with Volo.

"Now," I said, "I'm going to kill you, and undo all of your filthy work that it's possible to undo."

Then the final horror happened. The diabolical powerful Volo collapsed and disappeared, leaving a slaving coward in the bedroom. He threw himself down on the floor, like Monmouth before James, and

screamed to be spared, beating the floor with his fists. As if they heard his horrible cries, many of his victims lifted up their voices, and there came to my ears other screams, yells, discordant cries, and it seemed as if every living thing in the castle conspired to make the clangour of death audible for miles.

Then suddenly, as if someone had turned it on, there was added the wild hooting of the sirens. It was deafening, maddening, confusing, and for an almost fatal moment, my mind was off Volo. I might as well have taken my mind off a cobra in my hands. He had crawled towards me in his foul petitions for his life to be spared, and I did not see that he had taken from his clothes somewhere a small thin knife. But the poor woman in her bridal clothes had seen, and threw herself before me as he struck upwards at me. She stooped down to prevent him using the knife and I saw the blood flow from a tiny gash in her arm. With a fierce joy, I pulled the trigger of the revolver again, and Volo died instantly. I turned to the woman who had saved me, and whom I believed to be a mutilated Beatrice, but she too was dead, killed by the poison which I now realized had been on the blade of the knife and intended for me. As if the occupants of the castle knew that its evil spirit was dead, the noises all died down, and at that moment, someone appeared at the open door of the bridal chamber.

I could hardly believe my eyes. It was Beatrice, safe and sound and as lovely as ever.

She came to me and I took her in my arms. She buried her face on my shoulder, trembling and hiding the dead from her vision.

At last I said:

"My dear, I thought . . . she was indeed you."

Beatrice looked up at me and replied:

"She was his wife. He couldn't bear to go through with the idea of marrying you to me, even in his black fantasy, because he realized there was something be-

tween us . . . liking, friendship . . . that even he couldn't destroy. So he chose this way. She hated him and he hated her, so this was just what he wanted . . . to deceive and hurt you . . .”

“And more than that, Beatrice,” I said. “But she saved my life.”

We went out of the room, and began the work of setting free the hopeless occupants of that dreadful house. What medical skill in its mercy could do for Volo's victims was done. Nowadays, the castle stands empty on its island, unvisited, silent, and we should hope, forgetful: certainly forgotten, as far as we can ever forget, by my wife Beatrice and myself.

BY ONE, BY TWO, AND BY THREE

by Stephen Hall

IT WAS while I was at Cambridge that I first came to know Angus Macbane. We met casually, as undergraduates do, at the breakfast table of a mutual friend, or rather acquaintance, and I remember being struck with the odd, cynical remarks my neighbour threw out at rare intervals, as he watched the argument we had started, about heaven knows what or what not, and were maintaining on either side with the boundless confidence and almost boundless ignorance peculiar to Freshmen. I seem to see him now, leaning back after the meal in a deep armchair, with his host's cat purring her contentment on his knee. He never looked at the semicircle of disputants round the fire, but blew beautiful rings of cigarette smoke into the air—or gazed with a critical expression, under half-shut lids, at the photographs of actresses forming a galaxy of popular beauty above the mantelpiece. Then he would emit some sentence, sometimes sensible, oftener wildly nonsensical, but always original, unexpected—a stone dropped with a splash and a ripple into the stream of conversation.

I do not think that he showed any very particular power of mind at the breakfast party, or indeed afterwards. What made one notice him was the faint aroma of oddity that seemed to cling to him, and all his ways and doings. He was incalculable, indefinable. This was what made a good many dislike him, and made me, with one or two others, conceive a queer liking for him. I always had a taste, secret or confessed, for those delicate degrees of oddity which require a certain natural bent to appreciate them at all. Extravagance of any

kind commands notice, and compels a choice between admiration and contempt; moreover, it generally—and not least at a University—invites imitation. No one ever either admired or despised Macbane, so far as I know, and no one could ever have imitated him. The singularity lay rather in the man himself than in any special habit. For Macbane was not definably different from other young men. He was of medium height, slightly made, but not spare; his face had hardly any colour, and his hair and moustache were light. His eyes were of a tint difficult to define; sometimes they seemed blue, sometimes grey, sometimes greenish, and he had a trick of keeping them half shut, and of looking away from anyone who was with him. This peculiarity is popularly supposed to be the sign of a knave; in his case it was merely a part of the man's general oddity, and did not create any special distrust.

Our acquaintance, thus casually begun, ripened into a strange sort of friendship. Macbane and I saw very little of each other; we did not talk much, nor go for walks and rows together, nor confide to each other our doings and plans, as friends are supposed to do. On rainy afternoons I would stroll round to his rooms and enter, to find him generally seated before the fire, caressing his cat. We did not greet each other; but I generally took up one of the numerous strange and rare books that he contrived to accumulate, though he spent very little money. This I would read, occasionally dropping a remark which he would answer with some cynical, curt sentence, and then both of us relapsed into silence. Tea would be made and drunk, and we sometimes sat thus till dinner-time, or later. Yet though I always felt as if I bored Macbane, I still went to his rooms, and when I did not go for some time he would generally, with an air of extreme lassitude and reluctance, come round to my quarters, there to sit and smoke and turn over my books in much the same way as I did when I visited him.

Angus Macbane never told me anything much about himself or his family; he was one of the most reticent of mortals. All he ever did in that way was to say once in an abrupt manner that some of his ancestors had been executed for witchcraft, and when I vented some of the usual commonplaces on the barbarous ignorance and cruelty of those times, he cut me short by remarking in a tone of profound conviction that he thought his ancestors thoroughly deserved their fate, and that their condemnation was the only oasis of justice in a desert of judicial infamy.

From other sources, however, I discovered that Angus Macbane was an only son, whose parents had both died soon after his birth, leaving nothing behind them but their child. An uncle, a rich Glasgow merchant, had provided in no very lavish way for the boy's education, and was supposed to be intending to leave him a large share of his property. This was all I gathered from those people who made a point of knowing everything about everybody, and there is no lack of them at Universities.

Two striking peculiarities there were about Macbane, which stood out from the general oddity of the man. The first was his fondness for cats, or, to speak more accurately, the fondness of cats for him. He had always one pet cat—generally a black one—in his rooms, and sometimes more, and when he had two, they were invariably jealous of each other. But he seemed to have an irresistible attraction for cats in general. They would come to him uncalled, and show the greatest pleasure when he noticed or caressed them. He did not stroke a cat often, but when he did, it was with a certain delicate and sensitive action of the hand that seemed to delight the animal above everything. So marked was the attraction he exercised that a scientific acquaintance accused him of carrying valerian in his pockets.

The other peculiarity was in his books. He had picked up, in ways only known to himself, a very fine collection of early works on demonology and witchcraft.

A more complete account, from all sides, of 'Satan's Invisible World' was seldom accumulated. There were books, pamphlets, and broadsheets in Latin, French, German, English, Italian, and Spanish, and some old family manuscripts relating to the arts or trials of warlocks and witches. There was even an old Arabic manual of sorcery, though this I am sure he could not read. Most of these works were of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, since which period, indeed, civilization has ordained a 'close time' for witches, and any treatises on the black art dated after that time Macbane not only did not buy, but as a rule refused to accept as gifts. "Early in the eighteenth century," he once remarked, "men lost their faith in the devil, and they have not as yet recovered it sufficiently to produce any witchcraft worthy of the name."

And indeed he had the greatest abhorrence and contempt for modern Spiritualism, mesmerism, esoteric Buddhism, etc., and the only occasion during his Cambridge life on which I saw him really lose his temper was when a mild youth, destined to holy orders, called on him and asked him to join a society for investigating ghostly and occult phenomena. He turned on the intruder with something like ferocity, saying that he did not see why people wanted to be wiser than their ancestors, and that the old way of selling oneself to the devil, and getting the price duly paid, was far better, both in its financial and moral aspects, than paying foreign impostors to show the way to his place of business.

"Though what the devil wants at all with such souls as yours," he added, meditatively, "is the one point in his character that I have never been able to understand. It is a weakness on his part—I am afraid it is a weakness!"

The incipient curate turned and fled.

A few sayings of this kind, reported and distorted in many little social circles, gave Angus Macbane an evil

reputation which he hardly deserved. The College authorities looked askance on him, and some of them, I believe, would have been thankful if his conduct had given them a pretext for 'sending him down', whether for a term or for ever. But no offence or glaring irregularity could be even plausibly alleged against him. He attended the College chapel frequently, and never lost an opportunity of hearing the Athanasian Creed.

"When I hear all those worthy people mumbling their sing-song formulas, without attaching any meaning to them, and chanting forth vague curses into the air," he once said to me, "I close my eyes, and can sometimes almost fancy myself on the Brocken, in the midst of the Witches' Sabbath."

This devout assiduity was only reckoned as one point more against him, for August Macbane belonged by birth to the very straitest of Scotch Presbyterians, and evinced no desire to quit them, or to dispute the harshest and most repulsive of the doctrines handed down from his ancestors. Yet to my knowledge he never went near any Presbyterian chapel, but preferred, as his worthy uncle said, 'to bow in the house of Rimmon'.

This uncle, as I gradually divined, was the one being whom my friend regarded with something like hatred. Mr Duncan Macdonald was the brother of Macbane's mother. He was a big, red, sandy man, rich, unmarried, and not unkindly in nature, and an ordinary person with a little tact could have managed him, if not with complete satisfaction, at any rate to no small profit. It is true, the manufacturer was one of those self-made men who think that no man has any business to be otherwise than self-made; but by flattering his pride, he could easily have been induced to support his nephew in ease, and even in luxury and extravagance, if enough show were made for the money. But he was a Philistine of the Philistines, two thirds of his life dominated by gain, and the rest by a rigid sense of duty. Material success and respectability were his two golden

calves, and to both of these his nephew's every thought and act did dishonour. Angus Macbane could not have been made a successful man by any process less summary and complete than the creation of a world for his needs alone, and not even this would have given him respectability. He could not live without aid from his uncle, but he accepted from him a mere pittance, which, grudgingly taken, soon came to be as grudgingly given. Yet when he forced himself to compete for scholarships and prizes which would have made him partly independent, he missed them in a way which would have been wilful in any other man. His essays were a byword among examiners for their cynical originality, perverse ability, and instinctive avoidance of the obvious avenues to success. Thus he was constrained to depend on that scanty income of which every coin seemed flung in his face. With his developed misanthropy and contempt for ordinary men, he would at all times have been intolerant of the mere existence of such a man as his uncle, and that he himself should be hopelessly indebted to such a creature for every morsel he ate, for every book he read, was a sheer monstrosity to his mind—or so I should conjecture from what I knew of the two. Angus seldom willingly mentioned his uncle, and when he did so it was with a deadly intensity of contempt in his tone—not his words—such as I never heard before or since.

* * *

An end comes to all things, and my time at Cambridge, which had passed as swiftly for me as for most men, and left me with the usual abundant third year's crop of unfulfilled purposes, came to its end in due course. Angus Macbane had 'gone down' before I did, with a high second-class degree in mathematics, chiefly gained, as I happened to hear from an examiner, by a very few problems which hardly anyone else solved. A serious quarrel with his uncle followed on this ill-success, but from motives of family duty and respectability

Mr Macdonald continued to pay his nephew enough to maintain life. No relation of his, he felt, must come to the workhouse.

For a year or two I lost sight of Macbane, and when I saw him again he was living in lodgings in an obscure street of a London suburb. I had learnt his address from another old college friend, Frank Standish by name, who had kept up relations with Angus. Frank was a complete contrast to Macbane. He was a tall, hearty, handsome, athletic fellow, successful in everything he undertook, and was now making his way as an engineer, and likely to do well. It was this opposition in their natures that had begotten their friendship. I have seen them sitting together at Cambridge, Standish chatting on by the hour, and Macbane watching him in contented silence. As someone remarked, it was like the famous friendship of a racehorse and a cat.

I was myself now an under-master at a large day school, and my evenings were in general free, so one night I called for Standish at his lodging, and together we trudged to find Macbane.

Our path led through one of those strange, uncanny wildernesses that lie about the outskirts of every great and growing town. Skeletons of unfinished houses, bristling with scaffolding poles, loomed on us at intervals through the rainy mist. The roads were long heaps of brickbats and loose stones, already varied with blades of coarse grass. The path we followed was seamed across with the ruts of heavy carts that had gone to and from the half-built houses, and we stumbled over posts and through plashy pools, along the ghostly highway, completely deserted now that the workmen were gone, and stretching its miles of raw ruin through the autumn mist. Standish whistled cheerily as he strode on through the desolation, and I was comforted to have him with me. I think I should almost have felt afraid but for his presence.

We crossed the No Man's Land of chaotic brick and

mortar, and found ourselves in a street of mean new houses. At No 21, Wolseley Road, Standish paused and rang. A slatternly maid-of-all-work answered the bell, and ushered us into the presence of Angus Macbane.

He was sitting by a poor little fire, in a shabby arm-chair, with his black cat on his knee as usual, and a volume of demonology in his hand, and, save that the room was small, cheaply furnished, and hideously papered, and the occupant looked thinner and wearier, we could have fancied ourselves at Cambridge again. But after the first greetings I soon noticed that Macbane was changed for the worse since I had seen him last. He did not seem at all dissipated, nor had he acquired the air of meanness and shiftiness that marks the needy adventurer, but there was a genuineness, almost a desperation, in his cynical utterances, which they had not had before—a hopelessness of expression and an irritability which I did not like. The misanthropy at which he had played before was now in grim earnest.

He told us a little—very little, and that reluctantly—of his own way of life. He was doing nothing of any moment—a struggling, unknown writer, spasmodically trying to secure some literary foothold, and failing always, whether by the fatality which attended him specially, or by the same chances as befall any author. Added to this misery was the consciousness of his dependence on his uncle, which was bitterer to him, I could see, than ever. He began to talk about Mr Macdonald of his own accord, and that was always a bad sign.

“Do you know,” he said, with a bitter laugh, “my worthy relative is coming out here before long? He writes me that he is due in London on business in a fortnight or so, and will pay me a visit to see if I am still given over to the same reprobate mind as before, and opposed to what *he* calls my duty. Won’t you come and see the fun, you two? I think I know how to aggravate him now, perfectly well. I assure you, at my last inter-

view with him, I made him swear within three minutes—and he an elder!”

“I say, Macbane,” Standish put in, in his good-natured way, “don’t carry that game too far. The old chap is good for a lot if only you don’t rub him up the wrong way. If you rile him this time, ten to one he cuts you off with a shilling—and then where will you be?”

“If he only would die!” Macbane went on, not seeming to hear his friend’s remonstrance. “Fellows like that have no sense of fitness. When I saw him last he reminded me of one of those big, fat, coarse speckled spiders that you want to kill, only they make such a mess. I should so like to murder him, if I could do it by deputy.”

He was joking, of course, but there was more earnestness than I liked in his manner. I looked at Standish, and he at me, before I spoke.

“If those are your sentiments,” I said, echoing his light tone, “we had better come to prevent bloodshed.”

“Yes, do come,” Angus resumed, “and if you will kindly take off his head outside, I shall be greatly obliged to you. Bring a delightful rusty old axe, Standish, with plenty of notches in the blade. It will be so nice to be like one of those dear Italian despots, and get one’s assassination done for one. Though there are better ways than hiring a bravo, even. An ancestor of mine——” and here he stopped suddenly.

“Well, what did your ancestor do?” asked I.

“Oh,” said Macbane coolly, “he raised a devil of some sort and got scragged by it himself.”

As he spoke these trivial words, there came a faint sound at the door as of something scratching very gently on the panels. I turned to Macbane and asked:

“Is that your dog, Mac?”

“My dog!” he said, with a shudder. “Why, I *hate* dogs. I never have one near my room by any chance—except when the landlady sends me up sausages.”

“Perhaps it is another cat come to make friends with

you," suggested Standish. "There it is again. I will let it in, whatever it is."

He flung the door open, and the chill air rushed in from the draughty passage and stairs. There was nothing outside or in sight, and he shut the door again with a bang.

"I heard it distinctly," he said, in the aggrieved tone of one who fancies he has made himself ridiculous. "What could it have been?"

"Wind, perhaps, or a rat," said Macbane, lightly. "There are plenty of rats in the place, and I am glad of it, for it is the only thing that prevents me from expecting the house to fall every moment. When it is going to fall the rats will all run out, and my cat Mephistopheles will run out after them, and I shall run out after Mephistopheles, and the landlady and the first-floor lodgers, and the landlady's cat that eats my tea and sugar, will all be squelched together, to the joy of all good cats and men—eh, Mephisto? Why, what ails the cat?"

For Mephistopheles was standing upon his master's lap, with back arched and tail rigid and bristling, glaring into the darkest corner of the little room, and hissing in a passion of mingled rage and fear. Then, before anyone could stop him, the cat made one leap at the window, with a yell and a great crash of glass, and was gone, leaving us staring at each other.

Angus Macbane spoke first, with a forced laugh.

"There goes my cat," he said, "and there goes one-and-nine for broken glass. Cats I may get again, but one-and-ninepence—never. A cat with nine lives, a shilling with nine pence—all lost, all lost!" And he went on laughing in a shrill, hysterical way that I did not at all like. During the pause that followed, Standish looked at his watch.

"It is pretty late now," he said, "and I have a lot of working drawings to prepare tomorrow. Goodnight, Macbane. If I come across your cat, I'll remonstrate

with him for quitting us so rudely. But no doubt he will come back of himself."

As Standish said this the rest of the large pane through which the cat had leaped suddenly fell out with a startling crash into the street, making us all wince.

"It was cracked already," remarked Angus; "and the glazier does not allow for the piece. Goodnight, both of you. I fancy I have something to do myself, too."

I was surprised, and a little hurt, at being thus practically turned out by my friend—for I had expressed no intention of departing, and it was not really very late; but I was not sorry to go now, and have the solace of Standish's cheery company home. A curious, undefined feeling of apprehension was creeping over me, and I wanted to be out in the night air, and shake off my uneasiness by a brisk walk.

We went downstairs, leaving Macbane brooding in his chair. As the landlady saw us out I slipped a half-crown into her hand.

"Mr Macbane's window got broken tonight," I said. "Will you have it mended, and not say anything about it to him?"

I knew that he would probably forget the occurrence if not reminded of it. Standish nodded approval, and we went out into the mist.

We walked on in silence till we turned out of the lamp-lit and inhabited part, and then my companion remarked, abruptly:

"That makes one-and-threepence I owe you, Eliot," and relapsed into silence, not even whistling as he strode along.

We had reached nearly the middle of the long, artificial desert, where a street was some day to be, when Standish stopped and caught me by the arm.

"Eliot, what is that?" he whispered.

We both stood still and listened. From the waste land beyond one of the skeleton houses came a fearful cry, whether of a child or an animal we could not tell—a

scream of mere pain and terror, intense and thrilling, neither human nor bestial. Then there was a deep, snarling growl, and the yell died into a choking gurgle, and suddenly fell silent.

"Come on!" Standish gasped, and ran with all his speed in the direction of the sound.

I followed as fast as my shorter legs and wind would take me over the stiff, slimy clay of the waste land, and after a few minutes found him bending over a little dark heap on the ground at the edge of a puddle.

"Have you got a match?" he said.

I nodded—I was too much out of breath to speak—and pulled out my matchbox. I struck a light, screening it with my hand, and we both looked earnestly at the black lump at our feet.

"Bah!" said Standish, as he mopped the perspiration from his face. "Why, it's only a cat, and it sounded like a baby."

It was the body of a large black cat, still warm and quivering, but quite dead. The throat was almost entirely severed, and the blood had streamed out, darkly streaking the thick, yellow water of the pool. Of what had killed it there was no sign or sound, only in the soft clay beside the puddle there were marks which seemed those of the poor cat's feet, and other footprints like these, but larger. I pointed them out to Standish.

"I see what it was," he said, as we trudged laboriously back to the road. "The cat was out there, and some beast of a dog caught it and killed it—though what cat or dog should be doing there is more than I can say. What teeth the brute must have! Ugh! I hope he's not waiting round to take another bite."

We got back to the road unbitten, and went on our way in silence, till I said:

"Standish, do you know, that cat was very like Mac-bane's?"

"Do you know, Eliot," was his answer, "that is just what I was going to tell you!"

And not another word did he utter, till I left him at his door and said goodnight.

* * *

Macbane was never a good correspondent, but he duly informed us of the date of his uncle's expected visit, and when the day came I called for Standish in the evening as before, and we trudged off through another sloppy mist. Standish, good, thoughtful fellow, had brought with him in his overcoat pocket a bottle of very fine old Irish whiskey, which he had long been treasuring up for some festal occasion, but now intended to devote to the mollifying, if possible, of Mr Macdonald.

"Every glass he takes of this," he solemnly assured me as we went on, "will be worth a hundred a year to Macbane."

We did not go by the same dreary road that we had taken before. Frank declared with a shudder that the last cry of that cat was still ringing in his ears, and that he could not stand the ghastly place again. I was rather surprised at his unwonted nervousness, but readily acquiesced in it. So we went a mile or so out of our way, keeping along endless streets of shabby-genteel houses, which were sufficiently hideous, but not appalling, and about nine in the evening we reached Wolseley Road.

I was surprised and almost shocked to notice the change that had passed over Macbane in the few weeks since I had seen him last. He did not seem worse in health—on the contrary, there was at times a nervous alacrity about his movements which I had not remarked before. But his face and expression seemed to have darkened, as it were, and grown evil. His college cynicism had already turned into misanthropy, and now, I thought, it had developed into a positive malevolence. He still was silent and brooding after the first greetings, but he no longer seemed dejected. Altogether a transformation of some kind had come to him, such that I,

though not very impressionable, was rather inclined to fear than to pity him.

The conversation, as was natural, turned on the uncle, who might appear at any moment now. Standish and I joined in urging on our friend the necessity of attempting conciliation, of showing some semblance of submission. We had more than once induced him to do so before, though his perverse temper generally made him unable to do more than avert an instant stoppage of the supplies; but tonight he was obstinate, and even spoke as if he were the aggrieved party, and his uncle the one to make advances.

"If the old fool cares to be civil," he said, fiercely, "then there's an end of it; and if not, there's an end, too. I am tired of humouring him."

As he spoke the 'old fool's' heavy tread was heard on the stairs, and in another minute he entered. He was a big, strong, red-faced, coarse-looking fellow, with sandy whiskers and grizzled hair, who nodded awkwardly to us, and gave a surly greeting to his nephew, who sat still in his armchair, looking into the fire with half-shut eyes.

Mr Duncan Macdonald seemed disconcerted by our presence, and I offered to withdraw; but Macbane would not let us.

"You see, uncle," he remarked, still keeping his eyes averted and using the familiar title solely, I am convinced, because he knew the uncle did not like it, "these gentlemen know all about our little affairs, and they had better hear your version of matters now than my version afterwards. Besides, one of them is going to be a literary man, and write a tale with Scottish characters in it, and you will be quite a godsend for him, as raw material for a study. If you want to swear at me, pray don't mind him; there is nothing that tells more in literature than a little aboriginal profanity, properly accented."

This was a bad beginning for an interview, and would have been worse still had Mr Macdonald been able fully

to understand his nephew's speech. What he did understand, however, obviously offended him, and he began to address Macbane in no very conciliatory tones, though at first with a forced moderation of language and strained English accent which were evidently the result of the young man's taunt. Then, as Macbane did not answer, but sat still looking into the fire, his uncle began to lose temper. His language grew broader and stronger, both as Scotch and as reproach. He addressed us with a sort of rough eloquence on the subject of his nephew's miserable laziness, shiftlessness, effeminacy, pointing at him, and showering down vigorous epithets on him. In the midst of his tirade, as he paused for breath, came a low sound of scratching at the door.

"There's that confounded rat again!" cried Standish, glad of any pretext for interrupting the miserable business. "Dead, for a ducat, this time."

He dashed open the door as he spoke, but there was nothing to be seen—only the gaslight in the passage, flickering and flaring in the draught, sent strange shadows flitting across the walls.

Frank came back and sat down, and busied himself in uncorking his bottle of whiskey, and setting the kettle on to boil. I took up a book, so as not to seem to observe a scene which I knew must be so painful and humiliating for Macbane. The uncle again plunged into the stream of his invective, and I kept my eyes on the nephew. I knew that he was really quite as passionate as the elder man, and I was afraid of what he might do if he once lost his self-control; but, though a little shiver passed over him sometimes, he was quite silent, leaning back in the armchair, with his head resting on his right hand, and his left arm hanging listlessly over the side of the chair. Presently he began to move the hands languidly to and fro, with the fingers outstretched, and the palm horizontal and slightly hollowed, keeping it more than a foot from the carpet. It was a curious gesture, but he had many odd tricks of the kind.

At last Mr Macdonald, having spent his store of abuse without any response, began, I fancy, to feel a little ashamed of himself, and became more conciliatory, letting fall some hints as to the terms on which he might even yet receive his prodigal nephew back to favour. The manner of his overtures was far more offensive than their substance, and to one who could make allowance for the man's coarse nature, there was even a trace of a feeling that might be called kindness. But Macbane was always far more sensitive to externals than other men, and his uncle's condescension, I could see, irritated him far more than his anger. He left off moving his hand to and fro and sat up, clutching the arms of his chair. Then, when the older man had done, he cast one deadly look at him, and shook his head as if he would not trust himself to speak.

"Winna ye speak, ye feckless pauper loon!" roared his uncle, with a string of oaths.

Macbane was silent, but that good fellow Standish interposed at what he thought was the right moment.

"Come, Mr Macdonald," he said, frankly, "I don't think you should talk like that. After all, Macbane is your own sister's son, and he is not well now, and you must not come down on him too heavily. Let us have a glass of toddy all round now and part friends, and we three will talk it all over, and make matters smooth tomorrow. We can't do any good tonight."

As he spoke he got out some tumblers from the cupboard and wiped them clean. The Glasgow manufacturer seemed a little mollified. Nobody could help liking Standish or his whiskey, and all might yet have been well if the devil had not seemed to enter suddenly into Angus Macbane. Standish had poured out a generous measure of the fragrant spirit, and was turning to take the kettle off the hob, when Macbane sprang up like a cat, in a white heat of rage, took the tumbler from the table and flung it right into the grate. The glass rang and crashed, and the flame leapt out blue like a tongue of

hell-fire, and Angus stood at the table, quivering all over, with his right hand opening and shutting as if feeling for a weapon. Standish caught him by the arm and pulled him back into his chair.

"Are you mad, Mac?" he exclaimed.

Macbane did not seem to hear, but sat glowering at his uncle. As for Mr Duncan Macdonald, he turned purple with anger. The complicated atrocity of the insult—an outrage at once on kinship, hospitality, thrift, and good whiskey—had smitten him dumb for a moment with surprise and rage. He clenched his fist and struck blindly at his nephew, who was fortunately out of reach. Then he spoke in a husky but distinct voice, slowly, as if registering a vow.

"De'il throttle me," he said, "if ever you see bawbee of mine again."

And he took up his hat and umbrella and turned to the door.

"Done with you, in the devil's name!" cried Macbane.

Without another word the uncle flung the door open, and shut it after him with a crash that shook the house. Then we heard him heavily stamping down the stairs and along the passage, till another great bang proclaimed that he had left the house. This last noise seemed to rouse Macbane from a sort of trance. He sprang up again and rushed to the door and threw it open, as if to pursue his uncle. We were going to stop him, for he looked murderous enough, but instead of dashing downstairs he stopped, flung out his hand with a strange gesture, as if he were pointing at something, and muttered a few words that I could not catch. Then he shut the door and came back slowly to his old seat, as pale as a dead man.

In the excitement of the scene we had none of us noticed the time, but now the cheap little clock on the mantelpiece struck twelve, and recalled the fact that two of us were far away from our lodgings. Standish and I looked at each other. We neither of us liked to

leave Macbane alone yet. The man's expression as he flung the glass into the fire, still more his look as he pointed down the stairs, was black enough for anything, and if we went now he seemed quite capable of going out and murdering his uncle, or staying and murdering himself. Standish winked at me and went out quietly. In ten minutes he came back and addressed Macbane, who was sunk in one of his reveries again.

"All right, old fellow," he said, cheerily; "your landlady tells me her first floor is vacant, and she will put us two up for the night. So cheer up, Mac. It is a bad business, but we will see you through it, never fear. Now let's brew some punch and be jolly tonight at any rate, as we needn't go."

Macbane woke up again at this, with a sudden feverish gaiety. He eagerly took the steaming tumbler Frank prepared for him, and drained it at a draught—he whose strongest stimulant was coffee. The whiskey did not seem to affect his head, however. More than this, he hunted out a soiled pack of cards from an obscure drawer, and proposed—he who hated all games—that we should play to pass the time. Dummy whist he thought too slow, and I proposed three-handed euchre, generally called 'cut throat'. The name seemed to amuse our friend vastly. He insisted on learning the game, and we started at once. His spirits were almost uproarious; I had never seen him like this before. Yet his gaiety was very unequal. Sometimes he would cut the wildest jokes till, in spite of our uneasiness about him, we shrieked with laughter, and again he would sink back in his chair, forgetting to play his hand, and seeming as if he listened for some sound. After some time he went to the door and flung it open, declaring that he was 'stifling in this hole of a room'. Then he sat down again to play, but fidgeted about in his chair impatiently. He was studying his cards, which he held up in his left hand, when I happened to look at the other arm hanging down by his chair.

“For goodness’ sake!” I exclaimed, “what have you done to your hand, Macbane?”

He held up his right hand as I spoke, and looked at it. Palm and fingers were dabbled and smeared with watery blood, fresh and wet. For a moment we stared at each other with pale faces.

“I must have cut my hand over that confounded tumbler or something,” said Macbane at last, with an evident effort. “I will go and wash it off in my bedroom and be back in a moment.”

He slipped out as he spoke, and we heard him washing his hand, muttering to himself all the time.

Then in a few minutes he came back, keeping his hand in his pocket, and resumed the game. But his former high spirits were gone, and another tumbler of punch failed to recall them. He made constant mistakes, played his hand at random, and at last suddenly threw all his cards down on the table, his head on them, and burst into a terrible fit of hysterical sobbing.

We did not know what to do with him, but Standish laid him on the hard sofa, and in a little time he seemed better, though greatly shaken, and managed to control himself. He thanked us in a whisper, and told us to go, and he would get to bed alone. We were still rather anxious about him, but there seemed no reason for staying with him now against his will. The natural reaction had followed on all the strain and excitement, and I, for one, was glad that it was no worse. So we left him beginning, in a slow and dazed way, to get to bed, and descended to try and snatch a little sleep in the genteel misery of the first-floor lodgings.

* * *

We passed a rather disturbed night in our strange quarters. There were rats in the walls, the windows rattled, and altogether there were more queer noises than one generally hears in houses so new. However, we did get to sleep, and did not wake again till the grey,

dull, sodden dawn was making ghastly the little strip of sky visible over the grimy roof of the house opposite. We rose and dressed quickly and went up to Macbane's room. I peered in, but he was still sleeping heavily, so we busied ourselves, as quietly as we could, in preparing breakfast, intending, if our friend did not wake, to go off to our own work for the day, leaving a message for him. We purposed, in a rather vague manner, to do something for poor Macbane. Standish hoped to work on the better feelings of his uncle. I had resolved to devote some of my little savings to keeping my friend out of the workhouse.

We were half through our scanty and silent meal, when a heavy tread was heard on the stairs, making apparently for the room where we were.

"What luck!" said the sanguine Standish. "Here's the penitent uncle, come back after the whiskey. Now leave me alone to manage him. There is half the bottle left."

The steps came up to the door and paused. Then there was a single sharp rap, and in walked—not Mr Macdonald, but a policeman. If Standish and I had been thieves or coiners taken in the act, we could hardly have shown more confusion.

My first thought was that perhaps Macbane had done something wrong, and this suspicion was confirmed by the officer's first words.

"Beg your pardon, gentlemen," he said, "but is either of you Mr A. Macbane?"

"No," said Standish. "Mr Macbane is asleep in the next room. What do you want with him?"

"I want him to come with me to the station, as soon as convenient, sir?" was the reply.

"What for?" persisted Standish. "There's nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Nothing wrong about him; leastways, I don't suppose so, sir," said the man. "But there's been foul play somewhere. There's been a body found in the road about

a mile off, and a card in the pocket with Mr Macbane's name and address on it, and we want him to come and identify the corpse."

"Do you know the man's name?" I demanded, divining as I asked what the answer would be.

"His linen was marked 'Macdonald', sir," was the cautious reply.

"And how had he been killed?" asked Standish, breathlessly.

"Throat cut from ear to ear," said the constable, with terrible conciseness.

We looked at each other, and shuddered. Neither of us had any kind feelings for the man thus suddenly cut off. In fact, we had been thoroughly disgusted with his coarse and sordid temper, and had hoped—in jest, it is true—that he might break his neck over the dismal road he had to traverse.

But this sudden, mysterious, hideous murder—for such it must be—struck us with a chill of horror. My first collected thought, I believe, was a feeling of intense thankfulness that we had not left Macbane alone the night before. Now, at any rate, no suspicion could attach to him.

The policeman looked curiously from one to the other of us.

"Perhaps," he said, at length, "one of you two gentlemen would know him?"

"If it is the man I suppose," answered Standish, "we certainly do know him. Mr Macdonald is Mr Macbane's uncle, and was here last night. We both saw him leave before twelve o'clock, and have not seen him since."

"Then, sir," said the policeman, "perhaps one of you will wake Mr Macbane and bring him along as soon as he can come, and the other will go to the station at once, for there is never any time to lose in these cases."

I went into Macbane's bedroom, and Standish took up his hat and followed the policeman out. I touched

my friend on the arm. He gasped, yawned, then sat up, rubbed his eyes, and stared wildly round him, till his gaze rested on me.

Then the recollection of what had happened seemed to come back on him in a flash, and he laid his head back on the pillow.

"Is that you, Eliot?" he said. "I have had such a horrible dream. Thank you for waking me. Must I get up now?"

"Yes, you must, Macbane," I replied, gravely. "I will tell you why afterwards."

"Moralities and mysteries!" said he, in his cynical way. "Well, I shall soon hear if I am a good boy, and don't take long over my dressing. Reach me my trousers, there's a good fellow."

As I did so I saw that his right hand was again streaked thinly with dried blood, and I could not help an exclamation.

"Ah!" said he, as I called his attention to it. "That thing has been bleeding again, I see. Well, I can soon wash it off."

And he sprang up in his nightshirt, and ran to his washhandstand.

"Look here!" he cried, as he plunged his hand into the water. "Shouldn't I make a lovely Lady Macbeth? 'Here's the smell of the blood yet. Oh, oh, oh! All the perfumes of Araby——' How does it go? 'Yet who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him?'"

"For goodness' sake, be quiet!" I screamed. "Your uncle is lying at the police station with his throat cut! Be thankful you had nothing to do with killing him!"

Macbane turned faint and sick, and sat down on his bed again; but he bore the news much better than I had thought he would. To be sure, he had no love for his uncle, and could not be expected to sorrow for him; but the shock did not seem somehow to affect him greatly, except by a mere physical repulsion at the horrid

manner of his uncle's death. He soon got up again, and went on dressing, listening meanwhile as I told him all I knew about the matter, and as soon as he was ready we went out together.

The police station was soon reached, and we were admitted into a back room, where Mr Macdonald's body lay on a table, covered with a piece of sacking. There was no difficulty in identifying the corpse. The throat was cut, or rather, as it seemed to me, torn almost through with a frightful wound; but the face was uninjured, and still bore an expression of sudden horror and surprise that was very ghastly. We did not care to look on the sight long. When the covering had been replaced the constables told us all they knew. Some workmen, coming to their work at one of the unfinished houses in the new road, had found the body, lying on its back in a pool of clotted blood. There were no marks of a struggle that they noticed. They had put the corpse on a short ladder left in one of the houses, and carried it to the police station. The nearest surgeon had been called in, and had pronounced that life had been extinct for some hours. A purse and gold watch were found in the pockets. As to the hand or the weapon that had done the deed, neither the surgeon nor the police would offer any suggestion, and we could not help them. Only, as we left the station, the police sergeant remarked that he thought he had a clue to the murderer.

"Do you hear that, Standish?" said Macbane, in a mocking tone. "*He* thinks he has a clue."

We walked back to Wolseley Road and left Macbane there, and then Standish and I trudged off to our work—for work must be done, whoever has died. And all that afternoon and evening, whenever I was within sight or sound of a main street, my eyes were greeted with sensational placards, and my ears deafened with the shouts of newsboys, reiterating the same burden—"Third edition! Awful murder in Craddock Park! A Glasgow

merchant murdered!' and over every placard I seemed to see the vision of the dead face, and that gash in the throat.

The inquest was held a few days afterwards, and of course we all attended it. The story of the quarrel with Angus Macbane came out, in its main outlines, from his evidence and ours, and I could tell from the coroner's pointed questions that he suspected our friend. But there was no reasonable doubt that Duncan Macdonald had been killed within an hour after he left the lodging house, and it was perfectly clear from our evidence and the landlady's that Angus Macbane had been in his room long after this, and practically certain that he had never left the house at all that night.

The medical evidence, when it came, was conclusive. The distinguished surgeon who had made the post-mortem examination gave it as his opinion that the wound in the throat could have been inflicted with no species of weapon with which he was acquainted, and as far as he could venture to form a hypothesis, death had been caused by the bite of some animal armed with exceedingly large and powerful cutting teeth.

This unexpected statement caused quite a sensation in court, and Standish jumped up.

"By Jove! I forgot the cat," he said to me, and then, advancing to the coroner, he informed him that he had an addition to make to his former statement. He was sworn again, and told the story of the mysterious death of poor Mephistopheles in a straightforward way that evidently impressed the jury. I confirmed his tale in every particular.

There were no more witnesses, and the coroner summed up. He began by stating that all the evidence which could be collected still left this terrible affair in a very mysterious state. So far as he could see, however, there was happily no reason for regarding it as a murder. There had been no robbery of the body though robbery would have been perfectly easy, and though

there might have seemed some *prima facie* grounds for suspecting one person of complicity in the act—here the worthy coroner glanced at Macbane, who smiled slightly—yet it had been proved by reputable witnesses, whose testimony had not been impugned—here Standish blushed, and I think I did too—that the person in question could not possibly have been present on the scene of Mr Macdonald's death at the hour when it took place, and had apparently confined the expression of his ill-will to mere words, which it would be unfair to invest with any special significance—and so on, in the usual moralizing vein of coroners. The medical evidence, he went on to say, pointed to the theory that the death of the deceased was caused by some savage animal, and the further statement of two of the witnesses seemed to indicate that some such ferocious beast, perhaps a dog, was loose in the neighbourhood. It would be for the jury, however, to review all the facts, and return a just and impartial verdict upon the case.

The jury deliberated for some time, and finally determined that the deceased died from the bite of some savage animal, but what animal they were unable to say. A rider to the verdict directed the police to use all possible diligence to track out and destroy so dangerous a beast, and suggested that a reward should be offered for its capture or death. This was done by the local authorities, but with no result, and as weeks went on and no fresh victim fell to the 'ravenous beast or beasts unknown', men ceased to go armed, or to apprehend attacks, and the Craddock Park mystery was forgotten.

Mr Duncan Macdonald had left no will, and though he had torn up a testament providing for his nephew, he had not yet executed his threat of disinheriting him. So Macbane, as the only near relative, came in for the manufacturer's very considerable fortune. He sold out his uncle's share in his business, and his first act almost was to purchase an old, half-ruinous place, called Dullas

Tower, which had been, as I gathered from the scanty letter he wrote me about it, the ancestral seat of the Macbanes before the family fell into poverty and ill-repute in the old witchcraft days.

I was prevented by my school duties from seeing Macbane, now that he had gone north, and about this time Standish got a good appointment on an Indian railway in course of construction, and had to sail at once. Thus we three friends were parted for long, and it might be for ever.

I was sorry enough to lose Standish. I think it was rather a relief to see no more of Macbane. He was stranger than ever, now that his sudden prosperity had come upon him—alternately gay and sullen, exalted and depressed, and disquieting enough in either mood. I occasionally sent him a line, and at still rarer intervals received an answer, but on the whole I thought he had dropped out of my life permanently, and I was not sorry to have it so, now that he needed no help. I did not dream of the strange way in which we were once again to be brought together.

* * *

It was some months after Standish had left for India, and I had already received one letter from him, when I was startled by a brief paragraph among the Indian telegrams in *The Times*. It ran thus:

I regret to state that Mr F. Standish, the young and talented engineer superintending the construction of the Salampore Junction Railway, has been killed, it is supposed by a tiger.

This was all—terribly simple, brief, and direct, as messages of evil are now. I was greatly shocked and grieved at this sudden death of my old friend, for, though I was not likely to see him again for many years, and college friendships fade sadly when college life is over, yet we had been much together before he left, and

my remembrance of him was still warm and affectionate.

As soon as I recovered from the blow of the news, I wrote at once to Lieutenant Johnson, a young officer whom Standish had mentioned as being stationed near his quarters, and as being an acquaintance of his, to ask for some particulars of my friend's death.

The answer was forwarded to me about the end of August. I was not at the time in London, but had been invited by an old friend of my family to stay with him and have some shooting—though this was mere pretence on my part—at his place in Yorkshire. Lieutenant Johnson's letter was sent on from my lodgings to Darton Manor, where I was. It was a good letter, showing in its tone of manly regret how familiar and dear Standish had grown in the short time of intercourse with his new neighbours; but what I turned to most eagerly was of course the account of my poor friend's death. It was brief and rather mysterious.

Standish had gone out for an early walk in the cool of the morning, taking his gun with him, as was his custom. He had walked along the line of the new railway a little distance, and then turned off into the country. As he did not come back at his usual time, two of his servants had gone out to look for him, and found him lying on his back in a path, quite dead. His throat was fearfully torn, but there was no other wound on him. There had been no struggle, and the gun was still loaded. Footprints of some animal were observed in a patch of soft ground near by, but it was not certain whether this was the beast that had killed Standish, for while the footmarks were like those of a small panther, the wound seemed rather as if inflicted by the teeth of a tiger. A large hunting-party had beaten the neighbouring country without finding any dangerous wild animal.

This narrative set me on a very gloomy train of thought. The details of Standish's end were horribly like those of Mr Duncan Macdonald's—the suddenness,

the stealth, the mystery, the ferocity of the attack were the same in both cases.

Yet what possible connection could there be between the Craddock Park mystery and the death of an engineer on the Salampore Railway? Still, I could not keep this haunting feeling of some impending doom from shadowing my mind. Four men had met in that little room in Wolseley Road on that memorable night in November. Two of the four had already perished by the same mysterious and horrible death. Was it possible that the same end was reserved for the other two, and, if so, who would be the next victim? It was a wild idea, I felt; but I simply could not get it out of my head, and it made me very gloomy and depressed at the dinner table that night.

My kindly old host noticed this, and his genial nature could not rest satisfied till all around him were as cheery as himself. So when our tête-à-tête dinner was done—we had been very late in dining that day—he resolved to have up a bottle of a certain very rare old wine, which he kept under special lock and key for great occasions. This precious liquor he was now resolved to devote to clearing away my melancholy.

He would never trust a butler with the key of his cellar, least of all would he let a servant touch this priceless vintage. He was going to fetch the bottle himself, but of course I interposed and insisted on going for him. With a sigh of resignation, he gave me his bunch of cellar keys, carefully instructing me as to their particular uses, and the treasures to which they respectively gave access. Then he dismissed me, and I went down to the cellar.

The cellar of Darton Manor was far older than the house. It was hewn out of the rock on which the hall stood, and was large and lofty. I think that when the old castle, whose walls are still to be traced in the Manor garden, was standing, the vaults beneath must have been the storehouse of the garrison. When the modern

house was built two windows were cut up through the rock to give light to the cellars, but the present owner had protected these openings with double gratings, and put an iron-plated door, with a strong and cunning lock, to defend his precious wines.

I took up a candle, lit it, and went down the winding stair that led to the cellar. The vault below was so lofty and so far beneath the floor of the hall, that the staircase, cut in the rock, seemed as if it would never end. I felt like one descending into a sepulchre.

The clash of the keys swinging from my hand was the only sound in the chilly silence, except when noise came, muffled and faint, from the house above. At last I reached the heavy door of the cellar, and with some labour unlocked it and swung it back. Then I drew out the key, as I wanted another on the bunch for releasing the precious bottle I had been sent to fetch.

For a moment I stood in the doorway, holding my light high, and gazing round me into the great cavernous room. I could not see all of it, but the long rows of casks and the racks of bottles were very impressive in their silent array of potential conviviality. Then I glanced up at the windows, whose gratings were now and then made visible by a flicker of summer lightning across the sky, and as I did so I suddenly heard a crash as of glass, far up in the house above. Then, as I still listened, came a faint sound of footfalls rapidly growing louder, as if something was coming down the winding stair with long leaps.

I did not stop to face whatever this might be. I did not pause to think what I should do. In a blind and fortunate impulse of overpowering terror I flung the heavy door to, plunged the key into the lock, and shot the bolt home.

How I managed to do it in the one instant left to me I never could understand. I had found the door hard enough to open before. As I gave the key a last turn, something came against the iron outside with a thud

that almost shook the hinges loose. Then there was a moment of quiet, and I, listening behind the door, could catch a quick, hoarse heavy panting, as of some beast of prey. Then came another great shock, and another, and at every blow the good door creaked and shook, but held firm. Next there was a grating, rending sound, as if teeth and claws were tearing at this last obstacle between my life and its destroyer, and still I stood silent, transfixed with horror, as in a nightmare, expecting to feel the fangs of the unseen Thing close through my throat. How long I stood thus, tasting all the bitterness of death, I cannot tell. It was years in agony; it may have been only minutes of time. To feel that something fiendish, brutal, and merciless was slowly tearing its way to me, and to know nothing of it save that it was death, this was the deadly and overmastering terror. My trance cannot have lasted long. With a start, I awoke to the consciousness that life was still mine, and that a chance of escape yet remained.

The frozen blood again coursed through my veins, and my dead courage revived. I sprang to the nearest large barrel that lay on its side and rolled it close against the door, to keep the panels from giving way. Then I took up an iron bar that I found lying on the floor—perhaps a lever for moving the casks—and stood ready to give one last blow for my life. The sound of tearing ceased; I heard one deep, snarling growl of disappointed rage, and then the quick steps seemed to recede up the stair. I stood there delivered, for a moment.

Only for a moment, however. My candle, which was a mere stump, suddenly flared, flickered, and left me in total darkness, made darker by the little patch of sky seen through the nearer window, across which still ran an occasional flicker of summer lightning.

In trying to strike a light I dropped the matchbox on the rock floor. While I was groping for it I suddenly looked up and saw two eyes.

Two eyes, I say, but they were rather two flames, or

two burning coals. For a moment I stood glaring, fascinated, at the orbs that glared into mine. Then, as the Thing turned what seemed its head, and the eyes were averted for a moment, I saw, or thought I saw, a dim phosphorescent mass obscuring the faint light of the window. Then the eyes were on me again, and I heard the sound of tearing and wrenching at the outer grating—for there were two, one above the window and one inside. The outer bars were old and rusty, strong enough to resist any common shocks, but not to hold against the unknown might that was rending at them. I heard them creaking, cracking, and then—oh, Heaven!—the whole grating gave way, and I heard it ring as it was hurled aloft and fell far out on the stones.

Next instant the strong glass of the window flew in shivers on the floor, and there were those awful eyes looking into mine now, with only a few bars between us. Then the wrenching began once more at the last barrier. It bent, it shifted. I thought it was giving way, and in a frenzy I rushed forward, whirling the iron bar round my head, and struck with all my force through the grating. Another horrible growl answered the blow, and the bar was seized and dragged from my grasp. It was found next day, deeply indented, on the ground, a hundred yards away.

But now that the prey seemed given over disarmed to its teeth, the devilish fury of the Thing seemed to triumph over the devilish cunning that had directed it. It gave up the persistent assault on the grating, and writhed against the bars in a transport of hissing rage, biting the air, grinding its jaws on the tough iron. And yet—this was the horror of it—I could see nothing distinctly—only a phosphorescent shadow, twisted and tortured with agonies of rage, and turning upon me sometimes those eyes which seemed to redden with the growing frenzy of the Thing, till they were like blood-red lamps.

I think I had lost all fear for my life now. I did not

think of danger or resistance; but so mighty was the sheer horror of that bestial rage that I grovelled down in the darkest corner of the vault, and hid my eyes and stopped my ears, and cried to Heaven to deliver me from the presence of the Thing.

Suddenly, as I crouched there, the end came. The noise ceased. I turned and saw that the eyes were gone. I stood up and stretched out my arms, and a cool air blew through the shattered window on my damp forehead. Then every tense fibre of my body seemed to give way, and I fell like one dead on the floor.

I was awakened from my swoon by a thundering at the door, and the sound of voices—human voices once more. I staggered to the door, pushed away the cask, and after long wrenching—for my hands seemed to have lost all strength—got the lock open, and stumbled into the arms of my good host. Above him, on the stairs, were two or three of the menservants, their pale, frightened faces looking ghastly in the light of the flaring candles.

“My dear boy!” he cried. “Thank goodness you are alive. We have been so frightened about you.”

I told him faintly that I had fallen in a swoon. I could not yet speak of what I had gone through, and, indeed, it now seemed like a hideous dream.

“Well, do you know,” he said, as he took my arm, and helped me up the stairs, “we had such a scare upstairs. Just a few minutes after you had gone, when I was wondering whether you would find the right wine, smash came something right through the dining-room window, and over went the big candlestick, and we were in the dark. And when we got a light again, you never saw such a scared set as we were; but there was nothing to be seen. Did you have a visit, too?”

“Something did come down here,” I managed to articulate. “But don’t ask me about it—not tonight. I want to sleep first.”

“I think we all want that,” he said, briefly, as we

reached the lighted hall again, and I, for one, felt as if I had come up from the grave alive.

* * *

I slept late into the following morning and should have slept later still had I not been aroused about ten o'clock by the butler, who held in his hand a yellow telegram envelope. As soon as I could shake off my drowsiness in part, I tore open the missive and, unfolding the paper, found to my surprise that it was from Macbane. He knew my address, indeed, from a letter that I had sent him; but knowing his ways, I never expected even a note from him, much less a telegram. When I read the message, my surprise was not diminished. 'If safe, and wishing to see me alive,' it ran, 'come at once. If unable, forget me. Nearest station, Kilburgh.'

What could this mean? Could Macbane know anything of my mysterious danger of last night? And if so, was the doom that had missed me impending over him? Or was it merely that he was ill and desponding, and thought himself dying? Turn and twist the message as I could, it puzzled me; but one thing was plain—Macbane was, or thought himself to be, in deadly need of me, his only friend, as far as I knew; and if I did not go, it was possible that he might lose the last chance of any friendly human care in his solitary life. I resolved at once, shaken and weary as I still felt, to start for Dullas Tower.

I rose and dressed hurriedly, and snatched some breakfast alone—for my good old host was too much exhausted by the excitement of the last night to come down yet. While eating, I was studying a railway guide, and discovered that by driving to the nearest station at once I could catch a train that would enable me by devious junction lines to make my way to Kilburgh—a little place in a wild part of a lowland county—by the evening.

While the horse was being put into the dog-cart, I scribbled a note to my host, explaining the reason for my speedy departure, and promising to return as soon as possible, and then I stepped into the cart and was driven off, arriving just in time to catch the train.

My journey was of the exasperatingly tedious character known to all who have ever tried to go any distance by means of crosslines and local lines and junctions. Twice I got some food during my long intervals of waiting at stations, and all the time, whether travelling or resting, I was possessed with a haunting perplexity, a shadowy fear. Through my brain incessantly beat, keeping time to the pulsating roar of the wheels, a text, or something like one—I know not how or why it suggested itself—‘One woe is past; behold another woe cometh’. The mysterious peril of the last night seemed already to have happened years ago. The dim terror of the future would be ages in coming, and between them, in the shadow of both, I was still going on and on, slowly but endlessly—a dream myself, and in a dream.

It was about eight in the evening, I think, when I reached Kilburgh Station; but my watch had stopped, and I could not be sure.

I cast a hasty glance round me, and could just make out the lights of a few houses in the valley below the station, and the dark outlines of hills around, some of them serrated with black pines, and the sky dense with cloud, and with a denser mass of gloom labouring slowly up from the west. There was the weight of a coming storm in the air.

I asked the station master where Dullas Tower was, and how I was to reach it.

“Dullas Tower?” he said, meditatively, and then, with a sudden flash of comprehension, “Oh, it’s the De’il’s Tower ye’ll be meaning, sir—Macbane’s?”

I nodded acquiescence. This popular corruption of the name seemed ominous, but somehow natural.

“Then ye’ve a matter of ten miles to go,” he said,

deliberately. "And gin I might offer an opeenion, ye'll do better to tak' Jimmy Brown's bit giggie. The man frae Macbane's tauld him to be ready the morn."

Guided by the cautious 'opeenion' of the station master, I found Brown's trap waiting outside the station. He was English, as I could tell by his accent, and this perhaps accounted for the slight tinge of contempt in the worthy official's reference to him and his vehicle. His horse, as far as I could tell by the station lamp, seemed a poor one, but it showed a remarkably vicious temper when I tried to get in, kicking and backing, and seeming possessed by an irrational desire to do me some bodily harm.

"Whoa, then, will ye, ye beast?" called Brown, as he caught hold of the rein and dexterously foiled the brute's instant attempt to bite him. "You're just like Macbane's muckle cat, that killed two men, and the third was Macbane."

I had gained my place on the seat at last, but this remark nearly shook me off again.

"What do you mean by that?" I almost screamed at the man.

He turned a puzzled face up to mine, as he climbed into his place and took the reins.

"Oh, I don't know, sir," he answered, as we rattled off. "It's just a saying the folks have about here. It's some story about an old warlock Macbane that had the Tower long ago, I believe. Nothing to do with this one, sir—of course not. I got into the way of saying it from hearing it often, that's all."

I did not answer him, as we drove on between high banks of earth and rock, with now and then a tree nodding threateningly above us. I was faint and tired, and unable to think in a connected manner. The grim old proverb, like the Scriptural or quasi-Scriptural phrase, transformed itself into a dreary refrain, which rang in time to the beat of the horse's hoofs on the dry road: '*Killed two men, and the third was Macbane—killed two*

men, and the *third* was *Macbane*.' It seemed a part of me, a pulse in my very brain, till it grew meaningless with incessant repetition.

We drove on westward, toiling up hills, rattling down them, but I hardly saw anything. It was all a part of my dream still, and it seemed natural to me when a black grove of tall trees, and in the midst a denser black mass, with one or two lights twinkling in it, rose up before us, and the driver told me this was the De'il's Tower.

As we came up to it, and I roused myself from my lethargy a little to observe my journey's end, I could see that part of the building seemed ruinous and broken down; the walls ended in a slope bristling with bushes. One grim-looking tower at the corner loomed high above us, apparently uninjured, and half way up it shone a faint light.

I alighted, paid the driver, who seemed in a hurry to get away, rang, and, when an old woman came to the door, asked if Macbane was at home. She said in reply that he was ill, and could see no one; but when I gave my name she conducted me through a long passage—part of it almost ruinous, part in better repair—to the foot of a winding stair. Here she told me to go up and knock at the first door I came to, and stood at the foot of the stairs with her candle to light me up. When I reached the door, which was some way up, I could hear her hobble away, leaving me in darkness, only relieved by an occasional gleam of lightning through the narrow slits that let in light and air to the staircase.

I knocked gently, and a voice said "Come in." I felt along the iron-studded door till I found and turned the handle of the latch. As I entered I saw Macbane sitting back in an old chair, with a shaded lamp on the table beside him, and some books and papers in its circle of light.

The room was small and circular, and was, as I conjectured, half way up the tower that had given its name

to the building. A window, made visible from time to time by the lightning, opened on the outer air, and I noticed with a sort of dull wonder that there seemed to be a set of strong bars defending it—perhaps a relic of old times when the room was a prison; I cannot tell.

My friend did not rise from his chair to greet me. He motioned languidly to a seat near him, and for some minutes I sat and looked at him, and he stared at the door. I noticed a new and alarming change in him since I had seen him last. Then, his look had been almost malevolent, instinct with a positive hatred for men; now all passion, all life, good or bad, seemed extinct in him.

After a long pause, broken by the muffled growls of the nearer thunder, he spoke.

“I hardly thought you would come,” he said, “but now you are here you had better read this.”

And he pointed to a yellow and torn old manuscript lying on the table. I took up the roll and began to look into it.

It was crabbed and quaint in writing and style, and it would only be perplexing to give its antique phraseology and obsolete Scottish law terms and phrases, even if I remembered them. But the substance of it was plain. It was a record of the trial and condemnation of Alexander Macbane of Dullas Tower for witchcraft, early in the seventeenth century.

After many preliminaries, over which I passed hastily, the narrative came to the confession of the wizard. This was apparently volunteered, and not extorted by any torture; but such cases were by no means rare at that time, I think. The peculiarity of this confession was that it was clear, consistent, rational even—if so wild a tale could be called rational—and did not involve anyone besides the wizard himself. Actual torture was applied, it would seem, to make Alexander Macbane implicate an old crone tried at the same time, but in vain.

‘The devil,’ he had said, ‘was no fool. He had better servants than these poor women.’

Briefly put, the gist of Alexander Macbane’s confession was as follows. He admitted that he had, by certain magic processes which he refused to reveal, as their very simplicity might lead others to use them, secured the services of a strange familiar.

This Thing owned him as master and did his bidding, though only in one way—it could slay, and nothing more. He had killed by it two men, kinsmen of his, one his enemy and one his friend, who had in fact—a marginal note stated—died in a sudden and strange manner. But that which he had regarded as his servant—the confession went on to say—had become his master, and he a bond slave to its devilish power. It was jealous of all he did; it had cut off any beast for which he showed a fondness, and it had driven him to cast off all his friends, and to give up all friendly feeling for men. One man, whom he loved, he had bidden it slay, or else it would have slain himself.

The Thing needed to have victims pointed out to it at certain intervals, or it turned on its master. Being asked how he knew the intentions of his familiar, the wizard answered that he could not tell how, but he divined its thoughts, even as, he felt sure, it read his. To the inquiry what form his demon assumed, he said that at first it was invisible to him as to others, but could be felt, and that gradually it took visible form as a beast, black and cat-like, with a great mouth.

The judges here asked the reason why Alexander Macbane had turned against his demon; the answer given, in quaint but still pathetic language, was that he had married a woman whom he loved, and had been happy with her for some months, and now he knew that he must choose between her and himself as a sacrifice to his familiar.

In making his confession, he knew that he was devoting himself to death the same night, but he was resolved

to do this. Better, he said, was it to die horribly thus, than to live alone with his sin and its punishment.

'And so,' the record concisely ended, 'the said Alexander Macbane, being remanded to his prison, was there found dead the next day, with his throat rent through, and the bars of the window broken. Whereby it was thought that he had said the truth as to himself.'

As I read the last words I dropped the roll, for the lightning glared into my very face, and a moment after a ringing crash of thunder burst over the building as if sky and earth were coming together. Then the roar leaped and rolled through the clouds, and died muttering far away, and through the rush of rain and wind I heard Macbane.

"You understand now," he said, with that dreadful, hollow sameness in his tone. "I am glad anyway that you will be left, and not I. I always liked you better than Standish. Perhaps it was a tiger after all that killed him, poor fellow. You are quite safe now. It is coming for me tonight. I thought it would have killed me last night, when I called it back——"

A crash of thunder drowned his last words.

"Macbane!" I cried, finding my power of speech at last. "It shall not be! Whether it is real or a dream, I do not know; but you shall not die that way. I kept the Thing out; cannot you do it? Never give up hope. Cannot you save yourself?"

Macbane smiled hopelessly.

"Listen," said he, and held up his hand, and in a pause of the rain I heard, low and distinct, *a scratching on the door*.

"Open it, Eliot," he said, calmly. "It must come, and the sooner the better. Then go down and wait, for it will not be a pleasant thing to see."

I sprang to the door, but not to open it. With frenzied speed I locked and double-locked it, and drove the heavy bolts into their sockets. But no rush came against the door, no tearing or grinding of teeth. I could hear

nothing—not even a breath, and the stillness was more terrifying than any sound.

“It is no use,” said my friend. “You could keep yourself safe; you cannot save me. It will have help tonight.”

A gust of wind swept round the tower as he spoke, and mingling in its wail I seemed to hear—or was it but my fancy?—the long, deadly howl of the Thing that I felt was so near us.

For a few moments there was silence. Then, with a crash, the lightning fell close to the tower, and a great pine, shattered by the stroke, rushed down right against the window, and its top crashed into the room, rending away the iron bars like rotten sticks. The wind of the fall extinguished the lamp, but in the darkness and the roar of thunder I could *feel* something pass by me with a mighty leap, and next moment a fainter flash showed me a picture which was but for an instant, but in that instant was branded in on my memory.

Macbane stood upright with arms folded, gazing calmly forward and upwards, and before him crouched, as if for a spring, a black mass with blood-red, burning eyes, the same eyes that had glared on me the night before. So much I saw; then, suddenly, the world was one blinding flame, one rending crash around me, and I fell stunned and senseless.

When I lived again, the dawn’s grey glimmer was dimly lighting the tower, and outside the blackened and shattered window a bird was singing. As I opened my eyes, my glance fell on something lying in the centre of the room. It was Macbane’s body. I crawled to him and looked into the dead face. There was no wound or mark on him, and there even seemed a faint smile on his lips, and near his feet lay a little heap of grey ash.

BOOMERANG

by Oscar Cook

WARWICK THREW himself into a chair beside me, hitched up his trousers, and, leaning across, tapped me on the knee.

"You remember the story about Mendingham which you told me?" he asked.

I nodded. I was not likely to forget that affair.

"Well," he went on, "I've got as good a one to tell you. Had it straight from the filly's mouth, so to speak—and it's red hot."

I edged away in my chair, for there was something positively ghoulish in his delight, in the coarse way in which he referred to a woman, and one who, if my inference were correct, must have known tragedy. But there is no stopping Warwick: he knows or admits no finer feelings or shame when his thirst for 'copy' is aroused. Like the little boy in the well-known picture, 'he won't be happy till he's "quenched" it'.

I ordered drinks, and when they had been served and we were alone, bade him get on with his sordid story.

"It's a wild tale," he began, "of two planter fellows in the interior of Borneo—and, as usual, there's a woman."

"The woman?" I could not refrain from asking, thinking of his earlier remark.

"The same," he replied. "A veritable golden-haired filly, only her mane is streaked with grey and there's a great livid scar or weal right round her neck. She's the wife of Leopold Thring. The other end of the triangle is Clifford Macy."

"And where do you come in?" I inquired.

Warwick closed one eye and pursed his lips.

"As a spinner of yarns," he answered sententiously. Then, with a return to his usual cynicism, "The filly is down and out, but for some silly religious scruples feels she must live. I bought the story, therefore, after verifying the facts. Shall I go on?"

I nodded, for I must admit I was genuinely interested. The eternal triangle always intrigues: set in the wilds of Borneo it promised a variation of incident unusually refreshing in these sophisticated days. Besides, that scar was eloquent.

Warwick chuckled.

"The two men were partners," he went on, "on a small experimental estate far up in the interior. They had been at it for six years and were just about to reap the fruits of their labours very handsomely. Incidentally, Macy had been out in the Colony the full six years—and the strain was beginning to tell. Thring had been home eighteen months before, and on coming back had brought his bride, Rhona.

"That was the beginning of the trouble. It split up the partnership: brought in a new element: meant the building of a new bungalow."

"For Macy?" I asked.

"Yes. And he didn't take kindly to it. He had got set. And then there was the loneliness of night after night alone, while the others—you understand?"

I nodded.

"Well," Warwick continued, "the expected happened. Macy flirted, philandered, and then fell violently in love. He was one of those fellows who never do things by halves. If he drank, he'd get fighting drunk: if he loved, he went all out on it: if he hated, well, hell was let loose."

"And—Mrs Thring?" I queried, for it seemed to me that she might have a point of view.

"Fell between two stools—as so many women of a certain type do. She began by being just friendly and

kind—you know the sort of thing—cheering the lonely man up, drifted into woman's eternal game of flirting, and then began to grow a little afraid of the fire she'd kindled. Too late she realized that she couldn't put the fire out—either hers or Macy's—and all the while she clung to some hereditary religious scruples.

"Thring was in many ways easygoing, but at the same time possessed of a curiously intense strain of jealous possessiveness. He was generous, too. If asked, he would share or give away his last shirt or crust. But let him think or feel that his rights or dues were being curtailed or taken and—well, he was a tough customer of rather primitive ideas.

"Rhona—that's the easiest way to think of the filly—soon found she was playing a game beyond her powers. Hers was no poker face, and Thring began to sense that something was wrong. She couldn't dissemble, and Macy made no attempt to hide his feelings. He didn't make it easy for her, and I guess from what the girl told me, life about this time was for her a sort of glorified hell—a suspicious husband on one hand, and an impetuous, devil-may-care lover on the other. She was living on a volcano."

"Which might explode any minute," I quietly added.

Warwick nodded.

"Exactly; or whenever Thring chose to spring the mine. He held the key to the situation, or, should I say, the time fuse? The old story, but set in a primitive land full of possibilities. You've got me?"

For answer, I offered Warwick a cigarette, and, taking one myself, lighted both.

"So far," I said, "with all your journalistic skill you've not got off the beaten track. Can't you improve?"

He chuckled, blew a cloud of smoke, and once again tapped my knee in his irritating manner.

"Your cynicism," he countered, "is but a poor cloak

for your curiosity. In reality you're jumping mad to know the end, eh?"

I made no reply, and he went on.

"Well, matters went on from day to day till Rhona became worn to the proverbial shadow. Thring wanted to send her home, but she wouldn't go. She owed a duty to her husband: she couldn't bear to be parted from her lover, and she didn't dare leave the two men alone. She was terribly, horribly afraid.

"Macy grew more and more openly amorous and less restrained. Thring watched whenever possible with the cunning of an iguana. Then came a rainy, damp spell that tried nerves to the uttermost and the inevitable stupid little disagreements between Rhona and Thring—mere trifles, but enough to let the lid off. He challenged her——"

"And she?" I could not help asking, for Warwick has, I must admit, the knack of keeping one on edge.

"Like a blithering but sublime little idiot admitted it was all true."

For nearly a minute I was speechless. Somehow, although underneath I had expected Rhona to behave so, it seemed such a senseless, unbelievable thing to do. Then at last I found my voice.

"And Thring?" I said simply.

Warwick emptied his glass at a gulp.

"That's the most curious thing in the whole yarn," he answered slowly. "Thring took it as quietly as a lamb."

"Stunned?" I suggested.

"That's what Rhona thought: what Macy believed when Rhona told him what had happened. In reality he must have been burning mad, a mass of white-hot revenge controlled by a devilish, cunning brain: he waited. A scene or a fight—and Macy was a big man—would have done no good. He would get his own back in his own time and in his own way. Meanwhile, there was the lull before the storm.

"Then, as so often happens, Fate played a hand. Macy went sick with malaria—really ill—and even Thring had to admit the necessity for Rhona to nurse him practically night and day. Macy owed his eventual recovery to her care, but even so his convalescence was a long job. In the end Rhona too crocked up through overwork, and Thring had them both on his hands. This was an opportunity better than he could have planned—it separated the lovers and gave him complete control.

"Obviously the time was ripe, ripe for Thring to score his revenge.

"The rains were over, the jungle had ceased wintering, and spring was in the air. The young grass and vegetation were shooting into new life: concurrently all the creepy, crawly insect life of the jungle and estate was young and vigorous and hungry too. These facts gave Thring the germ of an idea which he was not slow to perfect—an idea as devilish as man could devise."

Warwick paused to press out the stub of his cigarette, and noticing that even he seemed affected by his recital, I prepared myself as best I could for a really gruesome horror. All I said, however, was, "Go on."

"It seems," he continued, "that in Borneo there is a kind of mammoth earwig—a thing almost as fine and gossamer as a spider's web, as long as a good-sized caterpillar, that lives on waxy secretions. These are integral parts of some flowers and trees, and lie buried deep in their recesses. It is one of the terrors of these particular tropics, for it moves and rests so lightly on a human being that one is practically unconscious of it, while, like its English relation, it has a decided liking for the human ear: on account of man's carnivorous diet the wax in this has a strong and very succulent taste."

As Warwick gave me those details, he sat upright on the edge of his easy chair. He spoke slowly, emphasizing each point by hitting the palm of his left hand with

the clenched fist of his right. It was impossible not to see the drift and inference of his remarks.

"You mean——?" I began.

"Exactly," he broke in quickly, blowing a cloud of smoke from a fresh cigarette which he had nervously lighted. "Exactly. It was a devilish idea. To put the giant earwig on Macy's hair just above the ear."

"And then . . .?" I knew the fatuousness of the question, but speech relieved the growing sense of ticklish horror that was creeping over me.

"Do nothing. But rely on the filthy insect running true to type. Once in Macy's ear, it was a thousand-to-one chance against it ever coming out the same way: it would not be able to turn: to back out would be almost an impossibility, and so, feeding as it went, it would crawl right across inside his head, with the result that——"

The picture Warwick was drawing was more than I could bear: even my imagination, dulled by years of legal dry-as-dust affairs, saw and sickened at the possibilities. I put out a hand and gripped Warwick's arm.

"Stop, man!" I cried hoarsely. "For God's sake, don't say any more. I understand. My God, but the man Thring must be a fiend!"

Warwick looked at me, and I saw that even his face had paled.

"*Was*," he said meaningly. "Perhaps you're right, perhaps he *was* a fiend. Yet, remember, Macy stole his wife."

"But a torture like that! The deliberate creation of a living torment that would grow into madness. Warwick, you can't condone that!"

He looked at me for a moment and then slowly spread out his hands.

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted. "It was a bit thick, I know. But there's more to come."

I closed my eyes and wondered if I could think of an

excuse for leaving Warwick; but in spite of my real horror, my curiosity won the day.

"Get on with it," I muttered, and leant back, eyes still shut, hands clenched. With teeth gritted together as if I myself were actually suffering the pain of that earwig slowly, daily creeping farther into and eating my brain, I waited.

Warwick was not slow to obey.

"I have told you," he said, "that Rhona had to nurse Macy, and even when he was better, though still weak, Thring insisted on her looking after him, though now he himself came more often.

"One afternoon Rhona was in Macy's bungalow alone with him: the house boy was out. Rhona was on the verandah: Macy was asleep in the bedroom. Dusk was just falling: bats were flying about: the flying foxes, heavy with fruit, were returning home: the inevitable house rats were scurrying about the floors: the lamps had not been lit. An eerie devastating hour. Rhona dropped some needlework and fought back tears. Then from the bedroom came a shriek. 'My head! My ear! Oh, God! My ear! Oh, God! The pain!'

"That was the beginning. The earwig had got well inside. Rhona rushed in and did all she could. Of course, there was nothing to see. Then for a little while Macy would be quiet because the earwig was quiet, sleeping or gorged. Then the vile thing would move or feed again, and Macy once more would shriek with the pain.

"And so it went on, day by day. Alternate quiet and alternate pain, each day for Macy, for Rhona a hell of nerve-rending expectancy. Waiting, always waiting for the pain that crept and crawled and twisted and writhed and moved slowly, ever slowly, through and across Macy's brain."

Warwick paused so long that I was compelled to open my eyes. His face was ghastly. Fortunately I could not see my own.

"And Thring?" I asked.

"Came often each day. Pretended sorrow and served out spurious dope—Rhona found the coloured water afterwards. He cleverly urged that Macy should be carried down to the coast for medical treatment, knowing full well that he was too ill and worn to bear the smallest strain. Then when Macy was an utter wreck, broken completely in mind and body, with hollow, hunted eyes, with ever-twitching fingers, with a body no part of which he could properly control or keep still, the earwig came out—at the other ear.

"As it happened, both Thring and Rhona were present. Macy must have suffered an excruciating pain, followed as usual by a period of quiescence: then, feeling a slight tickling sensation on his cheek put up his hand to rub or scratch. His fingers came in contact with the earwig and its fine gossamer hairs. Instinct did the rest. You follow?"

My tongue was still too dry to enable me to speak. Instead I nodded, and Warwick went on.

"He naturally was curious and looked to see what he was holding. In an instant he realized. Even Rhona could not be in doubt. The hairs were faintly but unmistakably covered here and there with blood, with wax, and with grey matter.

"For a moment there was absolute silence between the three. At last Macy spoke.

"'My God!' he just whispered. 'Oh, my God! What an escape!'

"Rhona burst into tears. Only Thring kept silent, and that was his mistake. The silence worried Macy, weak though he was. He looked from Rhona to Thring, and at the critical moment Thring could not meet his gaze. The truth was out. With an oath Macy threw the insect, now dead from the pressure of his fingers, straight into Thring's face. Then he crumpled up in his chair and sobbed and sobbed till even the chair shook."

Again Warwick paused till I thought he would never go on. I had heard enough, I'll admit, and yet it seemed to me that at least there should be an epilogue.

"Is that all?" I tentatively asked.

Warwick shook his head.

"Nearly, but not quite," he said. "Rhona had ceased weeping and kept her eyes fixed on Thring—she dared not go and comfort Macy now. She saw him examine the dead earwig, having picked it up from the floor to which it had fallen, turn it this way and that, then produce from a pocket a magnifying glass which he used daily for the inspection and detection of leaf disease on certain of the plants. As she watched, she saw the fear and disappointment leave his face, to be replaced by a look of cunning and evil satisfaction. Then for the first time he spoke.

"'Macy!' he called, in a sharp, loud voice.

"Macy looked up.

"Thring held up the earwig. 'This is dead, now,' he said, 'dead. As dead as my friendship for you, you swine of a thief, as dead as my love for that whore who was my wife. It's dead, I tell you, dead, but it's a female. D'you get me? A female, and a female lays eggs, and before it died, it——'

"He never finished. His baiting at last roused Macy, endowing him with the strength of madness and despair. With one spring he was at Thring's throat, bearing him down to the ground. Over and over they rolled on the floor, struggling for possession of the great hunting knife stuck in Thring's belt. One moment Macy was on top, the next, Thring. Their breath and oaths came in great trembling gasps. They kicked and bit and scratched. And all the while Rhona watched, fascinated and terrified. Then Thring got definitely on top. He had one hand on Macy's throat, both knees on his chest, and with his free hand he was feeling for the knife. In that instant Rhona's religious scruples went by the board. She realized she only loved Macy, that

her husband didn't count. She rushed to Macy's help. Thring saw her coming and let drive a blow at her head which almost stunned her. She fell on top of him just as he was whipping out the knife. Its edge caught her neck. The sudden spurt of blood shot into Thring's eyes, and blinded him. It was Macy's last chance. He knew it, and he took it.

When Rhona came back to consciousness, Thring was dead. Macy was standing beside the body, which was gradually swelling to huge proportions as he worked, weakly but steadily, at the white ant exterminator pump, the nozzle of which was pushed down the dead man's throat."

Warwick ceased. This last had been a long, unbroken recital, and mechanically he picked up his empty glass as if to drain it. The action brought me back to nearly normal. I rang for the waiter—the knob of the electric bell luckily being just over my head. While waiting, I had time to speak.

"I've heard enough," I said hurriedly, "to last me a lifetime. You've made me feel positively sick. But there's just one point. What happened to Macy? Did he live?"

Warwick nodded.

"That's another strange fact. He still lives. He was tried for the murder of Thring, but there was no real evidence. On the other hand, his story was too tall to be believed, with the result—well, you can guess."

"A lunatic asylum—for life?" I asked.

Warwick nodded again. Then I followed his glance. A waiter was standing by my chair.

"Two double whisky and sodas," I ordered tersely, and then, with shaking fingers, lighted a cigarette.

OUR FEATHERED FRIENDS

by Philip Macdonald

THE HOT, hard August sunshine poured its pale and blazing gold over the countryside. At the crest of the hill, which overlooked a county and a half, the tiny motor car drawn up to the side of the dusty road which wound up the hill like a white riband looked not so much mechanical as insectile. It looked like a Brobdingnagian bee which, wings folded, had settled for a moment's sleepy basking in the fierce sunshine.

Beside the car, seeming almost ludicrously out of proportion with it, stood a man and a woman. The sum of their ages could not have exceeded forty-five. The dress of the girl, which was silken and slight, would not, at all events upon her charming body, have done aught save grace a car as large and costly as this one was minute and cheap. But the clothes of the boy, despite his youth and erect comeliness, were somehow eloquent of Norwood, a careful and not unintelligent clerkliness pursued in the city of London, and a pseudo-charitable arrangement whereby the bee-like motor car should be purchased, for many pounds more than its actual worth, in small but almost eternal slices.

The girl was hatless, and her clipped golden poll glittered in the sunrays. She looked, and was, cool, despite the great heat of the afternoon. The boy, in his tweed jacket, thick flannel trousers, and over-tight collar, at whose front blazed a tie which hoped to look like that of some famous school or college, was hot, and very hot. He pulled his hat from his dark head and mopped at his brow with a vivid handkerchief.

"Coo!" he said. "Hot enough for you, Vi?"

She wriggled slim, half-covered shoulders. "It's a treat!" she said. She gazed about her with wide blue eyes; she looked down and round at the county-and-a-half. "Where's this, Jack?"

The boy continued to puff and mop. He said:

"Blessed if *I* know! . . . I lost me bearings after that big village place—what was it? . . ."

"Greyne, or some such," said the girl absently. Her gaze was now directed down the hillside to her right, where the emerald roof of a dense wood shone through the sun's gold. There was no breath of wind, even right up upon this hill, and the green of the leaves showed smooth and unbroken.

The boy put on his hat again. "Better be getting on, I s'pose. You've had that leg-stretch you were wanting."

"Ooh! Not *yet*, Jack. Don't let's yet!" She put the fingers of her left hand upon his sleeve. On the third of these fingers there sparkled a ring of doubtful brilliance. "Don't let's go on yet, Jack!" she said. She looked up into his face, her lips pouted in a way which was not the least of reasons for the flashing ring.

He slid an arm about the slim shoulders; he bent his head and kissed thoroughly the red mouth. "Just's *you* like, Vi. . . . But what you want to do?" He looked about him with curling lip. "Sit around up here on this dusty grass and frizzle?"

"Silly!" she said, pulling herself away from him. She pointed down to the green roof, "I want to go down there. . . . Into that wood. Jest to see what it's like. Haven't been in a reel wood since the summer holidays before last, when Effie an' me went to Hastings. . . . Cummon! Bet it's lovely and cool down there. . . ."

This last sentence floated up to him, for already she was off the narrow road and beginning a slipping descent of the short rough grass of the hillside's first twenty feet.

He went sliding and stumbling after her. But he

could not catch up with the light, fragile little figure in its absurdly enchanting wisp of blue silk. The soles of his thick shoes were of leather, and, growing polished by the brushing of the close, arid grass, were treacherous. Forty feet down, on the suddenly jutting and only gently sloping plateau where the wood began, he did come up with her: he ended a stumbling, sliding rush with an imperfect and involuntary somersault which landed him asprawl at her feet.

He sat up, shouting with laughter. With a shock of surprise greater than any of his short life, he felt a little foot kick sharply—nearly savagely—at his arm, and heard a tensely whispered “SSH!”

He scrambled to his feet, to see that she was standing facing the trees, her shining golden head thrust forward, her whole body tense as that of a sprinter waiting for the pistol’s crack. As, wonderingly, he shuffled to take his stand at her shoulder, she said:

“*Listen!* . . . Birds! . . . Jever hear the like? . . .” Her tone was a hushed yet clear whisper—like none he had ever heard her use before.

He said nothing. He stood scowling sulkily down at the grass beneath his feet and rubbing at the spot where her shoe had met his arm.

It seemed to him an hour before she turned. But turn at last she did. He still had his hand at the kicked arm, for all the world as if it really were causing him pain. From beneath his brows he watched her, covertly. He saw the odd rapt look leave the small face once more its pertly pretty self; saw the blue eyes suddenly widen with memory of what she had done. . . .

And then soft warm arms came about his neck and by their pressure pulled down his head so that, close pressed against him and standing upon tiptoe, she might smother his face with the kisses of contrition.

He said, in answer to the pleas for forgiveness with which the caresses were interspersed:

“Never known you do a thing like that before, Vi!”

"No," she said. "And you never won't again! Reely, Jack darling! . . . It . . . it . . ."—a cloud came over the blue eyes—"it . . . I don't rightly know what came over me. . . . I was listening to the birds. . . . I never heard the like . . . and . . . and I never heard you till you laughed . . . and I dunno *what* it was, but it seemed 's if I jest *had* to go on hearing what the birds were . . . 's if it was . . . was *wrong* to listen to anything else. . . . Oh, *I* dunno!"

The small face was troubled and the eyes desperate with the realization of explanation's impossibility. But the mouth pouted. The boy kissed it. He laughed and said:

"Funny kid, you!" He drew her arm through the crook of his and began to walk towards the first ranks of the trees. He put up his free hand and felt tenderly at the back of his neck. He said:

"Shan't be sorry for some shade. Neck's gettin' all sore."

They walked on, finding that the trees were strangely further away than they had seemed. They did not speak, but every now and then the slim, naked arm would squeeze the thick, clothed arm and have its pressure returned.

They had only some ten paces to go to reach the fringe of the wood when the girl halted. He turned his head to look down at her and found that once more she was tense in every muscle and thrusting the golden head forward as if the better to hear. He frowned; then smiled; then again bent his brows. He sensed that there was somewhere an oddness which he knew he would never understand—a feeling abhorrent to him, as, indeed, to most men. He found that he, too, was straining to listen.

He supposed it must be birds that he was listening for. And quite suddenly he laughed. For he had realized that he was listening for something which had been for the last few moments so incessantly in his ears

that he had forgotten he was hearing it. He explained this to the girl. She seemed to listen to him with only half an ear, and for a moment he came near to losing his temper. But only for a moment. He was a good-natured boy, with sensitive instincts serving him well in place of realized tact.

He felt a little tugging at his arm and fell into step with her as she began to go forward again. He went on with his theme, ignoring her patently half-hearted attention.

"Like at a dance," he said. "You know, Vi—you never hear the noise of the people's feet on the floor unless you happen to listen for it, an' when you do listen for it an' hear that sort of *shishing*—then you know you've been hearing it all the time, see? That's what we were doing about the birds. . . ." He became suddenly conscious that, in order to make himself clearly heard above the chattering, twittering flood of bird song, he was speaking in a tone at least twice as loud as the normal. He said:

"Coo! . . . You're right, Vi. *I* never heard anything like it!"

They were passing now through the ranks of the outer line of trees. To the boy, a little worried by the strangeness of his adored, and more than a little discomfited by the truly abnormal heat of the sun, it seemed that he passed from an inferno to a paradise at one step. No more did the sun beat implacably down upon the world. In here, under the roof of green which no ray pierced but only a gentle, pervading, filtered softness of light, there was a cool peacefulness which seemed to bathe him, instantly, in a placid bath of contentment.

But the girl shivered a little. She said:

"Oh! It's almost cold in here!"

He did not catch the words. The chirping and carolling which was going on all about and above them seemed to catch up and absorb the sound of her voice.

"Drat the birds!" he said. "What you say?"

He saw her lips move, but though he bent his head, did not catch a sound. There had come, from immediately above their heads, the furious squeaks and flutterings of a bird quarrel.

"Drat the birds!" he said again.

They were quite deep in the wood now. Looking round, he could not see at all the sun-drenched grass plateau from which they had come. He felt a tugging at his arm. The girl was pointing to a gently sloping bed of thick moss which was like a carpet spread at the foot of an old and twisted tree.

They sauntered to this carpet and sat down upon it, the boy sprawling at his ease, the girl very straight of back, with her hands clasped tightly about her raised knees. Had he been looking at her, rather than at the pipe he was filling, he would have seen again that craning forward of her head.

He did not finish the filling of his pipe. The singing of the birds went on. It seemed to gather volume until the whole world was filled with its chaotic whistling. The boy found, now that he had once consciously listened for and to it, that he could not again make his ears unconscious of the sound; the sound which, with its seemingly momentarily increased volume, was now so plucking at the nerves within his head—indeed over his whole body—that he felt he could not sit much longer to endure it. He thrust pipe and pouch savagely back into his pocket and turned to say to the girl that the quicker they got away from this blinking twittering the better he'd be pleased.

But the words died upon his lips. For even as he turned he became aware of a diminution of the reedy babel. He saw, too, calmer now with the decrease of irritation, that the girl was still in rapt attention.

So he held his tongue. The singing of the birds grew less and lesser with each moment. He began to feel drowsy, and once caught himself with a startled jerk from the edge of actual slumber. He peered sideways

at his companion and saw that still she sat rigid; not by the breadth of a hair had she altered her first attentive pose. He felt again for pipe and pouch.

His fingers idle in the jacket pocket, he found himself listening again. Only this time he listened because he wanted to listen. There was now but one bird who sang. And the boy was curiously conscious, hearing these liquid notes alone and in the fullness of their uninterrupted and almost unbearable beauty, that the reason for his hatred of that full and somehow discordant chorus which a few moments ago had nearly driven him from the trees and their lovely shelter had been his inability to hear more than an isolated note or two of this song whose existence then he had realized only subconsciously.

The full, deep notes ceased their rapid and incredible trilling, cutting their sound off sharply, almost in the manner of an operatic singer. There was, then, only silence in the wood. It lasted, for the town-bred boy and girl caught suddenly in this placid whirlpool of natural beauty, for moments which seemed strained and incalculable ages. And then into this pool of pregnant no-sound were dropped, one by one, six exquisite jewels of sound, each pause between these isolated lovelinesses being of twice the duration of its predecessor.

After the last of these notes—deep and varying and crystal pure, yet misty with unimaginable beauties—the silence fell again; a silence not pregnant, as the last, with the vibrant foreshadowings of the magic to come, but a silence which had in it the utter and miserable quietness of endings and nothingness.

The boy's arm went up and wrapped itself gently about slim, barely covered shoulders. Two heads turned, and dark eyes looked into blue. The blue were abrim with unshed tears. She whispered:

"It was *him* I was listening to all the while. I could hear *that* all . . . all through the others. . . ."

A tear brimmed over and rolled down the pale cheek.

The arm about her shoulders tightened, and at last she relaxed. The little body grew limp and lay against his strength.

"You lay quiet, darling," he said. His voice trembled a little. And he spoke in the hushed voice of a man who knows himself in a holy or enchanted place.

Then silence. Silence which weighed and pressed upon a man's soul. Silence which seemed a living deadness about them. From the boy's shoulder came a hushed, small voice which endeavoured to conceal its shaking. It said:

"I . . . I . . . felt all along . . . we shouldn't . . . shouldn't be here. . . . We didn't ought to 've come. . . ."

Despite its quietness there was something like panic in the voice.

He spoke reassuring words. To shake her from this queer, repressed hysteria, he said these words in a loud and virile tone. But this had only the effect of conveying to himself something of the odd disquiet which had possessed the girl.

"It's cold in here," she whispered suddenly. Her body pressed itself against him.

He laughed; an odd sound. He said hastily:

"Cold! You're talking out of the back of your neck, Vi."

"It is," she said. But her voice was more natural now. "We better be getting along, hadn't we?"

He nodded. "Think we had," he said. He stirred, as if to get to his feet. But a small hand suddenly gripped his arm, and her voice whispered:

"Look! *Look!*" It was her own voice again, so that, even while he started a little at her sudden clutch and the urgency of her tone, he felt a wave of relief and a sudden quietening of his own vague but uncomfortable uneasiness.

His gaze followed the line of her pointing finger. He saw, upon the carpeting of rotten twigs and brown mouldering leaves, just at the point where this brown

and the dark cool green of their mossbank met, a small bird. It stood upon its slender sticks of legs and gazed up at them, over the plump bright-hued breast, with shining little eyes. Its head was cocked to one side.

"D'you know," said the girl's whisper, "that's the first one we've *seen*?"

The boy pondered for a moment. "Gosh!" he said at last. "So it is and all!"

They watched in silence. The bird hopped nearer.

"Isn't he *sweet*, Jack?" Her whisper was a delighted chuckle.

"Talk about tame!" said the boy softly. "Cunning little beggar!"

Her elbow nudged his ribs. She said, her lips barely moving:

"Keep still. If we don't move, I believe he'll come right up to us."

Almost on her words, the bird hopped nearer. Now he was actually upon the moss, and thus less than an inch from the toe of the girl's left shoe. His little pert head, which was of a shining green with a rather comically long beak of yellow, was still cocked to one side. His bright, small eyes still surveyed them with the unwinking stare of his kind.

The girl's fascinated eyes were upon the small creature. She saw nothing else. Not so the boy. There was a nudge, this time from his elbow.

"Look there!" he whispered, pointing. "And there!"

She took, reluctantly enough, her eyes from the small intruder by her foot. She gazed in the directions he had indicated. She gasped in wonder. She whispered:

"Why, they're *all* coming to see us!"

Everywhere between the boles of the close-growing trees were birds. Some stood singly, some in pairs, some in little clumps of four and more. Some seemed, even to urban eyes, patently of the same family as their first visitor, who still stood by the white shoe, staring up at the face of its owner. But there were many more fami-

lies. There were very small birds, and birds of sparrow size but unsparrowlike plumage, and birds which were a little bigger than this, and birds which were twice and three times the size. But one and all faced the carpet of moss and stared with their shining eyes at the two humans who lay upon it.

"This," said the boy, "is the rummest start *I* ever . . ."

The girl's elbow nudged him to silence. He followed the nod of her head and, looking down, saw that the first visitor was now perched actually upon her instep. He seemed very much at his ease there. But he was no longer looking up at them with those bright little eyes. And his head was no longer cocked to one side: it was level, so that he appeared to be in contemplation of a silk-clad shin.

Something—perhaps it was a little whispering, pattering rustle among the rotting leaves of the wood's carpet—took the boy's fascinated eyes from this strange sight. He lifted them to see a stranger; a sight perhaps more fascinating, but with by no means the same fascination.

The birds were nearer. Much, much nearer. And their line was solid now; and unbroken semicircle with bounding line so wideflung that he felt rather than saw its extent. One little corner of his brain for an instant busied itself with wild essays at numerical computation, but reeled back defeated by the impossibility of the task. Even as he stared, his face pale now, and his eyes wide with something like terror, that semicircle drew yet nearer, each unit of it taking four hops and four hops only. Now, its line unmarred, it was close upon the edge of the moss.

But was it only a semicircle? A dread doubt of this flashed into his mind.

One horrified glance across his shoulder told him that semicircle it was not. Full circle it was.

Birds, birds, birds! Was it possible that the world itself should hold such numbers of birds?

Eyes! Small, shining, myriad button points of glittering eyes. All fixed upon him . . . and—God!—upon *her*. . . .

In one wild glance he saw that as yet she had not seen. Still she was in rapt, silent ecstasy over her one bird. And this now sat upon the outspread palm of her hand. Close to her face she was holding this hand. . . .

Through the pall of silence he could feel those countless eyes upon him. Little eyes; bright, glittering eyes. . . .

His breath came in shuddering gasps. He tried to get himself in hand; tried, until the sweat ran off him with the intensity of his effort, to master his fear. To some extent he succeeded. He would no longer sit idle while the circle . . . while the circle . . .

The silence was again ruffled upon its surface by a rustling patter. . . . It was one hop this time. It brought the semicircle fronting him so near that there were birds within an inch of his feet.

He leapt up. He waved his arms and kicked out and uttered one shout which somehow cracked and was half strangled in his throat.

Nothing happened. At the end of the moss a small bird, crushed by his kick, lay in a soft, small heap.

Not one of the birds moved. Still their eyes were upon him.

The girl sat like a statue in living stone. She had seen, and terror held her. Her palm, the **one** bird still motionless upon it, still was outspread near her face.

From high above them there dropped slowly into the black depths of the silence one note of a sweetness ineffable. It lingered upon the breathless air, dying slowly until it fused with the silence.

And then the girl screamed. Suddenly and dreadfully. The small green poll had darted forward. The yellow beak had struck and sunk. A scarlet runnel coursed down the tender cheek.

Above the lingering echo of that scream there came another of those single notes from on high.

The silence died then. There was a whirring which filled the air. That circle was no more.

There were two feathered mounds which screamed and ran and leapt, and at last lay and were silent.

TABOO

by Geoffrey Household

I HAD THIS story from Lewis Banning, the American; but as I also know Shiravieff pretty well and have heard some parts of it from him since, I think I can honestly reconstruct his own words.

Shiravieff had asked Banning to meet Colonel Romero, and after lunch took them, as his habit is, into his consulting room; his study, I should call it, for there are no instruments or white enamel to make a man unpleasantly conscious of the workings of his own body, nor has Shiravieff, among the obscure groups of letters that he is entitled to write after his name, any one which implies a medical degree. It is a long, restful room, its harmony only broken by sporting trophies. The muzzle of an enormous wolf grins over the mantel-piece, and there are fine heads of ibex and aurochs on the opposite wall. No doubt Shiravieff put them there deliberately. His patients from the counties came in expecting a quack doctor but at once gained confidence when they saw he had killed wild animals in a gentlemanly manner.

The trophies suit him. With his peaked beard and broad smile, he looks more the explorer than the psychologist. His unvarying calm is not the priestlike quality of the doctor; it is the disillusionment of the traveller and exile, of one who has studied the best and the worst in human nature and discovered that there is no definable difference between them.

Romero took a dislike to the room. He was very sensitive to atmosphere, though he would have denied it indignantly.

"A lot of silly women," he grumbled obscurely, "pouring out emotions."

They had, of course, poured out plenty of emotions from the same chair that he was occupying; but, since Shiravieff made his reputation on cases of shell shock, there must have been a lot of silly men too. Romero naturally would not mention that. He preferred to think that hysteria was confined to the opposite sex. Being a Latin in love with England, he worshipped and cultivated our detachment.

"I assure you that emotions are quite harmless once they are out of the system," answered Shiravieff, smiling. "It's when they stay inside that they give trouble."

"*Ça!* I like people who keep their emotions inside," said Romero. "It is why I live in London. The English are not cold—it is nonsense to say they are cold—but they are well bred. They never show a sign of what hurts them most. I like that."

Shiravieff tapped his long forefinger on the table in a fast, nervous rhythm.

"And what if they *must* display emotion?" he asked irritably. "Shock them—shock them, you understand, so that they must! They can't do it, and they are hurt for life."

They had never before seen him impatient. Nobody had. It was an unimaginable activity, as if your family doctor were to come and visit you without his trousers. Romero had evidently stirred up the depths.

"I've shocked them, and they displayed plenty of emotion," remarked Banning.

"Oh, I do not mean their little conventions," said Shiravieff slowly and severely. "Shock them with some horrid fact that they can't blink away, something that would outrage the souls of any of us. Do you remember de Maupassant's story of the man whose daughter was buried alive—how she returned from the grave and how all his life he kept the twitching gesture with which he tried to push her away? Well, if that

man had shrieked or thrown a fit or wept all night he mightn't have suffered from the twitch."

"Courage would have saved him," announced the colonel superbly.

"No!" shouted Shiravieff. "We're all cowards, and the healthiest thing we can do is to express fear when we feel it."

"The fear of death——" began Romero.

"I am not talking about the fear of death. It is not that. It is our horror of breaking a taboo that causes shock. Listen to me. Do either of you remember the Zweibergen case in 1926?"

"The name's familiar," said Banning. "But I can't just recall . . . was it a haunted village?"

"I congratulate you on your healthy mind," said Shiravieff ironically. "You can forget what you don't want to remember."

He offered them cigars and lit one himself. Since he hardly ever smoked it calmed him immediately. His grey eyes twinkled as if to assure them that he shared their surprise at his irritation. Banning had never before realized, so he said, that the anti-smoke societies were right, that tobacco was a drug.

"I was at Zweibergen that summer. I chose it because I wanted to be alone. I can only rest when I am alone," began Shiravieff abruptly. "The eastern Carpathians were remote ten years ago—cut off from the tourists by too many frontiers. The Hungarian magnates who used to shoot the forests before the war had vanished, and their estates were sparsely settled. I didn't expect any civilized company.

"I was disappointed to find that a married couple had rented the old shooting box. They were obviously interesting, but I made no advances to them beyond passing the time of day whenever we met on the village street. He was English and she American—one of those delightful women who are wholly and typically American. No other country can fuse enough races to pro-

duce them. Her blood, I should guess, was mostly Slav. They thought me a surly fellow, but respected my evident desire for privacy—until the time when all of us in Zweibergeren wanted listeners. Then the Vaughans asked me to dinner.

“We talked nothing but commonplaces during the meal, which was, by the way, excellent. There were a joint of venison and some wild strawberries, I remember. We took our coffee on the lawn in front of the house, and sat for a moment in silence—the mountain silence—staring out across the valley. The pine forest, rising tier upon tier, was very black in the late twilight. White, isolated rocks were scattered through it. They looked as if they might move on at any minute—like the ghosts of great beasts pasturing upon the treetops. Then a dog howled on the alp above us. We all began talking at once. About the mystery, of course.

“Two men had been missing in that forest for nearly a week. The first of them belonged to a little town about ten miles down the valley; he was returning after night-fall from a short climb in the mountains. He might have vanished into a snowdrift or ravine, for the paths were none too safe. There were no climbing clubs in that district to keep them up. But it seemed to be some less common accident that had overtaken him. He was out of the high peaks. A shepherd camping on one of the lower alps had exchanged a goodnight with him, and watched him disappear among the trees on his way downwards. That was the last that had been seen or heard of him.

“The other was one of the search party that had gone out on the following day. The man had been posted as a stop, while the rest beat the woods towards him. It was the last drive, and already dark. When the line came up to his stand he was not there.

“Everybody suspected wolves. Since 1914 there had been no shooting over the game preserves, and animal life of all sorts was plentiful. But the wolves were not in

pack, and the search parties did not find a trace of blood. There were no tracks to help. There was no sign of a struggle. Vaughan suggested that we were making a mystery out of nothing—probably the two men had become tired of domestic routine, and taken the opportunity to disappear. By now, he expected, they were on their way to the Argentine.

“His cool dismissal of tragedy was inhuman. He sat there, tall, distant, and casually strong. His face was stamped ready-made out of that pleasant upper-class mould. Only his firm mouth and thin sensitive nostrils showed that he had any personality of his own. Kyra Vaughan looked at him scornfully.

“‘Is that what you really think?’ she asked.

“‘Why not?’ he answered. ‘If those men had been killed it must have been by something prowling about and waiting for its chance. And there isn’t such a thing.’

“‘If you want to believe the men aren’t dead, believe it!’ Kyra said.

“Vaughan’s theory that the men had disappeared of their own free will was, of course, absurd; but his wife’s sudden coldness to him seemed to me to be needlessly impatient. I understood when I knew him better. Vaughan—your reserved Englishman, Romero!—was covering up his thoughts and fears, and chose, quite unconsciously, to appear stupid rather than to show his anxiety. She recognized the insincerity without understanding its cause, and it made her angry.

“They were a queer pair, those two; intelligent, cultured, and so interested in themselves and each other that they needed more than one life to satisfy their curiosity. She was a highly strung creature, with swift brown eyes and a slender, eager body that seemed to grow like a flower from the ground under her feet. And natural! I don’t mean she couldn’t act. She could—but when she did, it was deliberate. She was defenceless

before others' suffering and joy, and she didn't try to hide it.

"Lord! She used to live through enough emotions in one day to last her husband for a year!

"Not that he was unemotional. Those two were very much alike, though you'd never have guessed it. But he was shy of tears and laughter, and he had armed his whole soul against them. To a casual observer he seemed the calmer of the two, but at bottom he was an extremist. He might have been a poet, a Saint Francis, a revolutionary. But was he? No! He was an Englishman. He knew he was in danger of being swayed by emotional ideas, of giving his life to them. And so? And so he balanced every idea with another, and secured peace for himself between the scales. She, of course, would always jump into one scale or the other. And he loved her for it. But his non-committal attitudes got on her nerves."

"She could do no wrong in your eyes," said Romero indignantly. His sympathies had been aroused on behalf of the unknown Englishman. He admired him.

"I adored her," said Shiravieff frankly. "Everybody did. She made one live more intensely. Don't think I undervalued him, however. I couldn't help seeing how his wheels went round, but I liked him thoroughly. He was a man you could trust, and good company as well. A man of action. What he did had little relation to the opinions he expressed.

"Well, after that dinner with the Vaughans I had no more desire for a lonely holiday; so I did the next best thing, and took an active interest in everything that was going on. I heard all the gossip, for I was staying in the general clearing house, the village inn. In the evenings I often joined the district magistrate as he sat in the garden with a stein of beer in front of him and looked over the notes of the depositions which he had taken that day.

"He was a very solid functionary—a good type of

man for a case like that. A more imaginative person would have formed theories, found evidence to fit them, and only added to the mystery. He did not want to discuss the case. No, he had no fear of an indiscretion. It was simply that he had nothing to say, and was clear headed enough to realize it. He admitted that he knew no more than the villagers whose depositions filled his portfolio. But he was ready to talk on any other subject—especially politics—and our long conversations gave me a reputation for profound wisdom among the villagers. Almost I had the standing of a public official.

“So, when a third man disappeared, this time from Zweibergen itself, the mayor and the village constable came to me for instructions. It was the local grocer who was missing. He had climbed up through the forest in the hope of bagging a blackcock at dusk. In the morning the shop did not open. Only then was it known that he had never returned. A solitary shot had been heard about 10.30 p.m., when the grocer was presumably trudging homewards.

“All I could do, pending the arrival of the magistrate, was to send out search parties. We quartered the forest, and examined every path. Vaughan and I, with one of the peasants, went up to my favourite place for blackcock. It was there, I thought, that the grocer would have gone. Then we inspected every foot of the route which he must have taken back to the village. Vaughan knew something about tracking. He was one of those surprising Englishmen whom you may know for years without realizing that once there were coloured men in Africa or Burma or Borneo who knew him still better, and drove game for him, and acknowledged him as someone juster than their gods, but no more comprehensible.

“We had covered some four miles when he surprised me by suddenly showing interest in the undergrowth. Up to then I had been fool enough to think that he was doing precisely nothing.

“‘Someone has turned aside from the path here,’ he said. ‘He was in a hurry. I wonder why.’”

“A few yards from the path there was a white rock about thirty feet high. It was steep, but projecting ledges gave an easy way up. A hot spring at the foot of it bubbled out of a cavity hardly bigger than a fox’s earth. When Vaughan showed me the signs, I could see that the scrub which grew between the rocks and the path had been roughly pushed aside. But I pointed out that no one was likely to dash off the path through that thicket.

“‘When you know you’re being followed, you like to have a clear space around you,’ Vaughan answered. ‘It would be comforting to be on top of that rock with a gun in your hands—if you got there in time. Let’s go up.’”

“The top was bare stone, with clumps of creeper and ivy growing from the crannies. Set back some three yards from the edge was a little tree, growing in a pocket of soil. One side of its base was shattered into slivers. It had received a full charge of shot at close quarters. The peasant crossed himself. He murmured:

“‘They say there’s always a tree between you and it.’”

“I asked him what ‘it’ was. He didn’t answer immediately, but played with his stick casually, and as if ashamed, until the naked steel point was in his hand. Then he muttered:

“‘The werewolf.’”

“Vaughan laughed and pointed to the shot marks six inches from the ground.

“‘The werewolf must be a baby one, if it’s only as tall as that,’ he said. ‘No, the man’s gun went off as he fell. Perhaps he was followed too close as he scrambled up. About there is where his body would have fallen.’”

“He knelt down to examine the ground.

“‘What’s that?’ he asked me. ‘If it’s blood, it has something else with it.’”

“There was only a tiny spot on the bare rock. I looked at it. It was undoubtedly brain tissue. I was

surprised that there was no more of it. It must, I suppose, have come from a deep wound in the skull. Might have been made by an arrow, or a bird's beak, or perhaps a tooth.

"Vaughan slid down the rock, and prodded his stick into the sulphurous mud of the stream bed. Then he hunted about in the bushes like a dog.

"'There was no body dragged away in that direction,' he said.

"We examined the farther side of the rock. It fell sheer, and seemed an impossible climb for man or beast. The edge was matted with growing things. I was ready to believe that Vaughan's eyes could tell if anything had passed that way.

"'Not a sign!' he said. 'Where the devil has his body gone to?'

"The three of us sat on the edge of the rock in silence. The spring bubbled and wept beneath, and the pines murmured above us. There was no need of a little particle of human substance, recognizable only to a physiologist's eye, to tell us that we were on the scene of a kill. Imagination? Imagination is so often only a forgotten instinct. The man who ran up that rock wondered in his panic why he gave way to his imagination.

"We found the magistrate in the village when we returned and reported our find to him.

"'Interesting! But what does it tell us?' he said.

"I pointed out that at least we knew the man was dead or dying.

"'There's no certain proof. Show me his body. Show me any motive for killing him.'

"Vaughan insisted that it was the work of an animal. The magistrate disagreed. If it were wolf, he said, we might have some difficulty in collecting the body, but none in finding it. And as for bear—well, they were so harmless that the idea was ridiculous.

"Nobody believed in any material beast, for the whole countryside had been beaten. But tales were told

in the village—the old tales. I should never have dreamed that those peasants accepted so many horrors as fact if I hadn't heard those tales in the village inn. The odd thing is that I couldn't say then, and I can't say now, that they were altogether wrong. You should have seen the look in those men's eyes as old Weiss, the game warden, told how time after time his grandfather had fired point-blank at a grey wolf whom he met in the woods at twilight. He had never killed it until he loaded his gun with silver. Then the wolf vanished after the shot, but Heinrich the cobbler was found dying in his house with a beaten silver dollar in his belly.

“Josef Weiss, his son, who did most of the work on the preserves and was seldom seen in the village unless he came down to sell a joint or two of venison, was indignant with his father. He was a heavily built, sullen fellow, who had read a little. There's nobody so intolerant of superstition as your half-educated man. Vaughan, of course, agreed with him—but then capped the villagers' stories with such ghastly tales from native folklore and mediæval literature that I couldn't help seeing he had been brooding on the subject. The peasants took him seriously. They came and went in pairs. No one would step out into the night without a companion. Only the shepherd was unaffected. He didn't disbelieve, but he was a mystic. He was used to passing to and fro under the trees at night.

“‘You've got to be a part of those things, sir,’ he said to me, ‘then you'll not be afraid of them. I don't say a man can turn himself into a wolf—the Blessed Virgin protect us!—but I know why he'd want to.’

“That was most interesting.

“‘I think I know too,’ I answered. ‘But what does it feel like?’

“‘It feels as if the woods had got under your skin, and you want to walk wild and crouch at the knees.’

“‘He's perfectly right,’ said Vaughan convincingly.

“That was the last straw for those peasants. They

drew away from Vaughan, and two of them spat into the fire to avert his evil eye. He seemed to them much too familiar with the black arts.

“‘How do you explain it?’ asked Vaughan, turning to me.

“I told him it might have a dozen different causes, just as fear of the dark has. And physical hunger might also have something to do with it.

“I think our modern psychology is inclined to give too much importance to sex. We forget that man is, or was, a fleet-footed hunting animal equipped with all the necessary instincts.

“As soon as I mentioned hunger, there was a chorus of assent—though they really didn’t know what I or the shepherd or Vaughan was talking about. Most of those men had experienced extreme hunger. The innkeeper was reminded of a temporary famine during the war. The shepherd told us how he had once spent a week stuck on the face of a cliff before he was found. Josef Weiss, eager to get away from the supernatural, told his experiences as a prisoner of war in Russia. With his companions he had been forgotten behind the blank walls of a fortress while their guards engaged in revolution. Those poor devils had been reduced to very desperate straits indeed.

“For a whole week Vaughan and I were out with the search parties day and night. Meanwhile Kyra wore herself out trying to comfort the womenfolk. They couldn’t help loving her—yet half suspected that she herself was at the bottom of the mystery. I don’t blame them. They couldn’t be expected to understand her intense spirituality. To them she was like a creature from another planet, fascinating and terrifying. Without claiming any supernatural powers for her, I’ve no doubt that Kyra could have told the past, present, and future of any of those villagers much more accurately than the travelling gipsies.

“On our first day of rest I spent the afternoon with

the Vaughans. He and I were refreshed by twelve hours' sleep, and certain that we could hit on some new solution to the mystery that might be the right one. Kyra joined in the discussion. We went over the old theories again and again, but could make no progress.

"We shall be forced to believe the tales they tell in the village," I said at last.

"Why don't you?" asked Kyra Vaughan.

"We both protested. Did she believe them, we asked.

"I'm not sure," she answered. "What does it matter? But I know that evil has come to those men. Evil . . ." she repeated.

"We were startled. You smile, Romero, but you don't realize how that atmosphere of the uncanny affected us.

"Looking back on it, I see how right she was. Women—good Lord, they get hold of the spiritual significance of something, and we take them literally!

"When she left us I asked Vaughan whether she really believed in the werewolf.

"Not exactly," he explained. "What she means is that our logic isn't getting us anywhere—that we ought to begin looking for something which, if it isn't a werewolf, has the spirit of the werewolf. You see, even if she saw one, she would be no more worried than she is. The outward form of things impresses her so little."

"Vaughan appreciated his wife. He didn't know what in the world she meant, but he knew that there was always sense in her parables, even if it took one a long time to make the connection between what she actually said and the way in which one would have expressed the same thing oneself. That, after all, is what understanding means.

"I asked what he supposed she meant by evil.

"Evil?" he replied. "Evil forces—something that behaves as it has no right to behave. She means almost—possession. Look here! Let's find out in our own way

what she means. Assuming it's visible, let's see this thing.'

"It was, he still thought, an animal. Its hunting had been successful, and now that the woods were quiet it would start again. He didn't think it had been driven away for good.

"It wasn't driven away by the first search parties,' he pointed out. 'They frightened all the game for miles around, but this thing simply took one of them. It will come back, just as surely as a man-eating lion comes back. And there's only one way to catch it—bait!'

"Who's going to be the bait?' I asked.

"You and I.'

"I suppose I looked startled. Vaughan laughed. He said that I was getting fat, that I would make most tempting bait. Whenever he made jokes in poor taste, I knew that he was perfectly serious.

"What are you going to do?' I asked. 'Tie me to a tree and watch out with a gun?'

"That's about right, except that you needn't be tied up—and as the idea is mine you can have first turn with the gun. Are you a good shot?'

"I am and so was he. To prove it, we practised on a target after dinner, and found that we could trust each other up to fifty yards in clear moonlight. Kyra disliked shooting. She had a horror of death. Vaughan's excuse didn't improve matters. He said that we were going deer stalking the next night and needed some practice.

"Are you going to shoot them while they are asleep?' she asked disgustedly.

"While they are having their supper, dear.'

"Before, if possible,' I added.

"I disliked hurting her by jokes that to her were pointless, but we chose that method deliberately. She couldn't be told the truth, and now she would be too proud to ask questions.

"Vaughan came down to the inn the following

afternoon, and we worked out a plan of campaign. The rock was the starting point of all our theories, and on it we decided to place the watcher. From the top there was a clear view of the path for fifty yards on either side. The watcher was to take up his stand, while covered by the ivy, before sunset, and at a little before ten the bait was to be on the path and within shot. He should walk up and down, taking care never to step out of sight of the rock, until midnight, when the party would break up. We reckoned that our quarry, if it reasoned, would take the bait to be a picket posted in that part of the forest.

"The difficulty was getting home. We had to go separately in case we were observed, and hope for the best. Eventually we decided that the man on the path, who might be followed, should go straight down to the road as fast as he could. There was a timber slide quite close, by which he could cut down in ten minutes. The man on the rock should wait awhile and then go home by the path.

"Well, I shall not see you again until tomorrow morning," said Vaughan as he got up to go. "You'll see me but I shan't see you. Just whistle once, very softly, as I come up the path, so that I know you're there."

"He remarked that he had left a letter for Kyra with the notary in case of accidents, and added, with an embarrassed laugh, that he supposed it was silly.

"I thought it was anything but silly, and said so.

"I was on the rock by sunset. I wormed my legs and body back into the ivy, leaving head and shoulders free to pivot with the rifle. It was a little .300 with a longish barrel. I felt certain that Vaughan was as safe as human science and a steady hand could make him.

"The moon came up, and the path was a ribbon of silver in front of me. There's something silent about moonlight. It's not light. It's a state of things. When there was sound it was unexpected, like the sudden shiver on the flank of a sleeping beast. A twig cracked now and then. An owl hooted. A fox slunk across the

pathway, looking back over his shoulder. I wished that Vaughan would come. Then the ivy rustled behind me. I couldn't turn round. My spine became very sensitive, and a point at the back of my skull tingled as if expecting a blow. It was no good my telling myself that nothing but a bird could possibly be behind me—but of course it was a bird. A nightjar whooshed out of the ivy, and my body became suddenly cold with sweat. That infernal fright cleared all vague fears right out of me. I continued to be uneasy, but I was calm.

"After a while I heard Vaughan striding up the path. Then he stepped within range, a bold, clear figure in the moonlight. I whistled softly, and he waved his hand from the wrist in acknowledgment. He walked up and down, smoking a cigar. The point of light marked his head in the shadows. Wherever he went, my sights were lined a yard or two behind him. At midnight he nodded his head towards my hiding place and trotted rapidly away to the timber slide. A little later I took the path home.

"The next night our roles were reversed. It was my turn to walk the path. I found that I preferred to be the bait. On the rock I had longed for another pair of eyes, but after an hour on the ground I did not even want to turn my head. I was quite content to trust Vaughan to take care of anything going on behind me. Only once was I uneasy. I heard, as I thought, a bird calling far down in the woods. It was a strange call, almost a whimper. It was like the little frightened exclamation of a woman. Birds weren't popular with me just then. I had a crazy memory of some Brazilian bird which drives a hole in the back of your head and lives on brains. I peered down through the trees, and caught a flicker of white in a moonlit clearing below. It showed only for a split second, and I came to the conclusion that it must have been a ripple of wind in the silver grass. When the time was up I went down the timber slide and took the road home to the inn. I fell

asleep wondering whether we hadn't let our nerves run away with us.

"I went up to see the Vaughans in the morning. Kyra looked pale and worried. I told her at once that she must take more rest.

"‘She won't,’ said Vaughan. ‘She can't resist other people's troubles.’

"‘You see, I can't put them out of my mind as easily as you,’ she answered provocatively.

"‘Oh Lord!’ Vaughan exclaimed. ‘I'm not going to start an argument.’

"‘No—because you know you're in the wrong. Have you quite forgotten this horrible affair?’

"I gathered up the reins of the conversation, and gentled it into easier topics. As I did so, I was conscious of resistance from Kyra; she evidently wanted to go on scrapping. I wondered why. Her nerves, no doubt, were overstrained, but she was too tired to wish to relieve them by a quarrel. I decided that she was deliberately worrying her husband to make him admit how he was spending his evenings.

"That was it. Before I left, she took me apart on the pretext of showing me the garden and pinned the conversation to our shooting expeditions. Please God I'm never in the dock if the prosecuting counsel is a woman! As it was, I had the right to ask questions in my turn, and managed to slip from under her cross-examination without allowing her to feel it. It hurt. I couldn't let her know the truth, but I hated to leave her in that torment of uncertainty. She hesitated an instant before she said goodbye to me. Then she caught my arm, and cried:

"‘Take care of him!’

"I smiled and told her that she was overwrought, that we were doing nothing dangerous. What else could I say?

"That night, the third of the watching, the woods were alive. The world which lives just below the fallen

leaves—mice and moles and big beetles—were making its surprising stir. The night birds were crying. A deer coughed far up in the forest. There was a slight breeze blowing, and from my lair on top of the rock I watched Vaughan trying to catch the scents it bore. He crouched down in the shadows. A bear ambled across the path up wind, and began to grub for some succulent morsel at the roots of a tree. It looked as woolly and harmless as a big dog. Clearly neither it nor its kind were the cause of our vigil. I saw Vaughan smile, and knew that he was thinking the same thought.

“A little after eleven the bear looked up, sniffed the air, and disappeared into the black bulk of the undergrowth as effortlessly and completely as if a spotlight had been switched off him. One by one the sounds of the night ceased. Vaughan eased the revolver in his pocket. The silence told its own tale. The forest had laid aside its business, and was watching like ourselves.

“Vaughan walked up the path to the far end of his beat. I looked away from him an instant, and down the path through the trees my eyes caught that same flicker of white. He turned to come back, and by the time that he was abreast of the rock I had seen it again. A bulky object it seemed to be, soft white, moving fast. He passed me, going towards it, and I lined my sights on the path ahead of him. Bounding up through the woods it came, then into the moonlight, and on to him. I was saved only by the extreme difficulty of the shot. I took just a fraction of a second longer than I needed, to make very sure of not hitting Vaughan. In that fraction of a second, thank God, she called to him! It was Kyra. A white ermine coat and her terrified running up the path had made of her a strange figure.

“She clung to him while she got her breath back. I heard her say:

“‘I was frightened. There was something after me. I know it.’

“Vaughan did not answer, but held her very close

and stroked her hair. His upper lip curled back a little from his teeth. For once his whole being was surrendered to a single emotion: the desire to kill whatever had frightened her.

“‘How did you know I was here?’ he asked.

“‘I didn’t. I was looking for you. I looked for you last night, too.’

“‘You mad, brave girl!’ he said.

“‘But you mustn’t, mustn’t be alone. Where’s Shiravieff?’

“‘Right there.’ He pointed to the rock.

“‘Why don’t you hide yourself, too?’

“‘One of us must show himself,’ he answered.

“She understood instantly the full meaning of his reply.

“‘Come back with me!’ she cried. ‘Promise me to stop it!’

“‘I’m very safe, dear,’ he answered. ‘Look!’

“I can hear his tense voice right now, and remember their exact words. Those things eat into the memory. He led her just below the rock. His left arm was round her. At the full stretch of his right arm he held out his handkerchief by two corners. He did not look at me, nor alter his tone.

“‘Shiravieff,’ he said, ‘make a hole in that!’

“It was just a theatrical bit of nonsense, for the handkerchief was the easiest of easy marks. At any other time I would have been as sure as he of the result of the shot. But what he didn’t know was that I had so nearly fired at another white and much larger mark—I was trembling so that I could hardly hold the rifle. I pressed the trigger. The hole in the handkerchief was dangerously near his hand. He put it down to bravado rather than bad shooting.

“Vaughan’s trick had its effect. Kyra was surprised. She did not realize how easy it was, any more than she knew how much harder to hit is a moving mark seen in a moment of excitement.

"'But let me stay with you,' she appealed.

"'Sweetheart, we're going back right now. Do you think I'm going to allow my most precious possession to run wild in the woods?'

"'What about mine?' she said, and kissed him.

"They went away down the short cut. He made her walk a yard in front of him, and I caught the glint of moonlight on the barrel of his revolver. He was taking no risks.

"I myself went back by the path—carelessly, for I was sure that every living thing had been scared away by the voices and the shot. I was nearly down when I knew I was being followed. You've both lived in strange places—do you want me to explain the sensation? No? Well then, I knew I was being followed. I stopped and faced back up the path. Instantly something moved past me in the bushes, as if to cut off my retreat. I'm not superstitious. Once I heard it, I felt safe, for I knew where it was. I was sure I could move faster down that path than anything in the undergrowth—and if it came out into the open, it would have to absorb five steel explosive bullets. I ran. So far as I could hear, it didn't follow.

"I told Vaughan the next morning what had happened.

"'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I had to take her back. You understand, don't you?'

"'Of course,' I answered in surprise. 'What else could you do?'

"'Well, I didn't like leaving you alone. We had advertised our presence pretty widely. True, we should have frightened away any animal—but all we know about this animal is that it doesn't behave like one. There was a chance of our attracting instead of frightening it. We're going to get it tonight,' he added savagely.

"I asked if Kyra would promise to stay at home.

"'Yes. She says we're doing our duty, and that she won't interfere. Do you think this is our duty?'

“‘No!’ I said.

“‘Nor do I. I never feel that anything which I enjoy can possibly be my duty. And, by God, I enjoy this now!’

“I think he did enjoy it as he waited on the rock that night. He wanted revenge. There was no reason to believe that Kyra had been frightened by anything more than night and loneliness, but he was out against the whole set of circumstances that had dared to affect her. He wanted to be the bait instead of the watcher—I believe, with some mad hope of getting his hands on his enemy. But I wouldn’t let him. After all, it was my turn.

“Bait! As I walked up and down the path, the word kept running through my mind. There wasn’t a sound. The only moving thing was the moon which passed from tree top to tree top as the night wore on. I pictured Vaughan on the rock, the foresight of his rifle creeping backwards and forwards in a quarter circle as it followed my movements. I visualized the line of his aim as a thread of light passing down and across in front of my eyes. Once I heard Vaughan cough. I knew that he had seen my nervousness and was reassuring me. I stood by a clump of bushes some twenty yards away, watching a silver leaf that shook as some tiny beast crawled up it.

“Hot breath on the back of my neck—crushing weight on my shoulders—hardness against the back of my skull—the crack of Vaughan’s rifle—they were instantaneous, but not too swift for me to know all the terror of death. Something leapt away from me, and squirmed into the springhead beneath the rock.

“‘Are you all right?’ shouted Vaughan, crashing down through the ivy.

“‘What was it?’

“‘A man. I’ve winged him. Come on! I’m going in after him!’

“Vaughan was berserk mad. I’ve never seen such

flaming disregard of danger. He drew a deep breath, and tackled the hole as if it were a man's ankles. Head and shoulders, he sloshed into the mud of the cavity, emptying his Winchester in front of him. If he couldn't wriggle forward swiftly without drawing breath he would be choked by the sulphur fumes or drowned. If his enemy were waiting for him, he was a dead man. He disappeared and I followed. No, I didn't need any courage. I was covered by the whole length of Vaughan's body. But it was a vile moment. We'd never dreamed that anything could get in and out through that spring. Imagine holding your breath, and trying to squirm through hot water, using your hips and shoulders like a snake, not knowing how you would return if the way forward was barred. At last I was able to raise myself on my hands and draw a breath. Vaughan had dragged himself clear and was on his feet, holding a flashlight in front of him.

"Got him!" he said.

"We were in a low cave under the rock. There was air from the cracks above us. The floor was of dry sand, for the hot stream flowed into the cave close to the hole by which it left. A man lay crumpled up at the far end of the hollow. We crossed over to him. He held a sort of long pistol in his hand. It was a spring humane-killer. The touch of that wide muzzle against my skull is not a pleasant memory. The muzzle is jagged, you see, so that it grips the scalp while the spike is released.

"We turned the body over—it was Josef Weiss. Werewolf? Possession? I don't know. I would call it an atavistic neurosis. But that's a name, not an explanation.

"Beyond the body there was a hole some six feet in diameter, as round as if it had been bored by a rotary drill. The springs which had forced that passage had dried up, but the mottled-yellow walls were smooth as marble with the deposit left by the water. Evidently

Weiss had been trying to reach that opening when Vaughan dropped him. We climbed that natural sewer pipe. For half an hour the flashlight revealed nothing but the sweating walls of the hole. Then we were stopped by a roughly hewn ladder which sprawled across the passage. The rungs were covered with mud, and here and there were dark stains on the wood. We went up. It led to a hollow evidently dug out with spade and chisel. The roof was of planks, with a trapdoor at one end. We lifted it with our shoulders, and stood up within the four walls of a cottage. A fire was smouldering on the open hearth, and as we let in the draught of air, a log burst into flame. A gun stood in the ingle. On a rack were some iron traps and a belt of cartridges. There was a table in the centre of the room with a long knife on it. That was all we saw with our first glance. With our second we saw a lot more. Weiss had certainly carried his homicidal mania to extremes. I imagine his beastly experiences as a prisoner of war had left a kink in the poor devil's mind. Then, digging out a cellar or repairing the floor, he had accidentally discovered the dry channel beneath the cottage, and followed it to its hidden outlet. That turned his secret desires into action. He could kill and remove his victim without any trace. And so he let himself go.

"At dawn we were back at the cottage with the magistrate. When he came out, he was violently, terribly sick. I have never seen a man be so sick. It cleared him. No, I'm not being humorous. It cleared him mentally. He needed none of those emotional upheavals which we have to employ to drive shock out of our system. Didn't I tell you he was unimaginative? He handled the subsequent inquiry in a masterly fashion. He accepted as an unavoidable fact the horror of the thing, but he wouldn't listen to tales which could not be proved. There was never any definite proof of the extra horror in which the villagers believed."

There was an exclamation from Lewis Banning.

"Ah—you remember now. I thought you would. The Press reported that rumour as a fact, but there was no definite proof, I tell you.

"Vaughan begged me to keep it from his wife. I was to persuade her to go away at once before a breath of it could reach her. I was to tell her that he might have received internal injuries, and should be examined without delay. He himself believed the tale that was going round, but he was very conscious of his poise. I suspect that he was feeling a little proud of himself—proud that he was unaffected. But he dreaded the effect of the shock on his wife.

"We were too late. The cook had caught the prevailing fever, and told that unpleasant rumour to Kyra. She ran to her husband, deadly pale, desperate, instinctively seeking protection against the blow. He could protect himself, and would have given his life to be able to protect her. He tried, but only gave her words and more words. He explained that, looking at the affair calmly, it didn't matter; that no one could have known; that the best thing was to forget it; and so on. It was absurd. As if anyone who believed what was being said could look at the affair calmly!

"Sentiments of that kind were no comfort to his wife. She expected him to show his horror, not to isolate himself as if he had shut down a lid, not to leave her spiritually alone. She cried out at him that he had no feeling and rushed to her room. Perhaps I should have given her a sedative, but I didn't. I knew that the sooner she had it out with herself, the better, and that her mind was healthy enough to stand it.

"I said so to Vaughan, but he did not understand. Emotion, he thought, was dangerous. It mustn't be let loose. He wanted to tell her again not to 'worry'. He didn't see that he was the only person within ten miles who wasn't 'worried'.

"She came down later. She spoke to Vaughan scorn-

fully, coldly, as if she had found him unfaithful to her. She said to him:

“‘I can’t see the woman again. Tell her to go, will you?’

“‘She meant the cook. Vaughan challenged her. He was just obstinately logical and fair.

“‘It’s not her fault,’ he said. ‘She’s an ignorant woman, not an anatomist. We’ll call her in, and you’ll see how unjust you are.’

“‘Oh no!’ she cried—and then checked herself.

“‘Send for her then!’ she said.

“‘The cook came in. How could she know, she sobbed—she had noticed nothing—she was sure that what she had bought from Josef Weiss was really venison—she didn’t think for a moment. . . . Well, blessed are the simple!

“‘My God! Be quiet!’ Kyra burst out. ‘You all of you think what you want to think. You all lie to yourselves and pretend and have no feelings!’

“‘I couldn’t stand any more. I begged her not to torture herself and not to torture me. It was the right note. She took my hands and asked me to forgive her. Then the tears came. She cried, I think, till morning. At breakfast she had a wan smile for both of us, and I knew that she was out of danger—clear of the shock for good. They left for England the same day.

“‘I met them in Vienna two years ago, and they dined with me. We never mentioned Zweibergen. They still adored one another, and still quarrelled. It was good to hear them talk and watch them feeling for each other’s sympathy.

“‘Vaughan refused his meat at dinner, and said that he had become a vegetarian.

“‘Why?’ I asked deliberately.

“‘He answered that he had recently had a nervous breakdown—could eat nothing, and had nearly died. He was all right now, he said; no trace of the illness remained but his distaste for meat . . . it had

come over him quite suddenly . . . he could not think why.

"I tell you the man was absolutely serious. He could *not* think why. Shock had lain hidden in him for ten years, and then had claimed its penalty."

"And you?" asked Banning. "How did you get clear of shock? You had to control your emotions at the time."

"A fair question," said Shiravieff. "I've been living under a suspended sentence. There have been days when I thought I should visit one of my colleagues and ask him to clean up the mess. If I could only have got the story out of my system, it would have helped a lot—but I couldn't bring myself to tell it."

"You have just told it," said Colonel Romero solemnly.

THE BLACK CAT

by Edgar Allan Poe

FOR THE most wild yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not—and very surely do I not dream. But tomorrow I die, and today I would unburden my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. To me, they have presented little but horror—to many they will seem less terrible than *baroques*. Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace—some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects.

From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals, and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time, and never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them. This peculiarity of character grew with my growth, and, in my manhood, I derived from it one of my principal sources of pleasure. To those who have cherished an affection for a faithful and sagacious dog, I need hardly

be at the trouble of explaining the nature or the intensity of the gratification thus derivable. There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere *Man*.

I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own. Observing my partiality for domestic pets, she lost no opportunity of procuring those of the most agreeable kind. We had birds, goldfish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a *cat*.

This latter was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree. In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise. Not that she was ever *serious* upon this point—and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered.

Pluto—this was the cat's name—was my favourite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets.

Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during which my general temperament and character—through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance—had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them. For Pluto, however, I still retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him, as I

made no scruple of maltreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog, when, by accident, or through affection, they came in my way. But my disease grew upon me—for what disease is like Alcohol!—and at length even Pluto, who was now becoming old, and consequently somewhat peevish—even Pluto began to experience the effects of my ill temper.

One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame. I took from my waistcoat pocket a penknife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and delicately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity.

When reason returned with the morning—when I had slept off the fumes of the night's debauch—I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed.

In the meantime the cat slowly recovered. The socket of the lost eye presented, it is true, a frightful appearance, but he no longer appeared to suffer any pain. He went about the house as usual, but, as might be expected, fled in extreme terror at my approach. I had so much of my old heart left, as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once so loved me. But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am no

more sure that my soul lives than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a stupid action, for no other reason than because he knows he should *not*? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is *Law*, merely because we understand it to be such? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to *vex itself*—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong's sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cold blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree; hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offence; hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it—if such a thing were possible—even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.

On the night of the day on which this most cruel deed was done, I was aroused from sleep by the cry of fire. The curtains of my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing. It was with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, made our escape from the conflagration. The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself thenceforward to despair.

I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity. But I am detailing a chain of facts—and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect. On the day succeeding the fire, I visited the ruins. The walls,

with one exception had fallen in. This exception was found in a compartment wall, not very thick, which stood about the middle of the house, and against which had rested the head of my bed. The plastering had here, in great measure, resisted the action of the fire—a fact which I attributed to its having been recently spread. About this wall a dense crowd were collected, and many persons seemed to be examining a particular portion of it with very minute and eager attention. The words ‘strange!’ ‘singular!’ and other similar expressions, excited my curiosity. I approached and saw, as if graven in *bas-relief* upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic *cat*. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous. There was a rope about the animal’s neck.

When I first beheld the apparition—for I could scarcely regard it as less—my wonder and my terror were extreme. But at length reflection came to my aid. The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd—by some one of whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown, through an open window, into my chamber. This had probably been done with the view of arousing me from sleep. The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly spread plaster; the lime of which, with the flames, and the *ammonia* from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it.

Although I thus readily accounted to my reason, if not altogether to my conscience, for the startling fact just detailed, it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy. For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat; and, during this period, there came back into my spirit a half sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse. I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and to look about me, among the vile haunts which I now habitually fre-

quented, for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to supply its place.

One night as I sat, half stupefied, in a den of more than infamy, my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object, reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of gin, or of rum, which constituted the chief furniture of the apartment. I had been looking steadily at the top of this hogshead for some minutes, and what now caused me surprise was the fact that I had not sooner perceived the object thereupon. I approached it, and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat—a very large one—fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any portion of his body; but this cat had a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast.

Upon my touching him, he immediately arose, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and appeared delighted with my notice. This, then, was the very creature of which I was in search. I at once offered to purchase it of the landlord; but this person made no claim to it—knew nothing of it—had never seen it before.

I continued my caresses, and when I prepared to go home, the animal evinced a disposition to accompany me. I permitted it to do so; occasionally stooping and patting it as I proceeded. When it reached the house it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favourite with my wife.

For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but—I know not how or why it was—its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed me. By slow degrees these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature; a certain sense of shame, and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty, preventing me from

physically abusing it. I did not, for some weeks, strike, or otherwise violently ill-use it; but gradually—very gradually—I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing, and to flee silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a pestilence.

What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one of its eyes. This circumstance, however, only endeared it to my wife, who, as I have already said, possessed, in a high degree, that humanity of feeling which had once been my distinguishing trait, and the source of many of my simplest and purest pleasures.

With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my dress, clamber, in this manner, to my breast. At such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of my former crime, but chiefly—let me confess it at once—by absolute *dread* of the beast.

This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil—and yet I should be at a loss how otherwise to define it. I am almost ashamed to own—yes, even in this felon's cell, I am almost ashamed to own—that the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me, had been heightened by one of the merest chimeras it would be possible to conceive. My wife had called my attention, more than once, to the character of the mark of white hair, of which I have spoken, and which constituted the sole visible difference between the strange beast and the one I had destroyed. The reader will remember that this mark, although large, had been originally very

indefinite; but, by slow degrees—degrees nearly imperceptible, and which for a long time my reason struggled to reject as fanciful—it had, at length, assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name—and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster *had I dared*—it was now, I say, the image of a hideous—of a ghastly thing—of the GALLOWS!—oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime—of Agony and of Death!

And now was I indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere Humanity. And *a brute beast*—whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed—*a brute beast* to work out for *me*—for me, a man fashioned in the image of the High God—so much of insufferable woe! Alas! neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of rest any more! During the former the creature left me no moment alone, and in the latter I started hourly from dreams of unutterable fear to find the hot breath of *the thing* upon my face, and its vast weight—an incarnate nightmare that I had no power to shake off—incumbent eternally upon my *heart*!

Beneath the pressure of torments such as these the feeble remnant of the good within me succumbed. Evil thoughts became my sole intimates—the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind; while from the sudden, frequent, and ungovernable outbursts of a fury to which I now blindly abandoned myself, my uncomplaining wife, alas, was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers.

One day she accompanied me, upon some household errand, into the cellar of the old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit. The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness. Uplifting an axe, and forgetting in my wrath the childish dread which

had hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal, which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded by the interference into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot without a groan.

This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body. I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbours. Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Again, I deliberated about casting it in the well in the yard—about packing it in a box, as if merchandise, with the usual arrangements, and so getting a porter to take it from the house. Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better expedient than either of these. I determined to wall it up in the cellar, as the monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims.

For a purpose such as this the cellar was well adapted. Its walls were loosely constructed, and had lately been plastered throughout with a rough plaster, which the dampness of the atmosphere had prevented from hardening. Moreover, in one of the walls was a projection, caused by a false chimney, or fireplace, that had been filled up and made to resemble the rest of the cellar. I made no doubt that I could readily displace the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before, so that no eye could detect anything suspicious.

And in this calculation I was not deceived. By means of a crowbar I easily dislodged the bricks, and, having carefully deposited the body against the inner wall, I propped it in that position, while with little trouble I relaid the whole structure as it originally stood. Having

procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution, I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brickwork. When I had finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with the minutest care. I looked around triumphantly, and said to myself: "Here at least, then, my labour has not been in vain."

My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness; for I had, at length, firmly resolved to put it to death. Had I been able to meet with it at the moment, there could have been no doubt of its fate; but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger, and forbore to present itself in my present mood. It is impossible to describe or to imagine the deep, the blissful sense of relief which the absence of the detested creature occasioned in my bosom. It did not make its appearance during the night; and thus for one night, at least, since its introduction into the house, I soundly and tranquilly slept; aye, *slept* even with the burden of murder upon my soul.

The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a free man. The monster, in terror, had fled the premises for ever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little. Some few inquiries had been made, but these had been readily answered. Even a search had been instituted—but of course nothing was to be discovered. I looked upon my future felicity as secured.

Upon the fourth day of the assassination, a party of the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house, and proceeded again to make rigorous investigation of the premises. Secure, however, in the inscrutability of my place of concealment, I felt no embarrassment what-

ever. The officers bade me accompany them in their search. They left no nook or corner unexplored. At length, for the third or fourth time, they descended into the cellar. I quivered not in a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence. I walked the cellar from end to end. I folded my arms upon my bosom, and roamed easily to and fro. The police were thoroughly satisfied and prepared to depart. The glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness.

"Gentlemen," I said at last, as the party ascended the steps, "I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health and a little more courtesy. By the by, gentlemen, this—this is a very well-constructed house" (in the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all)—"I may say an *excellently* well-constructed house. These walls—are you going, gentlemen?—these walls are solidly put together"; and here, through the mere frenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brickwork behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom.

But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend! No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb!—by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman—a howl—a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.

Of my own thoughts it is folly to speak. Swooning, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant the party on the stairs remained motionless, through ex-

tremity of terror and awe. In the next a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb.

LEININGEN VERSUS THE ANTS

by Carl Stephenson

"UNLESS THEY alter their course, and there's no reason why they should, they'll reach your plantation in two days at the latest."

Leiningen sucked placidly at a cigar about the size of a corn cob and for a few seconds gazed without answering at the agitated District Commissioner. Then he took the cigar from his lips and leaned slightly forward. With his bristling grey hair, bulky nose, and lucid eyes, he had the look of an ageing and shabby eagle.

"Decent of you," he murmured, "paddling all this way just to give me the tip. But you're pulling my leg, of course, when you say I must do a bunk. Why, even a herd of saurians couldn't drive me from this plantation of mine."

The Brazilian official threw up lean and lanky arms and clawed the air with wildly distended fingers. "Leiningen!" he shouted, "you're insane! They're not creatures you can fight—they're an elemental—an 'act of God'! Ten miles long, two miles wide—ants, nothing but ants! And every single one of them a fiend from hell; before you can spit three times they'll eat a full-grown buffalo to the bones. I tell you if you don't clear out at once there'll be nothing left of you but a skeleton picked as clean as your own plantation."

Leiningen grinned. "Act of God, my eye! Anyway, I'm not an old woman; I'm not going to run for it just because an elemental's on the way. And don't think I'm the kind of fathead who tries to fend off lightning with his fists, either. I use my intelligence, old man. With me, the brain isn't a second blindgut; I know what

it's there for. When I began this model farm and plantation three years ago, I took into account all that could conceivably happen to it. And now I'm ready for anything and everything—including your ants."

The Brazilian rose heavily to his feet. "I've done my best," he gasped. "Your obstinacy endangers not only yourself, but the lives of your four hundred workers. You don't know these ants!"

Leiningen accompanied him down to the river, where the Government launch was moored. The vessel cast off. As it moved downstream, the exclamation mark neared the rail and began waving its arms frantically. Long after the launch had disappeared round the bend, Leiningen thought he could still hear that dimming, imploring voice. "You don't know them, I tell you! *You don't know them!*"

But the reported enemy was by no means unfamiliar to the planter. Before he started work on his settlement, he had lived long enough in the country to see for himself the fearful devastations sometimes wrought by these ravenous insects in their campaigns for food. But since then he had planned measures of defence accordingly, and these, he was convinced, were in every way adequate to withstand the approaching peril.

Moreover, during his three years as planter, Leiningen had met and defeated drought, flood, plague, and all other 'acts of God' which had come against him—unlike his fellow settlers in the district, who had made little or no resistance. This unbroken success he attributed solely to the observance of his lifelong motto: *The human brain needs only to become fully aware of its powers to conquer even the elements.* Dullards reeled senselessly and aimlessly into the abyss; cranks, however brilliant, lost their heads when circumstances suddenly altered or accelerated and ran into stone walls; sluggards drifted with the current until they were caught in whirlpools and dragged under. But such disasters, Leiningen contended, merely strengthened his argument that intel-

ligence, directed aright, invariably makes man the master of his fate.

Yes, Leiningen had always known how to grapple with life. Even here, in this Brazilian wilderness, his brain had triumphed over every difficulty and danger it had so far encountered. First he had vanquished primal forces by cunning and organization, then he had enlisted the resources of modern science to increase miraculously the yield of his plantation. And now he was sure he would prove more than a match for the 'irresistible' ants.

That same evening, however, Leiningen assembled his workers. He had no intention of waiting till the news reached their ears from other sources. Most of them had been born in the district; the cry, 'The ants are coming!' was to them an imperative signal for instant, panic-stricken flight, a spring for life itself. But so great was the Indians' trust in Leiningen, in Leiningen's word, and in Leiningen's wisdom, that they received his curt tidings, and his orders for the imminent struggle, with the calmness with which they were given. They waited, unafraid, alert, as if for the beginning of a new game or hunt which he had just described to them. The ants were indeed mighty, but not so mighty as the boss. Let them come!

They came at noon the second day. Their approach was announced by the wild unrest of the horses, scarcely controllable now either in stall or under rider, scenting from afar a vapour instinct with horror.

It was announced by a stampede of animals, timid and savage, hurtling past each other; jaguars and pumas flashing by nimble stags of the pampas; bulky tapirs, no longer hunters, themselves hunted, outpacing fleet kinkajous; maddened herds of cattle, heads lowered, nostrils snorting, rushing through tribes of loping monkeys, chattering in a dementia of terror; then followed the creeping and springing denizens of bush and steppe, big and little rodents, snakes, and lizards.

Pell-mell the rabble swarmed down the hill to the plantation, scattered right and left before the barrier of the water-filled ditch, then sped onwards to the river, where, again hindered, they fled along its banks out of sight.

This water-filled ditch was one of the defence measures which Leiningen had long since prepared against the advent of the ants. It encompassed three sides of the plantation like a huge horseshoe. Twelve feet across, but not very deep, when dry it could hardly be described as an obstacle to either man or beast. But the ends of the 'horseshoe' ran into the river which formed the northern boundary, and fourth side, of the plantation. And at the end nearer the house and outbuildings in the middle of the plantation, Leiningen had constructed a dam by means of which water from the river could be diverted into the ditch.

So now, by opening the dam, he was able to fling an imposing girdle of water, a huge quadrilateral with the river as its base, completely around the plantation, like the moat encircling a medieval city. Unless the ants were clever enough to build rafts, they had no hope of reaching the plantation, Leiningen concluded.

The twelve-foot water ditch seemed to afford in itself all the security needed. But while awaiting the arrival of the ants, Leiningen made a further improvement. The western section of the ditch ran along the edge of a tamarind wood, and the branches of some great trees reached over the water. Leiningen now had them lopped so that ants could not descend from them within the 'moat'.

The women and children, then the herds of cattle, were escorted by peons on rafts over the river, to remain on the other side in absolute safety until the plunderers had departed. Leiningen gave this instruction, not because he believed the non-combatants were in any danger, but in order to avoid hampering the efficiency of the defenders. "Critical situations first become

crises," he explained to his men, "when oxen or women get excited."

Finally, he made a careful inspection of the 'inner moat'—a smaller ditch lined with concrete, which extended around the hill on which stood the ranch house, barns, stables, and other buildings. Into this concrete ditch emptied the inflow pipes from three great petrol tanks. If by some miracle the ants managed to cross the water and reach the plantation, this 'rampart of petrol' would be an absolutely impassable protection for the besieged and their dwellings and stock. Such, at least, was Leiningen's opinion.

He stationed his men at irregular distances along the water ditch, the first line of defence. Then he lay down in his hammock and puffed drowsily away at his pipe until a peon came with the report that the ants had been observed far away in the south.

Leiningen mounted his horse, which at the feel of its master seemed to forget its uneasiness, and rode leisurely in the direction of the threatening offensive. The southern stretch of ditch—the upper side of the quadrilateral—was nearly three miles long; from its centre one could survey the entire countryside. This was destined to be the scene of the outbreak of war between Leiningen's brain and twenty square miles of life-destroying ants.

It was a sight one could never forget. Over the range of hills, as far as eye could see, crept a darkening hem, ever longer and broader, until the shadow spread across the slope from east to west, then downwards, downwards, uncannily swift, and all the green herbage of that wide vista was being mown as by a giant sickle, leaving only the vast moving shadow, extending, deepening, and moving rapidly nearer.

When Leiningen's men, behind their barrier of water, perceived the approach of the long-expected foe, they gave vent to their suspense in screams and imprecations. But as the distance began to lessen between the 'sons of

hell' and the water ditch, they relapsed into silence. Before the advance of that awe-inspiring throng, their belief in the powers of the boss began to steadily dwindle.

Even Leiningen himself, who had ridden up just in time to restore their loss of heart by a display of unshakable calm, even he could not free himself from a qualm of malaise. Yonder were thousands of millions of voracious jaws bearing down upon him and only a suddenly insignificant, narrow ditch lay between him and his men and being gnawed to the bones 'before you can spit three times'.

Hadn't his brain for once taken on more than it could manage? If the blighters decided to rush the ditch, fill it to the brim with their corpses, there'd still be more than enough to destroy every trace of that cranium of his. The planter's chin jutted; they hadn't got him yet, and he'd see to it they never would. While he could think at all, he'd flout both death and the devil.

The hostile army was approaching in perfect formation; no human battalions, however well drilled, could ever hope to rival the precision of that advance. Along a front that moved forward as uniformly as a straight line, the ants drew nearer and nearer to the water ditch. Then, when they learned through their scouts the nature of the obstacle, the two outlying wings of the army detached themselves from the main body and marched down the western and eastern sides of the ditch.

This surrounding manœuvre took rather more than an hour to accomplish; no doubt the ants expected that at some point they would find a crossing.

During this outflanking movement by the wings, the army on the centre and southern front remained still. The besieged were therefore able to contemplate at their leisure the thumb-long, reddish-black, long-legged insects; some of the Indians believed they could see, too,

intent on them, the brilliant, cold eyes, and the razor-edged mandibles, of this host of infinity.

It is not easy for the average person to imagine that an animal, not to mention an insect, can *think*. But now both the European brain of Leiningen and the primitive brains of the Indians began to stir with the unpleasant foreboding that inside every single one of that deluge of insects dwelt a thought. And that thought was: Ditch or no ditch, we'll get to your flesh!

Not until four o'clock did the wings reach the 'horse-shoe' ends of the ditch, only to find these ran into the great river. Through some kind of secret telegraphy, the report must then have flashed very swiftly indeed along the entire enemy line. And Leiningen, riding—no longer casually—along his side of the ditch, noticed by energetic and widespread movements of troops that for some unknown reason the news of the check had its greatest effect on the southern front, where the main army was massed. Perhaps the failure to find a way over the ditch was persuading the ants to withdraw from the plantation in search of spoils more easily attainable.

An immense flood of ants, about a hundred yards in width, was pouring in a glimmering-black cataract down the far slope of the ditch. Many thousands were already drowning in the sluggish, creeping flow, but they were followed by troop after troop, who clambered over their sinking comrades, and then themselves served as dying bridges to the reserves hurrying on in their rear.

Shoals of ants were being carried away by the current into the middle of the ditch, where gradually they broke asunder and then, exhausted by their struggles, vanished below the surface. Nevertheless, the wavering, floundering hundred-yard front was remorselessly if slowly advancing towards the besieged on the other bank. Leiningen had been wrong when he supposed the enemy would first have to fill the ditch with their bodies before they could cross; instead, they merely

needed to act as stepping stones, as they swam and sank, to the hordes ever pressing onwards from behind.

Near Leiningen a few mounted herdsman awaited his orders. He sent one to the weir—the river must be dammed more strongly to increase the speed and power of the water coursing through the ditch.

A second peon was despatched to the outhouses to bring spades and petrol sprinklers. A third rode away to summon to the zone of the offensive all the men, except the observation posts, on the nearby sections of the ditch, which were not yet actively threatened.

The ants were getting across far more quickly than Leiningen would have deemed possible. Impelled by the mighty cascade behind them, they struggled nearer and nearer to the inner bank. The momentum of the attack was so great that neither the tardy flow of the stream nor its downward pull could exert its proper force; and into the gap left by every submerging insect, hastened forward a dozen more.

When reinforcements reached Leiningen, the invaders were half way over. The planter had to admit to himself that it was only by a stroke of luck for him that the ants were attempting the crossing on a relatively short front: had they assaulted simultaneously along the entire length of the ditch, the outlook for the defenders would have been black indeed.

Even as it was, it could hardly be described as rosy, though the planter seemed quite unaware that death in a gruesome form was drawing closer and closer. As the war between his brain and the 'act of God' reached its climax, the very shadow of annihilation began to pale to Leiningen, who now felt like a champion in a new Olympic game, a gigantic and thrilling contest, from which he was determined to emerge victor. Such, indeed, was his aura of confidence that the Indians forgot their stupefied fear of the peril only a yard or two away; under the planter's supervision, they began fervidly digging up to the edge of the bank and throw-

ing clods of earth and spadefuls of sand into the midst of the hostile fleet.

The petrol sprinklers, hitherto used to destroy pests and blights on the plantation, were also brought into action. Streams of evil-reeking oil now soared and fell over an enemy already in disorder through the bombardment of earth and sand.

The ants responded to these vigorous and successful measures of defence by further developments of their offensive. Entire clumps of huddling insects began to roll down the opposite bank into the water. At the same time, Leiningen noticed that the ants were now attacking along an ever-widening front. As the numbers both of his men and his petrol sprinklers were severely limited, this rapid extension of the line of battle was becoming an overwhelming danger.

To add to his difficulties, the very clods of earth they flung into that black floating carpet often whirled fragments towards the defenders' side, and here and there dark ribbons were already mounting the inner bank. True, wherever a man saw these they could still be driven back into the water by spadefuls of earth or jets of petrol. But the file of defenders was too sparse and scattered to hold off at all points these landing parties, and though the peons toiled like madmen, their plight became momentarily more perilous.

One man struck with his spade at an enemy clump, did not draw it back quickly enough from the water; in a trice the wooden haft swarmed with upward scurrying insects. With a curse, he dropped the spade into the ditch; too late, they were already on his body. They lost no time; wherever they encountered bare flesh they bit deeply; a few, bigger than the rest, carried in their hindquarters a sting which injected a burning and paralysing venom. Screaming, frantic with pain, the peon danced and twirled like a dervish.

Realizing that another such casualty, yes, perhaps this alone, might plunge his men into confusion and

destroy their morale, Leiningen roared in a bellow louder than the yells of the victim: "Into the petrol, idiot! Douse your paws in the petrol!" The dervish ceased his pirouette as if transfixed, then tore off his shirt and plunged his arm and the ants hanging to it up to the shoulder in one of the large open tins of petrol. But even then the fierce mandibles did not slacken; another peon had to help him squash and detach each separate insect.

Distracted by the episode, some defenders had turned away from the ditch. And now cries of fury, a thudding of spades, and a wild trampling to and fro, showed that the ants had made full use of the interval, though luckily only a few had managed to get across. The men set to work again desperately with the barrage of earth and sand. Meanwhile an old Indian, who acted as medicine man to the plantation workers, gave the bitten peon a drink he had prepared some hours before, which, he claimed, possessed the virtue of dissolving and weakening ants' venom.

Leiningen surveyed his position. A dispassionate observer would have estimated the odds against him at a thousand to one. But then such an onlooker would have reckoned only by what he saw—the advance of myriad battalions of ants against the futile efforts of a few defenders—and not by the unseen activity that can go on in a man's brain.

For Leiningen had not erred when he decided he would fight elemental with elemental. The water in the ditch was beginning to rise; the stronger damming of the river was making itself apparent.

Visibly the swiftness and power of the masses of water increased, swirling into quicker and quicker movement its living black surface, dispersing its pattern, carrying away more and more of it on the hastening current.

Victory had been snatched from the very jaws of defeat. With a hysterical shout of joy, the peons

feverishly intensified their bombardment of earth clods and sand.

And now the wide cataract down the opposite bank was thinning and ceasing, as if the ants were becoming aware that they could not attain their aim. They were scurrying back up the slope to safety.

All the troops so far hurled into the ditch had been sacrificed in vain. Drowned and floundering insects eddied in thousands along the flow, while Indians running on the bank destroyed every swimmer that reached the side.

Not until the ditch curved towards the east did the scattered ranks assemble again in a coherent mass. And now, exhausted and half numbed, they were in no condition to ascend the bank. Fusillades of clods drove them round the bend towards the mouth of the ditch and then into the river, wherein they vanished without leaving a trace.

The news ran swiftly along the entire chain of outposts, and soon a long scattered line of laughing men could be seen hastening along the ditch towards the scene of victory.

For once they seemed to have lost all their native reserve, for it was in wild abandon now they celebrated the triumph—as if there were no longer thousands of millions of merciless, cold, and hungry eyes watching them from the opposite bank, watching and waiting.

The sun sank behind the rim of the tamarind wood and twilight deepened into night. It was not only hoped but expected that the ants would remain quiet until dawn. But to defeat any forlorn attempt at a crossing, the flow of water through the ditch was powerfully increased by opening the dam still further.

In spite of this impregnable barrier, Leiningen was not yet altogether convinced that the ants would not venture another surprise attack. He ordered his men to camp along the bank overnight. He also detailed

parties of them to patrol the ditch in two of his motor cars and ceaselessly to illuminate the surface of the water with headlights and electric torches.

After having taken all the precautions he deemed necessary, the farmer ate his supper with considerable appetite and went to bed. His slumbers were in no wise disturbed by the memory of the waiting, live, twenty square miles.

Dawn found a thoroughly refreshed and active Leiningen riding along the edge of the ditch. The planter saw before him a motionless and unaltered throng of besiegers. He studied the wide belt of water between them and the plantation, and for a moment almost regretted that the fight had ended so soon and so simply. In the comforting, matter-of-fact light of morning, it seemed to him now that the ants hadn't the ghost of a chance to cross the ditch. Even if they plunged headlong into it on all three fronts at once, the force of the now powerful current would inevitably sweep them away. He had got quite a thrill out of the fight—a pity it was already over.

He rode along the eastern and southern sections of the ditch and found everything in order. He reached the western section, opposite the tamarind wood, and here, contrary to the other battle fronts, he found the enemy very busy indeed. The trunks and branches of the trees and the creepers of the lianas, on the far bank of the ditch, fairly swarmed with industrious insects. But instead of eating the leaves there and then, they were merely gnawing through the stalks, so that a thick green shower fell steadily to the ground.

No doubt they were victualling columns sent out to obtain provender for the rest of the army. The discovery did not surprise Leiningen. He did not need to be told that ants are intelligent, that certain species even use others as milch cows, watchdogs, and slaves. He was well aware of their power of adaptation, their sense of discipline, their marvellous talent for organization.

His belief that a foray to supply the army was in progress was strengthened when he saw the leaves that fell to the ground being dragged to the troops waiting outside the wood. Then all at once he realized the aim that rain of green was intended to serve.

Each single leaf, pulled or pushed by dozens of toiling insects, was borne straight to the edge of the ditch. Even as Macbeth watched the approach of Birnam Wood in the hands of his enemies, Leiningen saw the tamarind wood move nearer and nearer in the mandibles of the ants. Unlike the fey Scot, however, he did not lose his nerve; no witches had prophesied his doom, and if they had he would have slept just as soundly. All the same, he was forced to admit to himself that the situation was now far more ominous than that of the day before.

He had thought it impossible for the ants to build rafts for themselves—well, here they were, coming in thousands, more than enough to bridge the ditch. Leaves after leaves rustled down the slope into the water, where the current drew them away from the bank and carried them into midstream. And every single leaf carried several ants. This time the farmer did not trust to the alacrity of his messengers. He galloped away, leaning from his saddle and yelling orders as he rushed past outpost after outpost: "Bring petrol pumps to the south-west front! Issue spades to every man along the line facing the wood!" And arrived at the eastern and southern sections, he dispatched every man except the observation posts to the menaced west.

Then, as he rode past the stretch where the ants had failed to cross the day before, he witnessed a brief but impressive scene. Down the slope of the distant hill there came towards him a singular being, writhing rather than running, an animal-like blackened statue with a shapeless head and four quivering feet that knuckled under almost ceaselessly. When the creature reached the far bank of the ditch and collapsed oppo-

site Leiningen, he recognized it as a pampas stag, covered over and over with ants.

It had strayed near the zone of the army. As usual, they had attacked its eyes first. Blinded, it had reeled in the madness of hideous torment straight into the ranks of its persecutors, and now the beast swayed to and fro in its death agony.

With a shot from his rifle Leiningen put it out of its misery. Then he pulled out his watch. He hadn't a second to lose, but for life itself he could not have denied his curiosity the satisfaction of knowing how long the ants would take—for personal reasons, so to speak. After six minutes the white polished bones alone remained. That's how he himself would look before you can—Leiningen spat once, and put spurs to his horse.

The sporting zest with which the excitement of the novel contest had inspired him the day before had now vanished; in its place was a cold and violent purpose. He would send these vermin back to the hell where they belonged, somehow, anyhow. Yes, but how, was indeed the question; as things stood at present it looked as if the devils would raze him and his men from the earth instead. He had underestimated the might of the enemy; he really would have to bestir himself if he hoped to outwit them.

The biggest danger now, he decided, was the point where the western section of the ditch curved southwards. And arrived there, he found his worst expectations justified. The very power of the current had huddled the leaves and their crews of ants so close together at the bend that the bridge was almost ready.

True, streams of petrol and clumps of earth still prevented a landing. But the number of floating leaves was increasing ever more swiftly. It could not be long now before a stretch of water a mile in length was decked by a green pontoon over which the ants could rush in millions.

Leiningen galloped to the weir. The damming of the river was controlled by a wheel on its bank. The planter ordered the man at the wheel first to lower the water in the ditch almost to vanishing point, next to wait a moment, then suddenly to let the river in again. This manœuvre of lowering and raising the surface, of decreasing then increasing the flow of water through the ditch, was to be repeated over and over again until further notice.

This tactic was at first successful. The water in the ditch sank, and with it the film of leaves. The green fleet nearly reached the bed and the troops on the far bank swarmed down the slope to it. Then a violent flow of water at the original depth raced through the ditch, overwhelming leaves and ants, and sweeping them along.

This intermittent rapid flushing prevented just in time the almost completed fording of the ditch. But it also flung here and there squads of the enemy vanguard simultaneously up the inner bank. These seemed to know their duty only too well, and lost no time accomplishing it. The air rang with the curses of bitten Indians. They had removed their shirts and pants to detect the quicker the upwards-hastening insects; when they saw one, they crushed it; and fortunately the onslaught as yet was only by skirmishers.

Again and again, the water sank and rose, carrying leaves and drowned ants away with it. It lowered once more nearly to its bed; but this time the exhausted defenders waited in vain for the flush of destruction. Leiningen sensed disaster; something must have gone wrong with the machinery of the dam. Then a sweating peon tore up to him:

"They're over!"

While the besieged were concentrating upon the defence of the stretch opposite the wood, the seemingly unaffected line beyond the wood had become the theatre of decisive action. Here the defenders' front

was sparse and scattered; everyone who could be spared had hurried away to the south.

Just as the man at the weir had lowered the water almost to the bed of the ditch, the ants on a wide front began another attempt at a direct crossing like that of the preceding day. Into the emptied bed poured an irresistible throng. Rushing across the ditch, they attained the inner bank before the slow-witted Indians fully grasped the situation. Their frantic screams dumbfounded the man at the weir. Before he could direct the river anew into the safeguarding bed he saw himself surrounded by raging ants. He ran like the others, ran for his life.

When Leiningen heard this, he knew the plantation was doomed. He wasted no time bemoaning the inevitable. For as long as there was the slightest chance of success, he had stood his ground, and now any further resistance was both useless and dangerous. He fired three revolver shots into the air—the prearranged signal for his men to retreat instantly within the ‘inner moat’. Then he rode towards the ranch house.

This was two miles from the point of invasion. There was therefore time enough to prepare the second line of defence against the advent of the ants. Of the three great petrol cisterns near the house, one had already been half emptied by the constant withdrawals needed for the pumps during the fight at the water ditch. The remaining petrol in it was now drawn off through underground pipes into the concrete trench which encircled the ranch house and its outbuildings.

And there, drifting in twos and threes, Leiningen’s men reached him. Most of them were obviously trying to preserve an air of calm and indifference, belied, however by their restless glances and knitted brows. One could see their belief in a favourable outcome of the struggle was already considerably shaken.

The planter called his peons around him.

“Well, lads,” he began, “we’ve lost the first round.

But we'll smash the beggars yet, don't you worry. Anyone who thinks otherwise can draw his pay here and now and push off. There are rafts enough and to spare on the river and plenty of time still to reach 'em."

Not a man stirred.

Leiningen acknowledged his silent vote of confidence with a laugh that was half a grunt. "That's the stuff, lads. Too bad if you'd missed the rest of the show, eh? Well, the fun won't start till morning. Once these blighters turn tail, there'll be plenty of work for everyone and higher wages all round. And now run along and get something to eat; you've earned it all right."

In the excitement of the fight the greater part of the day had passed without the men once pausing to snatch a bite. Now that the ants were for the time being out of sight, and the 'wall of petrol' gave a stronger feeling of security, hungry stomachs began to assert their claims.

The bridges over the concrete ditch were removed. Here and there solitary ants had reached the ditch; they gazed at the petrol meditatively, then scurried back again. Apparently they had little interest at the moment for what lay beyond the evil-reeking barrier; the abundant spoils of the plantation were the main attraction. Soon the trees, shrubs, and beds for miles around were hulled with ants zealously gobbling the yield of long weary months of strenuous toil.

As twilight began to fall, a cordon of ants marched around the petrol trench, but as yet made no move towards its brink. Leiningen posted sentries with headlights and electric torches, then withdrew to his office, and began to reckon up his losses. He estimated these as large, but, in comparison with his bank balance, by no means unbearable. He worked out in some detail a scheme of intensive cultivation which would enable him, before very long, to more than compensate himself for the damage now being wrought to his crops. It was with a contented mind that he finally betook himself to

bed where he slept deeply until dawn, undisturbed by any thought that next day little more might be left of him than a glistening skeleton.

He rose with the sun and went out on the flat roof of his house. And a scene like one from Dante lay around him; for miles in every direction there was nothing but a black, glittering multitude, a multitude of rested, sated, but none the less voracious ants: yes, look as far as one might, one could see nothing but that rustling black throng, except in the north, where the great river drew a boundary they could not hope to pass. But even the high stone breakwater, along the bank of the river, which Leiningen had built as a defence against inundations, was, like the paths, the shorn trees and shrubs, the ground itself, black with ants.

So their greed was not glutted in razing that vast plantation? Not by a long chalk; they were all the more eager now on a rich and certain booty—four hundred men, numerous horses, and bursting granaries.

At first it seemed that the petrol trench would serve its purpose. The besiegers sensed the peril of swimming it, and made no move to plunge blindly over its brink. Instead they devised a better manœuvre; they began to collect shreds of bark, twigs, and dried leaves and dropped these into the petrol. Everything green, which could have been similarly used, had long since been eaten. After a time, though, a long procession could be seen bringing from the west the tamarind leaves used as rafts the day before.

Since the petrol, unlike the water in the outer ditch, was perfectly still, the refuse stayed where it was thrown. It was several hours before the the ants succeeded in covering an appreciable part of the surface. At length, however, they were ready to proceed to a direct attack.

Their storm troops swarmed down the concrete side, scrambled over the supporting surface of twigs and

leaves, and impelled these over the few remaining streaks of open petrol until they reached the other side. Then they began to climb up this to make straight for the helpless garrison.

During the entire offensive, the planter sat peacefully, watching them with interest, but not stirring a muscle. Moreover, he had ordered his men not to disturb in any way whatever the advancing horde. So they squatted listlessly along the bank of the ditch and waited for a sign from the boss.

The petrol was now covered with ants. A few had climbed the inner concrete wall and were scurrying towards the defenders.

"Everyone back from the ditch!" roared Leiningen. The men rushed away, without the slightest idea of his plan. He stooped forward and cautiously dropped into the ditch a stone which split the floating carpet and its living freight, to reveal a gleaming patch of petrol. A match spurted, sank down to the oily surface—Leiningen sprang back; in a flash a towering rampart of fire encompassed the garrison.

This spectacular and instant repulse threw the Indians into ecstasy. They applauded, yelled, and stamped, like children at a pantomime. Had it not been for the awe in which they held the boss, they would infallibly have carried him shoulder high.

It was some time before the petrol burned down to the bed of the ditch, and the wall of smoke and flame began to lower. The ants had retreated in a wide circle from the devastation, and innumerable charred fragments along the outer bank showed that the flames had spread from the holocaust in the ditch well into the ranks beyond, where they had wrought havoc far and wide.

Yet the perseverance of the ants was by no means broken; indeed, each set-back seemed only to whet it. The concrete cooled, the flicker of the dying flames wavered and vanished, petrol from the second tank

poured into the trench—and the ants marched forward anew to the attack.

The foregoing scene repeated itself in every detail, except that on this occasion less time was needed to bridge the ditch, for the petrol was now already filmed by a layer of ash. Once again they withdrew; once again petrol flowed into the ditch. Would the creatures never learn that their self-sacrifice was utterly senseless? It really was senseless, wasn't it? Yes, of course it was senseless—provided the defenders had an *unlimited* supply of petrol.

When Leiningen reached this stage of reasoning, he felt for the first time since the arrival of the ants that his confidence was deserting him. His skin began to creep; he loosened his collar. Once the devils were over the trench there wasn't a chance in hell for him and his men. God, what a prospect, to be eaten alive like that!

For the third time the flames immolated the attacking troops, and burned down to extinction. Yet the ants were coming on again as if nothing had happened. And meanwhile Leiningen had made a discovery that chilled him to the bone—petrol was no longer flowing into the ditch. Something must be blocking the outflow pipe of the third and last cistern—a snake or a dead rat? Whatever it was, the ants could be held off no longer, unless petrol could by some method be led from the cistern into the ditch.

Then Leiningen remembered that in the outhouse near by were two old disused fire engines. Spry as never before in their lives, the peons dragged them out of the shed, connected their pumps to the cistern, uncoiled and laid the hose. They were just in time to aim a stream of petrol at a column of ants that had already crossed and drive them back down the incline into the ditch. Once more an oily girdle surrounded the garrison, once more it was possible to hold the position—for the moment.

It was obvious, however, that this last resource meant

only the postponement of defeat and death. A few of the peons fell on their knees and began to pray; others, shrieking insanely, fired their revolvers at the black, advancing masses, as if they felt their despair was pitiful enough to sway fate itself to mercy.

At length, two of the men's nerves broke: Leiningen saw a naked Indian leap over the north side of the petrol trench, quickly followed by a second. They sprinted with incredible speed towards the river. But their fleetness did not save them; long before they could attain the rafts, the enemy covered their bodies from head to foot.

In the agony of their torment, both sprang blindly into the wide river, where enemies no less sinister awaited them. Wild screams of mortal anguish informed the breathless onlookers that crocodiles and sword-toothed piranhas were no less ravenous than ants, and even nimbler in reaching their prey.

In spite of this bloody warning, more and more men showed they were making up their minds to run the blockade. Anything, even a fight midstream against alligators, seemed better than powerlessly waiting for death to come and slowly consume their living bodies.

Leiningen flogged his brain till it reeled. Was there nothing on earth could sweep this devils' spawn back into the hell from which it came?

Then out of the inferno of his bewilderment rose a terrifying inspiration. Yes, one hope remained, and one alone. It might be possible to dam the great river completely so that its waters would fill not only the water ditch but overflow into the entire gigantic 'saucer' of land in which lay the plantation.

The far bank of the river was too high for the waters to escape that way. The stone breakwater ran between the river and the plantation; its only gaps occurred where the 'horseshoe' ends of the water ditch passed into the river. So its waters would not only be forced to inundate into the plantation, they would also be held

there by the breakwater until they rose to its own level. In half an hour, perhaps even earlier, the plantation and its hostile army of occupation would be flooded.

The ranch house and outbuildings stood upon rising ground. Their foundations were higher than the breakwater, so the flood would not reach them. And any remaining ants trying to ascend the slope could be repulsed by petrol.

It was possible—yes, if one could only get to the dam! A distance of nearly two miles lay between the ranch house and the weir—two miles of ants. Those two peons had managed only a fifth of that distance at the cost of their lives. Was there an Indian daring enough after that to run the gauntlet five times as far? Hardly likely; and if there were, his prospect of getting back was almost nil.

No, there was only one thing for it, he'd have to make the attempt himself; he might just as well be running as sitting still, anyway, when the ants finally got him. Besides, there *was* a bit of a chance. Perhaps the ants weren't so almighty, after all; perhaps he had allowed the mass suggestion of that evil black throng to hypnotize him, just as a snake fascinates and overpowers.

The ants were building their bridges. Leiningen got up on a chair. "Hey, lads, listen to me!" he cried. Slowly and listlessly, from all sides of the trench, the men began to shuffle towards him, the apathy of death already stamped on their faces.

"Listen, lads!" he shouted. "You're frightened of those beggars, but you're a damn sight more frightened of me, and I'm proud of you. There's still a chance to save our lives—by flooding the plantation from the river. Now one of you might manage to get as far as the weir—but he'd never come back. Well, I'm not going to let you try it; if I did I'd be worse than one of those ants. No, I called the tune, and now I'm going to pay the piper.

"The moment I'm over the ditch, set fire to the petrol.

That'll allow time for the flood to do the trick. Then all you have to do is to wait here all snug and quiet till I'm back. Yes, I'm coming back, trust me"—he grinned—"when I've finished my slimming-cure."

He pulled on high leather boots, drew heavy gauntlets over his hands, and stuffed the spaces between breeches and boots, gauntlets and arms, shirt and neck, with rags soaked in petrol. With close-fitting mosquito goggles he shielded his eyes, knowing too well the ants' dodge of first robbing their victim of sight. Finally, he plugged his nostrils and ears with cotton wool, and let the peons drench his clothes with petrol.

He was about to set off when the old Indian medicine man came up to him; he had a wondrous salve, he said, prepared from a species of chafer whose odour was intolerable to ants. Yes, this odour protected these chafers from the attacks of even the most murderous ants. The Indian smeared the boss's boots, his gauntlets, and his face over and over with the extract.

Leiningen then remembered the paralysing effect of ants' venom, and the Indian gave him a gourd full of the medicine he had administered to the bitten peon at the water ditch. The planter drank it down without noticing its bitter taste; his mind was already at the weir.

He started off towards the north-west corner of the trench. With a bound he was over—and among the ants.

The beleaguered garrison had no opportunity to watch Leiningen's race against death. The ants were climbing the inner bank again—the lurid ring of petrol blazed aloft. For the fourth time that day the reflection from the fire shone on the sweating faces of the imprisoned men, and on the reddish-black cuirasses of their oppressors. The red and blue, dark-edged flames leaped vividly now, celebrating what? The funeral pyre of the four hundred, or of the hosts of destruction?

Leiningen ran. He ran in long, equal strides, with

only one thought, one sensation, in his being—he *must* get through. He dodged all trees and shrubs; except for the split seconds his soles touched the ground the ants should have no opportunity to alight on him. That they would get to him soon, despite the salve on his boots, the petrol on his clothes, he realized only too well, but he knew even more surely that he must, and that he would, get to the weir.

Apparently the salve was some use after all; not until he had reached half way did he feel ants under his clothes, and a few on his face. Mechanically, in his stride, he struck at them, scarcely conscious of their bites. He saw he was drawing appreciably nearer the weir—the distance grew less and less—sank to five hundred—three—two—one hundred yards.

Then he was at the weir and gripping the ant-hulled wheel. Hardly had he seized it when a horde of infuriated ants flowed over his hands, arms, and shoulders. He started the wheel—before it turned once on its axis the swarm covered his face. Leiningen strained like a madman, his lips pressed tight; if he opened them to draw breath . . .

He turned and turned; slowly the dam lowered until it reached the bed of the river. Already the water was overflowing the ditch. Another minute, and the river was pouring through the nearby gap in the breakwater. The flooding of the plantation had begun.

Leiningen let go the wheel. Now, for the first time, he realized he was coated from head to foot with a layer of ants. In spite of the petrol, his clothes were full of them, several had got to his body or were clinging to his face. Now that he had completed his task, he felt the smart raging over his flesh from the bites of sawing and piercing insects.

Frantic with pain, he almost plunged into the river. To be ripped and slashed to shreds by piranhas? Already he was running the return journey, knocking ants

from his gloves and jacket, brushing them from his bloodied face, squashing them to death under his clothes.

One of the creatures bit him just below the rim of his goggles; he managed to tear it away, but the agony of the bite and its etching acid drilled into the eye nerves; he saw now through circles of fire into a milky mist, then he ran for a time almost blinded, knowing that if he once tripped and fell. . . . The old Indian's brew didn't seem much good; it weakened the poison a bit, but didn't get rid of it. His heart pounded as if it would burst; blood roared in his ears; a giant's fist battered his lungs.

Then he could see again, but the burning girdle of petrol appeared infinitely far away; he could not last half that distance. Swift-changing pictures flashed through his head, episodes in his life, while in another part of his brain a cool and impartial onlooker informed this ant-blurred, gasping, exhausted bundle named Leiningen that such a rushing panorama of scenes from one's past is seen only in the moment before death.

A stone in the path . . . too weak to avoid it . . . the planter stumbled and collapsed. He tried to rise . . . he must be pinned under a rock . . . it was impossible . . . the slightest movement was impossible. . . .

Then all at once he saw, starkly clear and huge, and, right before his eyes, furred with ants, towering and swaying in its death agony, the pampas stag. In six minutes—gnawed to the bones. God, he *couldn't* die like that! And something outside him seemed to drag him to his feet. He tottered. He began to stagger forward again.

Through the blazing ring hurtled an apparition which, as soon as it reached the ground on the inner side, fell full length and did not move. Leiningen, at the moment he made that leap through the flames, lost consciousness for the first time in his life. As he lay there, with glazing eyes and lacerated face, he appeared

a man returned from the grave. The peons rushed to him, stripped off his clothes, tore away the ants from a body that seemed almost one open wound; in some places the bones were showing. They carried him into the ranch house.

As the curtain of flames lowered, one could see, in place of the illimitable host of ants, an extensive vista of water. The thwarted river had swept over the plantation, carrying with it the entire army. The water had collected and mounted in the great 'saucer', while the ants had in vain attempted to reach the hill on which stood the ranch house. The girdle of flames held them back.

And so, imprisoned between water and fire, they had been delivered into the annihilation that was their god. And near the farther mouth of the water ditch, where the stone mole had its second gap, the ocean swept the lost battalions into the river, to vanish for ever.

The ring of fire dwindled as the water mounted to the petrol trench, and quenched the dimming flames. The inundation rose higher and higher: because its outflow was impeded by the timber and underbrush it had carried along with it, its surface required some time to reach the top of the high stone breakwater and discharge over it the rest of the shattered army.

It swelled over ant-stippled shrubs and bushes, until it washed against the foot of the knoll whereon the besieged had taken refuge. For a while an alluvium of ants tried again and again to attain this dry land, only to be repulsed by streams of petrol back into the merciless flood.

Leiningen lay on his bed, his body swathed from head to foot in bandages. With fomentations and salves, they had managed to stop the bleeding, and had dressed his many wounds. Now they thronged around him, one question in every face. Would he recover? "He won't die," said the old man who had bandaged him, "if he doesn't want to."

The planter opened his eyes. "Everything in order?" he asked.

"They're gone," said his nurse. "To hell." He held out to his master a gourd full of a powerful sleeping-draught. Leiningen gulped it down.

"I told you I'd come back," he murmured, "even if I am a bit streamlined." He grinned and shut his eyes. He slept.



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to torture the mind with their
lingering passions