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VARIOUS TEMPTATIONS

by William Sansom

His name unknown he had been strangling girls in the Victoria district. After talking no one knew what to them by the gleam of brass bedsteads; after lonely hours standing on pavements with people passing; after perhaps in those hot July streets, with blue sky blinding high above and hazed with burnt petrol, a dazzled head-aching hatred of some broad scarlet cinema poster and the black leather taxis; after sudden hopeless ecstasies at some rounded girl’s figure passing in rubber and silk, after the hours of slow crumbs in the empty milk-bar and the balneal reek of grim-tiled lavatories? After all the day-town’s faceless hours, the evening town might have whirled quicker on him with the death of the day, the yellow-painted lights of the night have caused the minutes to accelerate and his fears to recede and a cold courage then to arm itself — until the wink, the terrible assent of some soft girl smiling towards the night... the beer, the port, the meat-pies, the bedsteads?

Each of the four found had been throttled with coarse thread. This, dry and the colour of hemp, had in each case been drawn from the frayed ends of the small carpet squares in those linoleum bedrooms. ‘A man,’ said the papers, ‘has been asked by the police to come forward in connection with the murders, etc., etc. ... Ronald Raikes — five-foot-nine, grey eyes, thin brown hair, brown tweed coat, grey flannel trousers. Black soft-brim hat.’

A girl called Clara, a plain girl and by profession an invisible mender, lay in her large white comfortable bed with its polished wood headpiece and its rose quilt. Faded blue curtains draped down their long soft cylinders, their dark recesses — and sometimes these columns moved, for the balcony windows were open for the hot July night. The night was still, airless; yet sometimes these queer causeless breezes, like the turning breath of a sleeper, came to rustle the curtains — and then as suddenly left them graven again in the stifling air like curtains
that had never moved. And this girl Clara lay reading lazily the evening paper.

She wore an old wool bed-jacket, faded yet rich against her pale and bloodless skin; she was alone, expecting no one. It was a night of restitution, of early supper and washing underclothes and stockings, an early night for a read and a long sleep. Two or three magazines nestled in the wadded bend of her knees. But saving for last the glossy, luxurious magazines, she lay now glancing through the paper—half reading, half tasting the quiet, sensing how secluded she was though the street was only one floor below, in her own bedroom yet with the heads of unsuspecting people passing only a few feet beneath. Unknown footsteps approached and retreated on the pavement beneath—footsteps that even on this still summer night sounded muffled, like footsteps heard on the pavement of a fog.

She lay listening for a while, then turned again to the paper, read again a bullying black headline relating the deaths of some hundreds of demonstrators somewhere in another hemisphere, and again let her eyes trail away from the weary greyish block of words beneath. The corner of the papers and its newsprint struck a harsh note of offices and tube-trains against the soft texture of the rose quilt—she frowned and was thus just about to reach for one of the more lustrous magazines when her eyes noted across the page a short, squat headline above a blackly-typed column about the Victoria murders. She shuffled more comfortably into the bed and concentrated hard to scramble up the delicious paragraphs.

But they had found nothing. No new murder, nowhere nearer to making an arrest. Yet after an official preamble, there occurred one of those theoretic dissertations, such as is often inserted to colour the progress of apprehension when no facts provide themselves. It appeared, it was thought, that the Victoria strangler suffered from a mania similar to that which had possessed the infamous Ripper; that is, the victims were mostly of a ‘certain profession’; it might be thus concluded that the Victoria murderer bore the same maniacal grudge against such women.

At this Clara put the paper down—thinking, well for one thing she never did herself up like those sort, in fact she never did herself up at all, and what would be the use? Instinctively then she turned to look across to the mirror on the dressing-table, saw there her worn pale face and sack-coloured hair, and
felt instantly neglected; down in her plain-feeling body there stirred again that familiar envy, the impotent grudge that still came to her at least once every day of her life— that nobody had ever bothered to think deeply for her, neither loving, nor hating, nor in any way caring. For a moment then the thought came that whatever had happened in those bedrooms, however horrible, that murderer had at least felt deeply for his subject, the subject girl was charged with positive attractions that had forced him to act. There could hardly be such a thing, in those circumstances at least, as a disinterested murder. Hate and love were often held to be variations of the same obsessed emotion— when it came to murder, to the high impassioned pitch of murder, to such an intense concentration of one person on another, then it seemed that a divine paralysis, something very much like love, possessed the murderer.

Clara put the paper aside with finality, for whenever the question of her looks occurred then she forced herself to think immediately of something else, to ignore what had for some years groaned into an obsession leading only to hours wasted with self-pity and idle depression. So that now she picked up the first magazine, and scrutinized with a false intensity the large and laughing figure in several colours and few clothes of a motion-picture queen. However, rather than pointing her momentary depression, the picture comforted her. Had it been a real girl in the room, she might have been further saddened; but these pictures of fabulous people separated by the convention of the page and the distance of their world of celluloid fantasy instead represented the image of earlier personal dreams, comforting dreams of what then she hoped one day she might become, when that hope which is youth's unique asset outweighed the material attribute of what she in fact was.

In the quiet air fogging the room with such palpable stillness the turning of the brittle magazine page made its own decisive crackle. Somewhere outside in the summer night a car slurred past, changed its gear, rounded the corner and sped off on a petulant note of acceleration to nowhere. The girl changed her position in the bed, easing herself deeper into the security of the bedclothes. Gradually she became absorbed, so that soon her mind was again ready to wander, but this time within her own imagining, outside the plane of that bedroom. She was idly thus transported into a wished-for situation between herself and the owner of the shop where she worked; in fact, she spoke aloud her decision to take the following Saturday off.
This her employer instantly refused. Then still speaking aloud she presented her reasons, insisted — and at last, the blood beginning to throb in her forehead, handed in her notice! ... This must have suddenly frightened her, bringing her back abruptly to the room — and she stopped talking. She laid the magazine down, looked round the room. Still that feeling of invisible fog — perhaps there was indeed mist; the furniture looked more than usually stationary. She tapped with her finger on the magazine. It sounded loud, too loud. Her mind returned to the murderer, she ceased tapping and looked quickly at the shut door. The memory of those murders must have lain at the back of her mind throughout the past minutes, gently elevating her with the compounding unconscious excitement that news sometimes brings, the sensation that somewhere something has happened, revitalizing life. But now she suddenly shivered. Those murders had happened in Victoria, the neighbouring district, only in fact — she counted — five, six streets away.

The curtains began to move. Her eyes were round and at them in the first flickering moment. This time they not only shuddered, but seemed to eddy, and then to belly out. A coldness grasped and held the ventricles of her heart. And the curtains, the whole length of the rounded blue curtains moved towards her across the carpet. Something was pushing them. They travelled out towards her, then the ends rose sailing, sailed wide, opened to reveal nothing but the night, the empty balcony — then as suddenly collapsed and receded back to where they had hung motionless before. She let out the deep breath that whitening she had held all that time. Only, then, a breath of wind again; a curious swell on the compressed summer air. And now again the curtains hung still. She gulped sickly, crumpled and decided to shut the window — better not to risk that sort of fright again, one never knew what one’s heart might do. But, just then, she hardly liked to approach those curtains. As the atmosphere of a nightmare cannot be shaken off for some minutes after waking, so those curtains held for a while their ambience of dread. Clara lay still. In a few minutes those fears quietened, but now forgetting the sense of fright she made no attempt to leave the bed, it was too comfortable, she would read again for a little. She turned over and picked up her magazine. Then a short while later, stretching, she half-turned to the curtains again. They were wide open. A man was standing exactly in the centre, outlined
against the night outside, holding the curtains apart with his two hands.

Ron Raikes, five-foot-nine, grey eyes, thin brown hair, brown sports jacket, black hat, stood on the balcony holding the curtains aside looking in at this girl twisted round in her white-sheeted bed. He held the curtains slightly behind him, he knew the street to be dark, he felt safe. He wanted to breathe deeply after the short climb of the painter’s ladder — but instead held it, above all kept quite still. The girl was staring straight at him, terrified, stuck in the pose of an actress suddenly revealed on her bedroom stage in its flood of light; in a moment she would scream. But something here was unusual, some quality lacking from the scene he had expected — and he concentrated, even in that moment when he knew himself to be in danger, letting some self-assured side of his mind wander and wonder what could be wrong.

He thought hard, screwing up his eyes to concentrate against the other unsteady excitement aching in his head — he knew how he had got here, he remembered the dull disconsolate hours waiting round the station, following two girls without result, then walking away from the lighted crowds into these darker streets and suddenly seeing a glimpse of this girl through the lighted window. Then that curious, unreasoned idea had crept over him. He had seen the ladder, measured the distance, then scoffed at himself for risking such an escapade. Anyone might have seen him . . . and then what, arrest for house-breaking, burglary? He had turned, walked away. Then walked back. That extraordinary excitement rose and held him. He had gritted his teeth, told himself not to be such a fool, to go home. Tomorrow would be fresh, a fine day to spend. But then the next hours of the restless night exhibited themselves, sounding their emptiness — so that it had seemed too early to give in and admit the day worthless. A sensation then of ability, of dexterous clever power had taken him — he had loitered nearer the ladder, looking up and down the street. The lamps were dull, the street empty. Once a car came slurring past, changed gear, accelerated off petulantly into the night, away to nowhere. The sound emphasized the quiet, the protection of that deserted hour. He had put a hand on the ladder. It was then the same as any simple choice — taking a drink or not taking a drink. The one action might lead to some detrimental end — to more drinks, a night out, a headache in
the morning — and would thus be best avoided; but the other, that action of taking, was pleasant and easy and the moral forehead argued that after all it could do no harm? So, quickly, telling himself he would climb down again in a second, this man Raikes had prised himself above the lashed night-plank and had run up the ladder. On the balcony he had paused by the curtains, breathless, now exhilarated in his ability, agile and alert as an animal — and had heard the sound of the girl turning in bed and the flick of her magazine page. A moment later the curtains had moved, nimbly he had stepped aside. A wind. He had looked down at the street — the wind populated the kerbs with dangerous movement. He parted the curtains, saw the girl lying there alone, and silently stepped on to the threshold.

Now when at last she screamed — a hoarse diminutive sob — he knew he must move, and so soundlessly on the carpet went towards her. As he moved he spoke: ‘I don’t want to hurt you’ — and then knowing that he must say something more than that, which she could hardly have believed, and knowing also that above all he must keep talking all the time with no pause to let her attention scream — ‘Really I don’t want to hurt you, you mustn’t scream, let me explain — but don’t you see if you scream I shall have to stop you. . . .’ Even with a smile, as soft a gesture as his soft quick-speaking voice, he pushed forward his coat pocket, his hand inside, so that this girl might recognize what she must have seen in detective stories, and even believe it to be his hand and perhaps a pipe, yet not be sure: ‘. . . but I won’t shoot and you’ll promise won’t you to be good and not scream — while I tell you why I’m here. You think I’m a burglar, that’s not true. It’s right I need a little money, only a little cash, ten bob even, because I’m in trouble, not dangerous trouble, but let me tell you, please, please listen to me, Miss.’ His voice continued softly talking, talking all the time quietly and never stuttering nor hesitating nor leaving a pause. Gradually, though her body remained alert and rigid, the girl’s face relaxed.

He stood at the foot of the bed, in the full light of the bedside lamp, leaning awkwardly on one leg, the cheap material of his coat ruffled and papery. Still talking, always talking, he took off his hat, lowered himself gently to sit on the end of the bed — rather to put her at her ease than to encroach further for himself. As he sat, he apologized. Then never pausing he told her a story, which was nearly true, about his escape from a
detention camp, the cruelty of his long sentence for a trivial theft, the days thereafter of evasion, the furtive search for casual employment, and then worst of all the long hours of time on his hands, the vacuum of time wandering, time wasting on the café clocks, lamp-posts of time waiting on blind corners, time walking away from uniforms, time of the head-aching clocks loitering at the slow pace of death towards his sole refuge — sleep. And this was nearly true — only that he omitted that his original crime had been one of sexual assault; he omitted those other dark occasions during the past three weeks; but he omitted these events because in fact he had forgotten them, they could only be recollected with difficulty, as episodes of vague elation, dark and blurred as an undeveloped photograph of which the image should be known yet puzzles with its indeterminate shape, its hints of light in the darkness and always the feeling that it should be known, that it once surely existed. This was also like anyone trying to remember exactly what had been done between any two specific hours on some date of a previous month, two hours framed by known engagements yet themselves blurred into an exasperating and hungry screen of dots, dark, almost appearing, convolving, receding.

So gradually as he offered himself to the girl’s pity, that bed-clothed hump of figure relaxed. Once her lips flexed their corners in the beginning of a smile. Into her eyes once crept that strange coquettish look, pained and immeasurably tender, with which a woman takes into her arms a strange child. The moment of danger was past, there would be no scream. And since now on her part she seemed to feel no danger from him, then it became very possible that the predicament might even appeal to her, to any girl nourished by the kind of drama that filled the magazines littering her bed. As well, he might look strained and ill — so he let his shoulders droop for the soft extraction of her last sympathy.

Yet as he talked on, as twice he instilled into the endless story a compliment to her and as twice her face seemed to shine for a moment with sudden life — nevertheless he sensed that all was not right with this apparently well-contrived affair. For this, he knew, should be near the time when he would be edging nearer to her, dropping his hat, picking it up and shifting thus unstessibly his position. It was near the time when he would be near enough to attempt, in one movement, the risk that could never fail, either way, accepted or rejected.
But... he was neither moving forward nor wishing to move. Still he talked, but now more slowly, with less purpose; he found that he was looking at her detachedly, no longer mixing her image with his words — and thus losing the words their energy; looking now not at the conceived image of something painted by the desiring brain — but as at something unexpected, not entirely known; as if instead of peering forward his head was leant back, surveying, listening, as a dog perhaps leans its head to one side listening for the whistled sign to regulate the bewildering moment. But — no such sign came. And through his words, straining at the diamond cunning that maintained him, he tried to reason out this perplexity, he annotated carefully what he saw. A white face, ill white, reddened faintly round the nostrils, pink and dry at the mouth; and a small fat mouth, puckered and fixed under its long upper lip: and eyes also small, yet full-irised and thus like brown pellets under eyebrows low and thick: and hair that colour of lustreless hemp, now tied with a bow so that it fell down either side of her cheeks as lank as string: and round her thin neck, a thin gold chain just glittering above the dull blue wool of that bed-jacket, blue brittle wool against the ill white skin: and behind, a white pillow and the dark wooden head of the bed curved like an inverted shield. Unattractive... not attractive as expected, not exciting... yet where? Where before had he remembered something like this, something impelling, strangely sympathetic and — there was no doubt — earnestly wanted?

Later, in contrast, there flashed across his memory the colour of other faces — a momentary reflection from the scarlet-lipped face on one of the magazine covers — and he remembered that these indeed troubled him, but in a different and accustomed way; these pricked at him in their busy way, lanced him hot, ached into his head so that it grew light, as in strong sunlight. And then, much later, long after this girl too had nervously begun to talk, after they had talked together, they made a cup of tea in her kitchen. And then, since the July dawn showed through the curtains, she made a bed for him on the sofa in the sitting-room, a bed of blankets and a silk cushion for his head.

Two weeks later the girl Clara came home at five o’clock in the afternoon carrying three parcels. They contained two coloured ties, six yards of white material for her wedding dress, and a box of thin red candles.
As she walked towards her front door she looked up at the windows and saw that they were shut. As it should have been – Ron was out as he had promised. It was his birthday. Thirty-two. For a few hours Clara was to concentrate on giving him a birthday tea, forgetting for one evening the fabulous question of that wedding dress. Now she ran up the stairs, opened the second door and saw there in an instant that the flat had been left especially clean, tidied into a straight, unfamiliar rigour. She smiled (how thoughtful he was, despite his 'strangeness') and threw her parcels down on the sofa, disarranging the cushions, in her tolerant happiness delighting in this. Then she was up again and arranging things. First the lights – silk handkerchiefs wound over the tops of the shades, for they shone too brightly. Next the tablecloth, white and fresh, soon decorated with small tinsels left over from Christmas, red crackers with feathered paper ends, globes gleaming like crimson quicksilver, silver and copper snowflakes.

(He’ll like this, a dash of colour. It’s his birthday, perhaps we could have gone out, but in a way it’s nicer in. Anyway, it must be in with him on the run. I wonder where he is now. I hope he went straight to the pictures. In the dark it’s safe. We did have fun doing him up different – a nice blue suit, distinguished – and the moustache is nice. Funny how you get used to that, he looks just the same as that first night. Quite, a quiet one. Says he likes to be quiet too, a plain life and a peaceful one. But a spot of colour – oh, it’ll do him good.)

Moving efficiently she hurried to the kitchen and fetched the hidden cake, placed it exactly in the centre of the table, wound a length of gold veiling round the bottom, undid the candle parcel, and expertly set the candles – one to thirty-one – round the white-iced circle. She wanted to light them, but instead put down the matches and picked off the cake one silver pellet and placed this on the tip of her tongue: then impatiently went for the knives and forks. All these actions were performed with that economy and swiftness of movement peculiar to women who arrange their own houses, a movement so sure that it seems to suggest dislike, so that it brings with each adjustment a grimace of disapproval, though nothing by anyone could be more approved.

(Thirty-one candles – I won’t put the other one, it’s nicer for him to think he’s still thirty-one. Or I suppose men don’t mind – still, do it. You never know what he really likes. A quiet one – but ever so thoughtful. And tender. And that’s a
funny thing, you'd think he might have tried something, the way he is, on the loose. A regular Mr Proper. Doesn't like this, doesn't like that, doesn't like dancing, doesn't like the way the girls go about, doesn't like lipstick, nor the way some of them dress . . . of course he's right, they make themselves up plain silly, but you'd think a man . . . ?

Now over to the sideboard, and from that polished oak cupboard take very carefully one, two, three, four fat quart bottles of black stout — and a half-bottle of port. Group them close together on the table, put the shining glasses just by, make it look like a real party. And the cigarettes, a coloured box of fifty. Crinkly paper serviettes. And last of all a long roll of paper, vivid green, on which she had traced, with a ruler and a pot of red paint: HAPPY BIRTHDAY RON!

This was now hung between two wall-lights, old gas-jets corded with electricity and shaded — and then she went to the door and switched on all the lights. The room warmed instantly, each light threw off a dark glow, as though it were part of its own shadow. Clara went to the curtains and half-drew them, cutting off some of the daylight. Then drew them altogether — and the table gleamed into sudden night-light, golden-white and warmly red, with the silver cake sparkling in the centre. She went into the other room to dress.

Sitting by the table with the mirror she took off her hat and shook her head; in the mirror the hair seemed to tumble about, not pinned severely as usual, but free and flopping — she had had it waved. The face, freckled with pin-points of the mirror's tarnish, looked pale and far away. She remembered she had much to do, and turned busily to a new silk blouse, hoping that Ron would still be in the pictures, beginning again to think of him.

She was not certain still that he might not be the man whom the police wanted in connection with those murders. She had thought it, of course, when he first appeared. Later his tender manner had dissipated such a first impression. He had come to supper the following night, and again had stayed; thus also for the next nights. It was understood that she was giving him sanctuary — and for his part, he insisted on paying her when he could again risk enquiring for work. It was an exciting predicament, of the utmost daring for anyone of Clara's way of life. Incredible — but the one important and over-riding fact had been that suddenly, even in this shocking way, there had appeared a strangely attractive man who had expressed immedi-
ately an interest in her. She knew that he was also interested in his safety. But there was much more to his manner than simply this – his tenderness and his extraordinary preoccupation with her, staring, listening, striving to please and addressing to her all the attentions of which through her declining youth she had been starved. She knew, moreover, that these attentions were real and not affected. Had they been false, nevertheless she would have been flattered. But as it was, the new horizons became dreamlike, drunken, impossible. To a normally frustrated, normally satisfied, normally hopeful woman – the immoral possibility that he might be that murderer would have frozen the relationship in its seed. But such was the waste and the want in lonely Clara that, despite every ingrained convention, the great boredom of her dull years had seemed to gather and move inside her, had heaved itself up like a monstrous sleeper turning, rearing and then subsiding on its other side with a flop of finality, a sigh of pleasure, welcoming now anything, anything but a return to the old dull days of nothing. There came the whisper: ‘Now or never!’ But there was no sense, as with other middle-aged escapist, of desperation; this chance had landed squarely on her doorstep, there was no striving, no doubt – it had simply happened. Then the instinctive knowledge of love – and finally to seal the atrophy of all hesitation, his proposal of marriage. So that now when she sometimes wondered whether he was the man the police wanted, her loyalty to him was so deeply assumed that it seemed she was really thinking of somebody else – or of him as another figure at a remove of time. The murders had certainly stopped – yet only two weeks ago? And anyway the man in the tweed coat was only wanted in connection with the murders... that in itself became indefinite... besides, there must be thousands of tweed coats and black hats... and besides there were thousands of coincidences of all kinds every day... .

So, shrugging her shoulders and smiling at herself for puzzling her mind so – when she knew there could be no answer – she returned to her dressing-table. Here her face grew serious, as again the lips pouted the down-drawn disapproval that meant she contemplated an act of which she approved. Her hand hesitated, then opened one of the dressing-table drawers. It disappeared inside, feeling to the very end of the drawer, searching there in the dark. Her lips parted, her eyes lost focus – as though she were scratching deliciously her back. At length the hand drew forth a small parcel.
Once more she hesitated, while the fingers itched at the knotted string. Suddenly they took hold of the knot and scrambled to untie it. The brown paper parted. Inside lay a lipstick and a box of powder.

(Just a little, a very little. I must look pretty, I must tonight.)

She pouted her lips and drew across them a thick scarlet smear, then frowned, exasperated by such extravagance. She started to wipe it off. But it left boldly impregnated already its mark. She shrugged her shoulders, looked fixedly into the mirror. What she saw pleased her, and she smiled.

As late as seven, when it was still light but the strength had left the day, when on trees and on the gardens of squares there extended a moist and cool shadow and even over the tram-torn streets a cooling sense of business past descended — Ronald Raikes left the cinema and hurried to get through the traffic and away into those quieter streets that led towards Clara’s flat. After a day of gritted heat, the sky was clouding; a few shops and orange-painted snack-bars had turned on their electric lights. By these lights and the homing hurry of the traffic, Raikes felt the presence of the evening, and clenched his jaw against it. That restlessness, vague as the hot breath before a headache, lightly metallic as the taste of fever, must be avoided. He skirted the traffic dangerously, hurrying for the quieter streets away from that garish junction. Between the green and purple tiles of a public house and the red-framed window of a passport photographer’s he entered at last into the duller, quieter perspective of a street of brown brick houses. Here was instant relief, as though a draught of wind had cooled physically his head. He thought of the girl, the calm flat, the safety, the rightness and the sanctuary there. Extraordinary, this sense of rightness and order that he felt with her; ease, relief, and constant need. Not at all like ‘being in love’. Like being very young again, with a protective nurse. Looking down at the pavement cracks he felt pleasure in them, pleasure reflected from a sense of gratitude — and he started planning, to get a job next week, to end this hiding about, to do something for her in return. And then he remembered that even at that moment she was doing something more for him, arranging some sort of treat, a birthday supper. And thus tenderly grateful he slipped open the front-door and climbed the stairs.

There were two rooms — the sitting-room and the bedroom.
He tried the sitting-room door which was regarded as his, but found it locked. But in the instant of rattling the knob Clara’s voice came: ‘Ron? . . . Ron, go in the bedroom, put your hat there – don’t come in till you’re quite ready. Surprise!’

Out in the dark passage, looking down at the brownish bare linoleum he smiled again, nodded, called a greeting and went into the bedroom. He washed, combed his hair, glancing now and then towards the closed connecting door. A last look in the mirror, a nervous washing gesture of his hands, and he was over at the door and opening it.

Coming from the daylit bedroom, this other room appeared like a picture of night, like some dimly-lit tableau recessed in a waxwork-show. He was momentarily dazzled not by light but by a yellowed darkness, a promise of other unfocused light, the murky bewilderment of a room entered from strong sunlight. But a voice sang out to help him: ‘Ron – HAPPY BIRTHDAY!’ and, reassured, his eyes began to assemble the room – the table, crackers, shining cake, glasses and bottles, the green paper greeting, the glittering tinsel and those downcast shaded lights. Round the cake burned the little upright knives of those thirty-one candles, each yellow blade winking. The ceiling disappeared in darkness, all the light was lowered down upon the table and the carpet. He stood for a moment still shocked, robbed still of the room he had expected, its cold and clockless daylight, its motionless smell of dust.

An uncertain figure that was Clara came forward from behind the table, her waist and legs in light, then upwards in shadow. Her hand stretched towards him, her voice laughed from the darkness. And thus with the affirmation of her presence, the feeling of shock mysteriously cleared, the room fell into a different perspective – and instantly he saw with gratitude how carefully she had arranged that festive table, indeed how prettily reminiscent it was of festivity, old Christmases and parties held long ago in some separate life. Happier, he was able to watch the glasses fill with rich black stout, saw the red wink of the port dropped in to sweeten it, raised his glass in a toast. Then they stood in the half-light of that upper shadow, drank, joked, talked themselves into the climate of celebration. They moved round that table with its bright low centre-light like figures about a shaded gambling board – so vivid the clarity of their lowered hands, the sheen of his suit and the gleam of her stockings, yet with their faces veiled and diffused. Then, when two of the bottles were already empty,
they sat down.

Raikes blinked in the new light. Everything sparkled suddenly, all things round him seemed to wink. He laughed, abruptly too excited. Clara was bending away from him, stretching to cut the cake. As he raised his glass, he saw her back from the corner of his eye, over the crystal rim of his glass—and held it then undrunk. He stared at the shining white blouse, the concisely corrugated folds of the knife-edge wave of her hair. Clara? The strangeness of the room dropped its curtain round him again, heavily. Clara, a slow voice mentioned in his mind, has merely bought herself a new blouse and waved her hair. He nodded, accepting this automatically. But the stout to which he was not used weighed inside his head, as though some heavy circular hat was being pressed down, wreathing leadenly where its brim circled, forcing a lightness within that seemed to balloon airily upwards. Unconsciously his hand went to his forehead—and at that moment Clara turned her face towards him, setting it on one side in the full light, blowing out some of those little red candles, laughing as she blew. The candle flames flickered and winked like jewels close to her cheek. She blew her cheeks out, so that they became full and rounded, then laughed so that her white teeth gleamed between oil-rich red lips.

Thin candle-threads of black smoke needled curling by her hair. She saw something strange in his eyes. Her voice said: ‘Why, Ron—you haven’t a headache? Not yet anyway... eh, dear?’

Now he no longer laughed naturally, but felt the stretch of his lips as he tried to smile a denial of the headache. The worry was at his head, he felt no longer at ease in that familiar chair, but rather balanced on it alertly, so that under the table his calves were braced, so that he moved his hands carefully for fear of encroaching on what was not his, hands of a guest, hands uneasy at a strange table.

Clara sat round now facing him—their chairs were to the same side of that round table, and close. She kept smiling; those new things she wore were plainly stimulating her, she must have felt transformed and beautiful. Such a certainty together with the unaccustomed alcohol brought a vivacity to her eye, a definition to the movements of her mouth. Traces of faltering, of apology, of all the wounded humilities of a face that apologizes for itself—all these were gone, wiped away beneath the white powder; now her face seemed to be charged
with light, expressive, and in its new self-assurance predatory. It was a face bent on effect, on making its michief. Instinctively it performed new tricks, attitudes learnt and stored but never before used, the intuitive mimicry of the female seducer. She smiled now largely, as though her lips enjoyed the touch of her teeth; lowered her eyelids, then sprang them suddenly open; ended a laugh by tossing her head—only to shake the new curls in the light; raised her hand to her throat, to show the throat stretched back and soft, took a piece of butter-coloured marzipan and its marble-white icing between the tips of two fingers and laughing opened her mouth very wide, so that the tongue-tip came out to meet the icing, so that teeth and lips and mouth were wide and then suddenly shut in a coy gobble. And all this time, while they ate and drank and talked and joked, Raikes sat watching her, smiling his lips, but eyes heavily bright and fixed like pewter as the trouble roasted his brain.

He knew now fully what he wanted to do. His hand, as if it were some other hand not connected to his body, reached away to where the parcel of ties lay open; and its fingers were playing with the string. They played with it over-willingly, like the fingers guiding a paintbrush to over-decorate a picture, like fingers that pour more salt into a well-seasoned cook-pot. Against the knowledge of what he wanted the mind still balanced its danger, calculated the result and its difficult aftermath. Once again this was gluttonous, like deciding to take more drink. Sense of the moment, imagination of the result; the moment's desire, the mind's warning. Twice he leant towards her, measuring the distance then drawing back. His mind told him that he was playing, he was allowed such play, nothing would come of it.

Then abruptly it happened. That playing, like a swing pushing higher and then somersaulting the circle, mounted on its own momentum, grew huge and boundless, swelled like fired gas. Those fingers tautened, snapped the string. He was up off the chair and over Clara. The string, sharp and hempen, bit into her neck. Her lips opened in a wide laugh, for she thought he was clowning up suddenly to kiss her, and then stretched themselves wider, then closed into a bluish cough and the last little sounds.
THE PALE BOY

by M. S. Waddell

He was a hungry looking child, the little pale boy. He stood in the corner of the playground on his own and watched the others playing; they did not want to play with him.

His name was Paul. He had it stitched on the sleeve of his grey uniform, like all the other orphanage children. He wasn’t like the others though, for Paul was beautiful. His hair was flaxen, his eyes were large and solemn, china blue. His voice was soft and his manner was shy, and the others said he bit them.

‘What is your name, little boy?’ asked the large overdressed woman with the shiny blonde hair as she bent over him. Paul answered her shyly. She sat down on the playground seat beside him and talked about her home in the country and the cats and dogs and the fields, how he would love the green, green grass. Paul sat patiently listening, his eyes fixed on her appealingly, his two large front teeth showing when he smiled.

‘Such a nice little boy,’ said Mrs Burnell to her husband that night, ‘but so very pale. I wonder if those children really get the right things to eat.’ But George Burnell merely grunted.

Mrs Burnell went to see Paul again. In fact every time she came on a visit to the orphanage she made a point of going across to the playground seat to talk to the little pale boy. She told him about the fields and the meadows and the stream at the bottom of her garden by the weeping willow tree and she told him about Trixie, her cat, and the kittens. The little pale boy smiled at her, showing his two front teeth.

‘How would you like to come and see Trixie’s kittens, Paul?’ Mrs Burnell asked. ‘I’m sure if we asked Matron very nicely she would let you come. You could spend the whole weekend at my house and see all the nice things there.’

The little pale boy put his arm round her neck and reached up to kiss her. It was a curious kiss and it made her start. His two front teeth seemed to dig into her cheek.

‘After that, what could I do?’ she said to her husband. ‘The poor little thing was so delighted at the thought of coming
away with me.'
‘It will make a bloody mess of the weekend,’ said George. ‘You and your fancy ideas. Kids running round the place – you’ll have the whole orphanage round our doorstep next.’

Mrs Burnell rose and left the room in a huff. George was so unsympathetic towards children. The poor mite, she said to herself, starved of affection, and she ran her hand almost caressingly over the two tiny scars his teeth had made on her cheek.

Mrs Burnell called for Paul the next day. He was waiting in the Matron’s office, his little case held tightly between his chubby knees, his face freshly scrubbed and adorned by a cheerful, toothful grin. It did her heart good to see his expectant little face. George would just have to put up with it for once.

‘Such a nice little boy,’ said the Matron, ‘but he hasn’t quite settled down here yet I’m afraid. We’re really very grateful to you for giving him this little treat. Perhaps you can bring some colour to his cheeks. He’s beginning to look quite undernourished,’ and she laughed a bleak official laugh.

‘Oh, I’m really glad to have him,’ Mrs Burnell replied. ‘Paul and I are old friends now. He’s always looked so lonely sitting in the playground on his own that I felt I really must do something to try and cheer him up.’

‘Yes, he is a lonely little boy,’ the Matron agreed. ‘He hasn’t really made any friends here yet I’m afraid. Of course he hasn’t been with us long and the circumstances attending his case were – very tragic, then it’s always difficult for an extra-sensitive child like Paul to settle into an institution. He just doesn’t seem to hit it off with the others. It’s almost as though they were afraid of him for some reason.’

As she spoke the Matron looked down into Paul’s china blue eyes and found the words catching in her throat. Reflected in the little pale boy’s eyes was something of pure malice, something that was there and then lost again as he smiled up at Mrs Burnell.

The Matron watched them go, the little boy’s hand clasped in that of the fat florid lady, and as she watched she felt an uncanny sense of release, as though something evil had passed from her. There was something about that little boy. . . . But she had no time to ponder the point. Cecil, Paul’s room mate, was waiting for her in the sickroom for treatment on the mysterious bites on his legs that the child was unable or unwill-
ing to explain.

'This is my little house, dear,' said Mrs Burnell as she opened the front door, and her heart gladdened to see the little flaxen-haired child trotting down the hallway before her, his case tucked under his arm.

She took off his coat and then they had tea, crumpets and honey, with fizzy lemonade for Paul. He ate sedately, almost as though the food did not interest him, and he ate very little.

'We won't make you a nice fat little boy easily, will we?' said Mrs Burnell. 'I can see why you're pale if this is all you take for nourishment at mealtimes.'

Then she took him by the hand and led him down the garden path to see the stream and the weeping willow tree, then on along to the tool shed to see Trixie and her kittens. She made him stand by the doorway with his eyes closed and then she swung the door open wide and stood back.

The pale little boy opened his eyes and stood looking in at the cat and its kittens. The boy licked his lips and bent forward to touch the little furry bundles as a child will and the next moment Trixie had leapt on his arm. The child staggered back under the weight of the assault and fell, the cat scrabbling at his face and upraised hands. As Mrs Burnell started forward to separate the pair Trixie gave a screech of pain and dropped from Paul, running off into the bushes with a strange lop-sided action.

'Oh the bad, bad pusscat,' Mrs Burnell made to comfort Paul, wiping the scratches on his face. 'Poor Paulie, poor little Paulie.' But the child did not seem to be at all dismayed.

'Naughty pusscat,' he said cheerfully.

'Yes, naughty pusscat to scrab poor Paulie,' said Mrs Burnell, leading him back to the house and paying no attention to Trixie's continued wail from the bushes where she had hidden herself.

The scratches were only little ones and the little boy did not seem to be at all put out. Mrs Burnell washed his hands and face and brushed his hair and put him out to play in the garden whilst she made her husband's tea.

'Going to play with Trixie,' he said, without fear.

'Stay away from the pusscat, Paulie,' she said. But the little pale boy only smiled at her and ran off happily to search the bushes.

She watched him from the bathroom window as he ran round the garden in hot pursuit of something or other, she
knew not what, his fat little legs waddling as fast as he could make them. Perhaps she could make George change his mind.

'This is Paulie, George,' she said to her husband, bringing the little boy to stand before him. 'Isn’t he a little darling?'

Mr Burnell looked up at the boy from the report he was studying. 'A bit on the pale side,' he commented, 'must be getting food that doesn’t suit him at that place,' and he dismissed Paul from his mind. The kid would give the wife something to play with for the weekend anyway. She had to have something to play with.

But Mrs Burnell was quite determined this time and later on she came back to the attack, when Paul was safely wrapped up in bed.

'No it wouldn’t be nice if we had a little boy of our very own,' George replied wearily to her oft-repeated question. 'It’s simply no use you starting that old thing up again.'

'But, George dear . . .'

'Ethel, I’m not going to adopt that child, however pale and frail he may look. I simply cannot afford to have a child hanging round the place interrupting my work.'

So there it was. Mrs Burnell left the room in a huff, as usual, and George settled down to get on with his work.

Mrs Burnell slowly climbed the stairs to the child’s room. She stood by his bedside in the darkness and put out her hand to touch the little quiff of flaxen hair that spilled over his pillow. 'Poor little Paulie,' she said softly, 'it isn’t my fault, Paulie, really it isn’t. I want you here for always and always. If only George wasn’t so stubborn.' Then she bent down and kissed his pale little cheek.

As she left the room his two china blue eyes opened wide and gazed after her thoughtfully.

'I see you’ve got rid of those blasted kittens at last,' said Mr Burnell the next morning. 'That’s a blessing anyway. We must have that cat doctored.'

'Don’t be silly, George, the kittens are in the shed,' said Mrs Burnell.

But they weren’t.

'Well now, isn’t that strange,' said Mrs Burnell. 'I suppose Trixie must have moved them somewhere else after the scare with Paulie.'

Mr Burnell went back to his gardening. Mrs Burnell took the little pale boy to church.

Coming home Paul said, 'Mummy Burnell, do I have to go
back to the orphanage?' in a very sad little voice.

Poor Mrs Burnell, that hateful George! Well at least the child should know the truth.

'Mummy Burnell would like you to be her little boy for ever and ever, Paulie, but Daddy Burnell is a very busy business man, and he says little boys make a lot of noise and he wouldn't be able to work, so you see I can't let you stay here. But Mummy Burnell will come to see you every week and you'll be able to come and visit here lots and lots of times, I promise.'

How she hated to say it! How she hated the hungry, betrayed look that came into Paul's eyes.

'Daddy Burnell doesn't like me,' he said in a matter-of-fact manner looking up at her, and there was nothing she could say.

When she reached home she sent Paul to play in the garden, where her husband was working. Perhaps the child could melt his hard heart. She couldn't bring herself to face her husband, how could he be so cruel? So she took a bath to cheer herself up and went down to make a special going away tea for her Paulie.

She made dozens of neat little sandwiches with the crusts cut off and she put out a plate of little cream cakes and chocolate biscuits, and then she rang the tea gong, but nobody came. She rang it again and again, and at last she went out into the garden to look for them. She walked round and round but the garden seemed to be quite empty—until suddenly the little pale boy came flying out of the cover of the weeping willow tree into her arms.

'Oh, Paulie,' she said, 'you did scare me so,' and she patted his head. 'My, you must have been enjoying yourself, your face is as rosy red as could be.'

But Mr Burnell was nowhere to be seen. He had quite vanished from the garden and Paulie did not seem to know where he had gone to. 'Afraid to show his face before the child,' was Mrs Burnell's verdict as she took Paulie in for his tea.

But tea was a disappointment as well. There were all the pretty buns and sandwiches she had made for Paulie's treat, and he only nibbled at them.

'Come on, Paulie, do eat up, darling. We want you to keep that nice rosy complexion,' Mrs Burnell said, reflecting what wonders a few good square meals had worked in the child.

'I'm quite, quite, full up, Mummy Burnell, really I am,'
said Paul. ‘Please may I go out and finish my game in the

And of course she let him go. He quite disappeared until it
was almost time to leave for the orphanage and then he ap-
peared at the back door, if anything rosier and better fed
looking than before.

‘They will be surprised to see you looking so bonny, child,’
said Mrs Burnell delightedly, and Paulie smiled his little
toothy smile at her.

They didn’t find Mr Burnell until about two months after
his disappearance, when a spaniel went sniffing under the
overhanging branches of the willow tree. There was hardly
any flesh left on the meatier parts of his body and the bones
appeared to have been gnawed. They don’t know how he died
but the theory is that he was attacked by some unknown
animal, ravenous for food.

Paul lives with his Mummy Burnell now but he seems to
be getting pale again. Though he loves his Mummy Burnell
she is a very fleshy lady and his appetite is growing every day,
his little front teeth getting sharper.

They never found the well-chewed kitten bones.
THE EMISSARY

by Ray Bradbury

He knew it was autumn again, because Torry came romping into the house bringing the windy crisp cold smell of autumn with him. In every black curl of his dog hair he carried autumn. Leaf flakes tangled in his dark ears and muzzle, dropping from his white vest, and off his flourished tail. The dog smelled just like autumn.

Martin Christie sat up in bed and reached down with one pale small hand. Torry barked and displayed a generous length of pink, rippling tongue, which he passed over and along the back of Martin's hand. Torry licked him like a lollipop. 'Because of the salt,' declared Martin, as Torry leaped upon the bed.

'Get down,' warned Martin. 'Mom doesn't like you up here.' Torry flattened his ears. 'Well ...' Martin relented. 'Just for a while, then.'

Torry warmed Martin's thin body with his dog warmness. Martin relished the clean dog smell and the litter of fallen leaves on the quilt. He didn't care if Mom scolded. After all, Torry was new born. Right out of the stomach of autumn Torry came, reborn in the firm sharp cold.

'What's it like outside, Torry? Tell me.'

Lying there, Torry would tell him. Lying there, Martin would know what autumn was like; like in the old days before sickness had put him to bed. His only contact with autumn now was this brief chill, this leaf-flaked fur; the compact canine representation of summer gone — this autumn-by-proxy.

'Where'd you go today, Torry?'

But Torry didn't have to tell him. He knew. Over a fall-burdened hill, leaving a pad-pattern in the brilliantly piled leaves, down to where the kids ran shouting on bikes and roller skates and wagons at Barstow's Park, that's where Torry ran, barking out his canine delight. And down into the town where rain had fallen dark, earlier; and mud furrowed under car wheels, down between the feet of weekend shoppers. That's
where Torry went.

And wherever Torry went, then Martin could go; because Torry would always tell him by the touch, feel, consistency, the wet, dry, or crispness of his coat. And, lying there holding Torry, Martin would send his mind out to retrace each step of Torry’s way through fields, over the shallow glitter of the ravine creek, darting across the marbled spread of the graveyard, into the wood, over the meadows; where all the wild, laughing autumn sports went on, Martin could go now through his emissary.

Mother’s voice sounded downstairs, angrily.

Her short angry walking came up the hall steps.

Martin pushed. ‘Down, Torry!’

Torry vanished under the bed just before the bedroom door opened and Mom looked in, blue eyes snapping. She carried a tray of salad and fruit juices, firmly.

‘Is Torry here?’ she demanded.

Torry gave himself away with a few bumps of his tail against the floor.

Mom set the tray down impatiently. ‘That dog is more trouble. Always upsetting things and digging places. He was in Miss Tarkins’s garden this morning, and dug a big hole. Miss Tarkins is mad.’

‘Oh.’ Martin held his breath. There was silence under the bed. Torry knew when to keep quiet.

‘And it’s not the only time,’ said Mom. ‘This is the third hole he’s dug this week!’

‘Maybe he’s looking for something.’

‘Something fiddlesticks! He’s just a curious nuisance. He can’t keep that black nose out of anything. Always curious!’

There was a hairy pizzicato of tail under the bed. Mom couldn’t help smiling.

‘Well,’ she ended, ‘if he doesn’t stop digging in yards, I’ll have to keep him in and not let him run.’

Martin opened his mouth wide. ‘Oh, no, Mom! Don’t do that! Then I wouldn’t know — anything. He tells me.’

Mom’s voice softened. ‘Does he, son?’

‘Sure. He goes around and comes back and tells what happens, tells everything!’

Mom’s hand was spun glass touching his head. ‘I’m glad he tells you. I’m glad you’ve got him.’

They both sat a moment, considering how worthless the last year would’ve been without Torry. Only two more months,
thought Martin, of being in bed, like the doctor said, and he'd be up and around.

'Here, Torry!'

Jangling, Martin locked the special collar attachment around Torry's neck. It was a note, painted on a tin square:

'MY NAME IS TORRY. WILL YOU VISIT MY MASTER, WHO IS SICK? FOLLOW ME!'

It worked. Torry carried it out into the world every day.

'Will you let him out, Mom?'

'Yes, if he's good and stops his digging!'

'He'll stop; won't you, Torry?'

The dog barked.

You could hear the dog yipping far down the street and away, going to fetch visitors. Martin was feverish and his eyes stood out in his head as he sat, propped up, listening, sending his mind rushing along with the dog, faster, faster. Yesterday Torry had brought Mrs Holloway from Elm Avenue, with a story book for a present; the day before Torry had sat up, begged at Mr Jacobs, the jeweller. Mr Jacobs had bent and near-sightedly deciphered the tag message and, sure enough, had come shuffling and waddling to pay Martin a little how-do-you-do.

Now, Martin heard the dog returning through the smoky afternoon, barking, running, barking again.

Footsteps came lightly after the dog. Somebody rang the downstairs bell, softly. Mom answered the door. Voices talked.

Torry raced upstairs, leaped on the bed. Martin leaned forward excitedly, his face shining, to see who'd come upstairs this time. Maybe Miss Palmborg or Mr Ellis or Miss Jendriss, or —

The visitor walked upstairs, talking to Mom. It was a young woman's voice, talking with a laugh in it.

The door opened.

Martin had company.

Four days passed in which Torry did his job, reported morning, afternoon and evening temperatures, soil consistencies, leaf colours, rain levels, and, most important of all, brought visitors.

Miss Haight, again, on Saturday. She was the young, laughing, handsome woman with the gleaming brown hair and the soft way of talking. She lived in the big house on Park Street.
It was her third visit in a month.

On Sunday it was Reverend Vollmar, on Monday Miss Clark and Mr Henricks.

And to each of them Martin explained his dog. How in pring he was odorous of wild flowers and fresh earth; in summer he was baked, warm, sun-crisp; in autumn, now, a treasure trove of gold leaves hidden in his pelt for Martin to explore out. Torry demonstrated this process for the visitors, lying over on his back waiting to be explored.

Then, one morning, Mom told Martin about Miss Haight, the one who was so handsome and young and laughed.

She was dead.

Killed in a motoring accident in Glen Falls.

Martin held on to his dog, remembering Miss Haight, thinking of the way she smiled, thinking of her bright eyes, her closely cropped chestnut hair, her slim body, her quick walk, her nice stories about seasons and people.

So now she was dead. She wasn’t going to laugh or tell stories any more. That’s all there was to it. She was dead.

‘What do they do in the graveyard, Mom, under the ground?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You mean they just lay there?’

‘Lie there,’ corrected Mom.

‘Lie there . . .?’

‘Yes,’ said Mom, ‘that’s all they do.’

‘It doesn’t sound like much fun.’

‘It’s not supposed to be.’

‘Why don’t they get up and walk around once in a while if they get tired of lying there?’

‘I think you’ve said enough, now,’ said Mom.

‘I just wanted to know.’

‘Well, now you know.’

‘Sometimes I think God’s pretty silly.’

‘Martin!’

Martin scowled. ‘You’d think He’d treat people better than throw dirt in their faces and tell them to lay still for keeps. You’d think He’d find a better way. What if I told Torry to play dead-dog? He does it awhile, but then he gets sick of it and wags his tail or blinks his eyes, or pants, or jumps off the bed, and walks around. I bet those graveyard people do the same, huh, Torry?’

Torry barked.
‘That will do!’ said Mom, firmly. ‘I don’t like such talk!’

The autumn continued. Torry ran across forests, over the creek, prowling through the graveyard as was his custom, and into town and around and back, missing nothing.

In mid-October, Torry began to act strangely. He couldn’t seem to find anybody to come to visit Martin. Nobody seemed to pay attention to his begging. He came home seven days in a row without bringing a visitor. Martin was deeply despondent over it.

Mom explained it. ‘Everybody’s busy. The war, and all. People have lots to worry over besides little begging dogs.’

‘Yeah,’ said Martin, ‘I guess so.’

But there was more than that to it. Torry had a funny gleam in his eyes. As if he wasn’t really trying, or didn’t care, or something. Something Martin couldn’t figure out. Maybe Torry was sick. Well, to heck with visitors. As long as he had Torry, everything was fine.

And then one day Torry ran out and didn’t come back at all.

Martin waited quietly at first. Then — nervously. Then — anxiously.

At supper time he heard Mom and Dad call Torry. Nothing happened. It was no use. There was no sound of paws along the path outside the house. No sharp barking in the cold night air. Nothing. Torry was gone. Torry wasn’t coming home ever.

Leaves fell past the window. Martin sank on his pillow, slowly, a pain deep and hard in his chest.

The world was dead. There was no autumn because there was no fur to bring it into the house. There would be no winter because there would be no paws to dampen the quilt with snow. No more seasons. No more time. The go-between, the emissary, had been lost in the wild thronging of civilization, probably hit by a car, or poisoned, or stolen, and there was no time.

Sobbing, Martin turned his face to his pillow. There was no contact with the world. The world was dead.

Martin twisted in bed and in three days the Hallowe’en pumpkins were rotting in trash cans, masks were burnt in incinerators, the bogeys were stacked away on shelves until
next year. Hallowe’en was withdrawn, impersonal, untouchable. It had simply been one evening when he had heard horns blowing off in the cold autumn stars, people yelling and thumping windows and porches with soap and cabbages. That was all.

Martin stared at the ceiling for the first three days of November, watching alternate light and dark shift across it. Days got shorter, darker, he could tell by the window. The trees were naked. The autumn wind changed its tempo and temperature. But it was just a pageant outside his window, nothing more. He couldn’t get at it.

Martin read books about the seasons and the people in that world that was now non-existent. He listened each day, but didn’t hear the sounds he wanted to hear.

Friday night came. His parents were going to the theatre. They’d be back at eleven. Miss Tarkins, from next door, would come over for a while until Martin got sleepy, and then she would go home.

Mom and Dad kissed him good night and walked out of the house into the autumn. He heard their footsteps go down the street.

Miss Tarkins came over, stayed a while, and then when Martin confessed to being tired, she turned out all the lights and went back home.

Silence, then. Martin just lay there and watched the stars moving slowly across the sky. It was a clear, moonlit evening. The kind when he and Torry had once run together across the town, across the sleeping graveyard, across the ravine, through the meadows, down the shadowed streets, chasing phantasmal childish dreams.

Only the wind was friendly. Stars don’t bark. Trees don’t sit up and beg. The wind, of course, did wag its tail against the house a number of times, startling Martin.

Now it was after nine o’clock.

If only Torry would come home, bringing some of the world with him. A burr or a rimed thistle, or the wind in his ears. If only Torry would come home.

And then, way off somewhere, there was a sound.

Martin arose in his covers, trembling. Starlight was reflected in his small eyes. He threw back the covers and tensed, listening. There, again, was the sound.

It was so small it was like a needle-point moving through the air miles and miles away.
It was the dreamy echo of a dog — barking.

It was the sound of a dog coming across meadows and fields, down dark streets, the sound of a dog running and letting his breath out to the night. The sound of a dog circling and running. It came and went, it lifted and faded, it came forward and went back, as if it was being led by someone on a chain. As if the dog was running and somebody whistled under the chestnut trees and the dog ran back, circled, and darted again for home.

Martin felt the room revolve under him, and the bed tremble with his body. The springs complained with metal, tining voices.

The faint barking continued for five minutes, growing louder and louder.

*Torry, come home! Torry, come home! Torry, boy, oh Torry, where’ve you been? Oh, Torry, Torry!*

Another five minutes. Nearer and nearer, and Martin kept saying the dog’s name over and over again. Bad dog, good dog, to go off and leave him for all these days. Bad dog, good dog, come home, oh, Torry, hurry home and tell me about the world! Tears fell and dissolved into the quilt.

Nearer now. Very near. Just up the street, barking. Torry!

Martin held his breath. The sound of dog feet in the piled dry leaves, down the path. And now — right outside the house, barking, barking, barking! Torry!

Barking to the door.

Martin shivered. Did he dare run down and let the dog in, or should he wait for Mom and Dad to come home? Wait. Yes, he must wait. But it would be unbearable if, while he waited, the dog ran away again. No, he would go down and release the lock and his own special dog would leap into his arms again. Good Torry!

He started to move from bed when he heard the other sound. The door opened downstairs. Somebody was kind enough to have opened the door for Torry.

Torry had brought a visitor, of course. Mr Buchanan, or Mr Jacobs, or perhaps Miss Tarkins.

The door opened and closed and Torry came racing upstairs and flung himself, yipping, on the bed.

‘Torry, where’ve you been, what’ve you done all this week?’

Martin laughed and cried all in one. He grabbed the dog and held him. Then he stopped laughing and crying, suddenly. He just stared at Torry with wide, strange eyes.
The odour arising from Torry was – different.
It was a smell of earth. Dead earth. Earth that had lain cheek
by jowl with unhealthy decaying things six feet under. Stink-
ing, stinking, rancid earth. Clods of decaying soil fell off
Torry’s paws. And – something else – a small withered frag-
ment of – skin?
Was it? Was it! WAS IT!
What kind of message was this from Torry? What did such
a message mean? The stench – the ripe and awful cemetery
earth.
Torry was a bad dog. Always digging where he shouldn’t
dig.
Torry was a good dog. Always making friends so easily.
Torry took to liking everybody. He brought them home with
him.
And now this latest visitor was coming up the stairs. Slowly.
Dragging one foot after the other, painfully, slowly, slowly,
slowly.
‘Torry, Torry – where’ve you been!’ screamed Martin.
A clod of rank crawling soil dropped from the dog’s chest.
The door to the bedroom moved inwards.
Martin had company.
LUCY COMES TO STAY

by Robert Bloch

Robert Bloch once remarked that ‘the world is a nice place to visit, but I wouldn’t want to live here’. He needn’t worry; he hasn’t lived in this world for a long time. Although listed as a permanent resident of Van Nuys, California, with steady and gainful employment in the motion picture business, that may be considered no more than a tax dodge. And if anyone thinks Bloch’s real world isn’t taxing, let him read the following story.

‘YOU CAN’T go on this way.’
Lucy kept her voice down low, because she knew the nurse had her room just down the hall from mine, and I wasn’t supposed to see any visitors.

‘But George is doing everything he can – poor dear, I hate to think of what all those doctors and specialists are costing him, and the sanatorium bill too. And now that nurse, that Miss Higgins, staying here every day.’

‘It won’t do any good. You know it won’t.’ Lucy didn’t sound like she was arguing with me. She knew. That’s because Lucy is smarter than I am. Lucy wouldn’t have started the drinking and gotten into such a mess in the first place. So it was about time I listened to what she said.

‘Look, Vi,’ she murmured. ‘I hate to tell you this. You aren’t well, you know. But you’re going to find out one of these days anyway, and you might as well hear it from me.’

‘What is it, Lucy?’

‘About George, and the doctors. They don’t think you’re going to get well.’ She paused. ‘They don’t want you to.’

‘Oh, Lucy!’

‘Listen to me, you little fool. Why do you suppose they sent you to that sanatorium in the first place? They said it was to take the cure. So you took it. All right, you’re cured, then. But you’ll notice that you still have the doctor coming every day, and George makes you stay here in your room, and that Miss Higgins who’s supposed to be a special nurse – you know

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what she is, don’t you? She’s a guard.’

I couldn’t say anything. I just sat there and blinked. I wanted to cry, but I couldn’t, because deep down inside I knew that Lucy was right.

‘Just try to get out of here,’ Lucy said. ‘You’ll see how fast she locks the door on you. All that talk about special diets and rest doesn’t fool me. Look at yourself — you’re as well as I am! You ought to be getting out, seeing people, visiting your friends.’

‘But I have no friends,’ I reminded her. ‘Not after that party, not after what I did —’

‘That’s a lie,’ Lucy nodded. ‘That’s what George wants you to think. Why, you have hundreds of friends, Vi. They still love you. They tried to see you at the hospital and George wouldn’t let them in. They sent flowers to the sanatorium and George told the nurses to burn them.’

‘He did? He told the nurses to burn the flowers?’

‘Of course. Look, Vi, it’s about time you faced the truth. George wants them to think you’re sick. George wants you to think you’re sick. Why? Because then he can put you away for good. Not in a private sanatorium, but in the —’

‘No!’ I began to shake. I couldn’t stop shaking. It was ghastly. But it proved something. They told me at the sanatorium, the doctors told me, that if I took the cure I wouldn’t get the shakes any more. Or the dreams, or any of the other things. Yet here it was — I was shaking again.

‘Shall I tell you some more?’ Lucy whispered. ‘Shall I tell you what they’re putting in your food? Shall I tell you about George and Miss Higgins?’

‘But she’s older than he is, and besides he’d never —’

Lucy laughed.

‘Stop it!’ I yelled.

‘All right. But don’t yell, you little fool. Do you want Miss Higgins to come in?’

‘She thinks I’m taking a nap. She gave me a sedative.’

‘Lucky I dumped it out.’ Lucy frowned. ‘Vi, I’ve got to get you away from here. And there isn’t much time.’

She was right. There wasn’t much time. Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks — how long had it been since I’d had a drink?

‘We’ll sneak off,’ Lucy said. ‘We could take a room together where they wouldn’t find us. I’ll nurse you until you’re well.’
'But rooms cost money.'
'You have that fifty dollars George gave you for a party dress – the one you didn’t buy.'
'Why Lucy,' I said. 'How did you know that?'
'You told me ages ago, dear. Poor thing, you don’t remember things very well, do you? All the more reason for trusting me.'
I nodded. I could trust Lucy. Even though she was responsible, in a way, for me starting to drink. She just had thought it would cheer me up when George brought all his high-class friends to the house and we went out to impress his clients. Lucy had tried to help. I could trust her. I must trust her –
'We can leave as soon as Miss Higgins goes tonight,' Lucy was saying. 'We’ll wait until George is asleep, eh? Why not get dressed now, and I’ll come back for you.'
I got dressed. It isn’t easy to dress when you have the shakes, because your hair keeps falling down and you can’t find all the snaps on your dress.
But I did it. I even put on some makeup and trimmed my hair a little with the big scissors. Then I looked at myself in the mirror and said out loud, 'Why, you can’t tell, can you?'
'Of course not,' said Lucy. 'You look radiant. Positively radiant.'
I stood there smiling, and the sun was going down, just shining through the window on the scissors in a way that hurt my eyes, and all at once I was so sleepy.
'George will be here soon, and Miss Higgins will leave,' Lucy said. 'I’d better go now. Why don’t you rest until I come for you?'
'Yes,' I said. 'You’ll be very careful?'
'Very careful,' Lucy whispered, and tiptoed out quietly.
I lay down on the bed and then I was sleeping, really sleeping for the first time in weeks, sleeping so the scissors wouldn’t hurt my eyes, the way George hurt me inside when he wanted to shut me up in the asylum so he and Miss Higgins could make love on my bed and laugh at me the way they all laughed except Lucy and she would take care of me she knew what to do now I could trust her when George came and I must sleep and sleep and nobody can blame you for what you think in your sleep or do in your sleep . . .
It was all right until I had the dreams, and even then I didn’t really worry about them because a dream is only a dream, and when I was drunk I had a lot of dreams and that’s how I got
into trouble because people didn’t understand but I knew it was all right.

When I woke up I had the shakes again, but it was Lucy shaking me, standing there in the dark shaking me. I looked around and saw that the door to my room was open, but Lucy didn’t bother to whisper.

She stood there with the scissors in her hand and called to me.

‘Come on, let’s hurry.’

‘What are you doing with the scissors?’ I asked.

‘Cutting the telephone wires, silly! I got into the kitchen after Miss Higgins left and dumped some of that sedative into George’s coffee. Remember, I told you the plan.’

I couldn’t remember now, but I knew it was all right. Lucy and I went out through the hall, past George’s room, and he never stirred. Then we went downstairs and out the front door and the street lights hurt my eyes. Lucy made me hurry right along, though.

We took a streetcar around the corner. It was crowded, but I managed to find a seat next to a fat man. Lucy just stood there, and when I wanted to talk she put her hand up to her lips, quickly, and I kept silent.

This was the difficult part, getting away. Once we were out of the neighbourhood, there’d be no worry. The wires were cut.

The lady at the rooming house on the South Side didn’t know about the wires being cut. She didn’t know about me, either, because Lucy got the room.

Lucy marched in bold as brass and laid my fifty dollars down on the desk. The rent was $12.50 a week in advance, and Lucy didn’t even ask to see the room. I guess that’s why the landlady wasn’t worried about baggage.

We got upstairs and locked the door, and then I had the shakes again.

Lucy said, ‘Vi – cut it out!’

‘But I can’t help it. What’ll I do now, Lucy? Oh, what’ll I do? Why did I ever let myself –’

‘Shut up!’ Lucy opened my purse and pulled something out. I had been wondering why my purse felt so heavy but I never dreamed about the secret.

She held the secret up. It glittered under the light, like the scissors, only this was a nice glittering. A golden glittering.

‘A whole pint!’ I gasped. ‘Where did you get it?’
‘From the cupboard downstairs, naturally. You knew George still keeps the stuff around. I slipped it into your purse, just in case.’

I had the shakes, but I got that bottle open in ten seconds. One of my fingernails broke, and then the stuff was burning and warming and softening –

‘Pig!’ said Lucy.

‘You know I had to have it,’ I whispered. ‘That’s why you brought it.’

‘I don’t like to see you drink,’ Lucy answered. ‘I never drink and I don’t like to see you hang one on, either.’

‘Please, Lucy. Just this once.’

‘Why can’t you take a shot and then leave it alone? That’s all I ask.’

‘Just this once, Lucy, I have to.’

‘I won’t sit here and watch you make a spectacle of yourself. You know what always happens – another mess.’

I took another gulp. The bottle was half empty.

‘I did all I could for you, Vi. But if you don’t stop now, I’m going.’

That made me pause. ‘You couldn’t do that to me. I need you, Lucy. Until I’m straightened out, anyway.’

Lucy laughed, the way I didn’t like. ‘Straightened out! That’s a hot one! Talking about straightening out with a bottle in your hand. It’s no use, Vi. Here I do everything I can for you, I stop at nothing to get you away, and you’re off on another bender.’

‘Please. You know I can’t help it.’

‘Oh yes you can help it, Vi. But you don’t want to. You’ve always had to make a choice, you know. George or the bottle. Me or the bottle. And the bottle always wins. I think deep down inside you hate George. You hate me.’

‘You’re my best friend.’

‘Nuts!’ Lucy talked vulgar sometimes, when she got really mad. And she was mad, now. It made me so nervous I had another drink.

‘Oh, I’m good enough for you when you’re in trouble, or have nobody else around to talk to. I’m good enough to lie for you, pull you out of your messes. But I’ve never been good enough for your friends, for George. And I can’t even win out over a bottle of rotgut whiskey. It’s no use, Vi. What I’ve done for you today you’ll never know. And it isn’t enough. Keep your lousy whiskey. I’m going.’
I know I started to cry. I tried to get up, but the room was turning round and round. Then Lucy was walking out the door and I dropped the bottle and the light kept shining the way it did on the scissors and I closed my eyes and dropped after the bottle to the floor...

When I woke up they were all pestering me, the landlady and the doctor and Miss Higgins and the man who said he was a policeman.

I wondered if Lucy had gone to them and betrayed me, but when I asked the doctor said no, they just discovered me through a routine checkup on hotels and rooming-houses after they found George's body in his bed with my scissors in his throat.

All at once I knew what Lucy had done, and why she ran out on me that way. She knew they'd find me and call it murder.

So I told them about her and how it must have happened. I even figured out how Lucy managed to get my fingerprints on the scissors.

But Miss Higgins said she'd never seen Lucy in my house, and the landlady told a lie and said I had registered for the room alone, and the man from the police just laughed when I kept begging him to find Lucy and make her tell the truth.

Only the doctor seemed to understand, and when we were alone together in the little room he asked me all about her and what she looked like, and I told him.

Then he brought over the mirror and held it up and asked me if I could see her. And sure enough—

She was standing right behind me, laughing. I could see her in the mirror and I told the doctor so, and he said yes, he thought he understood now.

So it was all right after all. Even when I got the shakes just then and dropped the mirror, so that the little jagged pieces hurt my eyes to look at, it was all right.

Lucy was back with me now, and she wouldn't ever go away any more. She'd stay with me for ever. I knew that. I knew it, because even though the light hurt my eyes, Lucy began to laugh.

After a minute, I began to laugh, too. And then the two of us were laughing together, we couldn't stop even when the doctor went away. We just stood there against the bars, Lucy and I, laughing like crazy.
‘**Penny for the guy, Mister?**’

The old gentleman at the bus stop thought, ‘Really, they get earlier and earlier every year. They’ll be starting up in the summer holidays next. Their parents really ought to –’

‘Penny for the guy, Mister?’

He looked down at the grimy hand tugging his sleeve.

‘Where is it?’

‘Over there.’ The thumb jerked over in the direction of a small wall which divided the pavement from the sodden lawn behind it. Sitting propped up against it was a glum apology for a guy.

‘They’re not like the guys we used to make,’ he thought wistfully. ‘We really took some trouble. Now it’s just a six-penny mask from Woolworth’s and a pair of Dad’s old reach-me-downs. Why, if you pick them up they all fall to pieces.’

The guy certainly looked somewhat precariously strung together.

‘Well, Mister?’ The hand tugged more impatiently. ‘What about it?’

‘There’s my bus.’ But the penny appeared nonetheless. He found it more or less impossible to refuse, so pressing was the request.

‘Somebody,’ he thought, as the crowd pushed and pulled past him. ‘Somebody will have to do something about this wholesale begging....’

‘Mind yer backs, please. Hurry along there.’

In the bus, as he was jostled and jammed, the old gentleman thought sadly of his long lost youth. He had not been just an old gentleman in a bus then; an anonymous old gentleman hurrying home from an anonymous job to an equally anonymous semi-detached. No, he had been Jerry Williams of Tedham, of whom great things were predicted. Strange how he could remember things that had happened then with far greater clarity than what had happened only yesterday. Silly, childish,
irrelevant things, most of them, too. But a scene or a person came creeping into his mind, and before he knew what was happening, had taken over completely.

‘Fares, please. Have your correct money ready, please.’

Like that wonderful bonfire. He still remembered that bonfire in every detail. It glared at him from the recesses of his memory, with all the shining clarity of those leaping, dancing flames. They said that folks had come from miles around to see it, even the neighbouring gentry had come. Of course, a lot of the gentry were friends of the Thomases so it was natural that they should have had invitations.

Jerry had heard that there had been supper and dancing up at the Hall before the great fire was lit. So that the open-air festivities had only been a culmination of what had gone before. But to Jerry and the other villagers, the bonfire was everything. They had looked forward to it for what had seemed months. And when the great day came, they were not disappointed. There was no feeling of anti-climax as so often happens when one has looked forward to something too hard.

And the guy! Jerry still remembered the guy. It was, he felt sure now, a work of art. Life-size, it had seemed a fitting crown for the best bonfire he had ever seen. Again he reflected how poor these modern guys were. Like everything else in the modern world, there was no craftsmanship.

A voice was speaking into his ear.

‘Have I your fare, sir?’

A woman a few seats ahead was getting up to leave. Eagerly he grabbed the seat, and for a time stared dismally out at the November fog which was beginning slowly to envelop the City.

‘Every night at the same time,’ he thought. . . .

He wondered what had become of the Hall, in this National Trust age. They were an odd family, the Thomases. His mother used to go up to do sewing and various other odd jobs for Mrs Thomas. That, of course, was before the poor lady had her attack. The first time he, Jerry, had ever been taken to the Hall was on one of his mother’s visits, when he was too young to be left alone. He had been given an immense tea, and Mrs Thomas had brought young David in to play with him.

He and David were almost the same age, but David had been far shyer than Jerry, and had at first refused positively to
play with this strange boy. Both mothers had coaxed and 
cajoled, and eventually David had been prevailed upon to 
show Jerry the new train set he had been given for Christmas. 
Jerry had never even seen a train set, let alone played with one, 
and he was vastly impressed. His eager interest softened 
David’s heart towards him, and on subsequent visits the two 
boys had played happily for hours while Mrs Williams sewed 
and pinned and altered. Sometimes Mrs Thomas would stay 
with them, but more often she was off on one of her numerous 
visits to the village.

This had been the beginning of an intermittent friendship 
between the two boys. Occasionally David would come to tea 
at Jerry’s cottage, and then out would come the best cloth and 
teaset. David’s manners were perfect and as he grew older, he 
charmed Mrs Williams more and more; he was continually 
held up as an example to the less inhibited Jerry. But it was 
this inhibition in David that had been the cause of the gradual 
cooling of their friendship. Not that they had ever fallen out – 
far from it. In fact, they hardly ever quarrelled. David invariably 
gave in to Jerry if there was a disagreement; he seemed to 
lack the spirit for a really good set-to.

No, it was just that David seemed to prefer his own com-
pany, or the company of animals, to that of other boys. When 
he did want other boys, it was usually to Jerry that he turned. 
But he was quite content to go off for long walks by himself, or 
perhaps with a dog. He had always been fond of dogs. Jerry 
remembered how his eyes shone when he first showed him his 
new puppy.

The bus came to a violent stop, jerking him out of his 
reverie. The driver swore at an Austin van which had swung 
out of a turning just in front. Various passengers grabbed the 
opportunity to get off. When eventually the bus did begin to 
move again, Jerry tried to collect his scattered thoughts.

Where was he? Oh yes, David and his dog. Jerry tried to 
remember that dog. It had gone everywhere with David, refus-
ing to be parted from him for even a minute. And David had 
returned the affection. It was a little wire-haired terrier; Jerry 
couldn’t remember whether it had been a stray, or whether 
David had been given it. In any event, it was very much a one-
man dog. Jerry himself had tried periodically to make tentative 
advances to it, but it had run back to David at the first oppor-
tunity, much, he felt, to David’s secret satisfaction. Some-
times when David thought himself unobserved he had kissed
and fondled the dog, in a demonstration of affection Jerry had never seen him show towards his parents.

In fact, Jerry thought that he had never got on particularly well with his parents. His father was a bluff genial typical county Squire, who had very little sympathy with his son’s strange aloof ways. In fact, he seemed to be attracted more by Jerry himself, as indeed did Mrs Thomas, who also found it difficult to meet her son on common ground. Perhaps because he and David were so different, Jerry and Mrs Thomas became firm friends, and even after her mental collapse, Jerry was the only person in whose company she remained reasonably calm. When his father, who had worked on the estate, was killed on the Somme, she used to bring over enormous food parcels and in a hundred ways helped to tide them over a difficult time. Her husband had tried to dissuade her from bestowing too much bounty on the tenants, but in many ways he was known to be surprisingly hard.

It was also known that the Thomases disagreed on practically everything. It was said that their marriage had begun to go wrong even before David was born. There were no other surviving children, and for a long time before David had reached what is popularly but sometimes erroneously called the age of discretion, wild rumours had been circulating in the village concerning the Squire’s roving affections. To most people who knew the Thomases these were considered not only wildly untrue but also grossly libellous; but nevertheless doubt remained. Indeed, it was true that nobody had actually seen Squire out with any other woman: it was just the look in his eye perhaps that made wise women nod their heads and say they wouldn’t put it past him, and fond mothers turn anxious looks towards their daughters. That, and a certain haggard look which was sometimes noticeable in Mrs Thomas. Jerry, who of course was really too young to take any interest in such things, had heard his mother relate in muted tones to his father at the end of one of her days up at the Hall, that things had been said and done, and that all was not as it should be between them. But nevertheless it was true that any dirty linen was safely and securely washed in private. Only the haggard look remained as testimony.

Jerry had read enough whodunits to know that one of the basic rules of the game from the author’s point of view was that a person should have knowledge of a certain vital piece of information concerning the crime without actually being aware
that he knows it. And this certainly applied to himself. It was only after the Squire’s sudden disappearance that the rumours crystallized into proven fact, and he remembered his mother’s discreet utterances. He could not recollect that he’d ever heard any rumours till afterwards, when he suddenly became aware that actually he’d heard a great many. It was strange the way that after the police had searched and searched without finding any trace of the missing gentleman, it seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should have run away with one of his lady-loves. And he certainly covered his traces well: no hint of his whereabouts ever had been discovered.

Jerry tried to remember, after an interval of forty years, what Mr Thomas had really been like. The only thing he could remember, at first, without consciously trying, was that he had never got on well with his son, David. But Jerry had always seen things from David’s viewpoint, never from his father’s. Now he realized how trying it must have been to have had a son so different from oneself, both in temperament and every kind of taste. Jerry had never had a son himself, but he could imagine how frustrated a father might feel. Perhaps in some obscure way he had blamed his wife, and that was why they had had scenes that had given rise to his wife’s haggard looks.

Now other incidents began to return. He remembered Squire’s violent temper, and that when he lost it a little vein used to appear in his forehead and throb and throb. Like the time when poachers had been caught on the property. They had had a lot of trouble for some time, and certain village louts were suspected. One evening the gamekeeper had burst into his study in a state of intense excitement to say that they had been chased into a coppice and were surrounded. Squire had ordered them to be smoked out. David had later told Jerry how disgusted and degraded he had felt at the whole sordid spectacle. Torches had been lit and soon the whole copse was a circle of flame. Nothing happened. David had been present, but in the background, crying with fear and pain for the wretches inside. They had stuck it out till the last possible moment, and then three sorry-looking specimens, blackened and scorched, their clothes half off their bodies, and wriggling with pain, had emerged. One of them had later died in the cottage hospital, so David had said. His father had shrugged at this, implying that he had brought it on himself, but David
had remembered his smile of triumph on that memorable night.

Perhaps after that the idol had toppled. David took to avoiding his father's company altogether, and went off with his little dog for whole days at a time. Even Jerry was banned from the secret fraternity, though reading Huck Finn at the time he had begged to be allowed to accompany them. Mrs Thomas was in an almost continual state of anxiety, and soon after this had arranged for the child to be sent away to boarding school. David had at first seemed pleased at the idea, but later had agreed to go only on condition that he could take his dog with him. Mrs Thomas had appealed to her husband, who as might be expected, scoffed at the idea, and told the boy not to be such a damn cissy. He had all but implied, so David later said, that there was something almost unhealthy in the boy's preference for canine company.

Jerry remembered the climax to this situation. After the catching of the poachers Mr Thomas had taken to putting down traps. Hideous lethal-looking things they were too, that could break a man's leg. Word got round the village, and no poacher was seen again in that region. But one day David had burst into Jerry's bedroom in a state of near hysteria. It seemed that Rusty had disappeared. He had hunted high and low but the dog was nowhere to be found, and David was broken-hearted. Jerry promised to come and help him search.

For hours the two boys whistled and called, until it was quite dark and the search had to be temporarily postponed. Early the next morning before Jerry was up, David was round at the cottage. There were dark lines under his eyes, which were red and swollen. Mrs Williams was quite alarmed. His distress seemed to be quite disproportionate; when at the most Rusty had probably wandered off after a rabbit or something and would return when he was hungry. She tried to reassure the boy, who at length assented somewhat doubtfully, and agreed to eat breakfast with the family. She promised herself that at the first opportunity she would have a talk with Mrs Thomas. How best, she wondered, to broach the subject, and suggest tactfully that the boy be given a nerve tonic....

But Rusty did not return. Some workers on the estate found him later that day and tried to keep the sight from David. Mrs Williams' guess must have been right, and he must indeed have chased a rabbit. At any rate, he had been caught in one of the traps, and it was evident from the state of the body that the
poor little animal had been struggling for hours. His hind paw had been crushed completely. David saw the men returning with the forlorn little bundle wrapped in a sheet, and had somehow wormed the truth out of one of the party.

He didn’t say much, Jerry remembered. In fact, he’d never said much about it. He just went deathly quiet, and his face was so white it reminded Jerry of one of the clowns in a travelling fair he’d seen the week before. For a week after that he was very ill and Jerry wasn’t allowed to see him. When he was free of chores for his mother, Jerry would sometimes wander up to the house and hang about outside David’s bedroom window, idly kicking the gravel and hoping for a glimpse of him. He saw a number of important looking men with top hats and preoccupied faces drive up in carriages, and learnt from the between-maid that they were medical men, and one, so it was said, an eminent Harley Street specialist. When he asked what was the matter with him, she said it was brain fever, and when he asked what that was, he was told not to ask so many questions and sent about his business. Once he collared Mrs Thomas, slipping out on one of her errands of mercy to the village, but she only smiled sadly and distantly and said he would be all right in time. Even his own mother was scarcely more forthcoming.

When at last he did appear he seemed to have grown much older. Something warned Jerry not to mention Rusty, and Rusty was never mentioned between them. David was even reconciled to the idea of going away to school, and looked forward to it. After all, as he said, there was nothing to keep him at Tedham.

Jerry was anxious to hear all about his illness, and on this subject, surprisingly, he was less reticent. In fact he rather delighted in recounting the symptoms. Jerry told him that he had seen the doctors, and how important they’d looked, and David said that he’d decided to be a doctor when he grew up….

‘Excuse me.’

A large business-man was nudging Jerry to move over as he wanted to sit down. Jerry’s raincoat was overflowing on to his neighbour’s part of the seat, and with a muttered apology, he gathered himself together. The business-man sat down and opened his evening paper.

... Yes, that must have been when David had first decided he wanted to become a doctor. And now he was one of the most
eminent neurologists in the country, with his own rooms in Harley Street. For a moment Jerry felt himself the possessor of an intimate and coveted secret. Probably, and because David did not confide in his parents, he, Jerry, had been the first one to know what was in David’s mind.

Shame, really, that he hadn’t kept up with him. Though he doubted whether Sir David Thomas would want to be bothered with a small fry like himself. He had had very little of what the world terms success, though he had to admit he had married quite a nice wife. He had had no children so, he reflected wistfully, his line would die out. Funny David had never married. Jerry had collected various news items through the years, and he knew that Sir David lived alone with only a housekeeper to look after him. The last time he had seen him was at poor Mrs Thomas’s funeral. Then they had barely said two words to each other. It seemed that all they had ever had to unite them was gone, and they had nothing left in common. In fact, when David left for the large Public School in the North, they had gone their separate ways. That was soon after Mr Thomas’s disappearance, and his wife’s mental collapse. In fact, the year of the Bonfire.

Funny how important the night of the Bonfire had become in his mind. Everything had changed that night. It was almost like the end of an era. Jerry tried to remember the exact year. It must have been after the War, because his own father had been dead then – probably about 1919 or 1920.

If he closed his eyes he could still see it as vividly as the little boy he had once been. About ten then, he had been, and David going on for twelve. David was the taller, but still with that queer strained look which betrayed his recent illness. Although he had looked forward to the great day with as much eagerness as anyone.

Jerry had read many books since the Tedham days. He had branched out on strange uninhabited byways of literature. The occult interested him, and witchcraft. He even fancied himself in some way psychic. He often had uncomfortable hints of foreknowledge of events; rather like the common experience we have all had of thinking about someone for no apparent reason, and then suddenly seeing them. Except in his case it was heightened. Now something seemed to warn him to go no farther. If the affairs of the Thomas family had come into his mind, they had come there unbidden, and he would do best to let sleeping dogs lie.
But this was nonsense and he knew it. What possible harm could there be in thinking about a Guy Fawkes Night celebration of forty years ago? He pushed the warning voice away, and rejoined the young Jerry Williams of circa 1919.

But something sinister had crept into the proceedings. It must have been planted there by time itself, for he had found nothing then to frighten him. It had just been a glorious holocaust, throwing out its arms to brighten the whole countryside. But now, though...

The scene was assuming unfamiliar proportions. It reminded him now of some ancient witches’ Sabbat or Walpurgis Night dance: the naked bodies thrown into sharp relief by the leaping flames against a gigantic, primeval backcloth of forest or mountain. And then it wasn’t the Sabbat any more, but the burning of the witches themselves, found guilty and condemned by the solemn pronouncements of the Church; and their screams of agony were mixed with the shouting of the onlookers in one diabolic opera of death in which the orchestrated accompaniment was the crackling of the flames as they ate into the wood of the funeral pyre....

All this he saw in one brief second, and then it was gone. The screams of mortal agony were after all only the delighted squeals of ecstatic children, and of course this picture was not the Fire, his Fire, but some uninvited intruder from the world of nightmare.

With a conscious effort he tried to recapture his own experience, uncluttered by alien impressions.

Plans had first been laid for Guy Fawkes Night weeks before. Everyone in the village had co-operated by searching their attics and cellars for all the old furniture and lumber they could throw out. All the children had united together, ranging far and wide in their search for combustible material. Odd jobs were requested and carried out with inflammable articles as payment. Surrounding trees were practically denuded of their branches: vast stacks of twigs and dead leaves were swept into position. Even the adults agreed that they had never seen preparations for a bonfire on such a grand scale, and as the great day dawned, even the older population of Tedham and surrounding districts looked forward with something like excitement to the evening. Anxious parents crossed their fingers that there would be no accidents, but the delighted faces of their offspring were sufficient compensation for any momentary misgiving.
Even Mr Thomas entered into the spirit of the thing, allowing the party to be held in the grounds of the Hall. In those days fireworks did not constitute the menace they do now, and consequently the bonfire was everything. From the first David took the greatest interest in the preparations and volunteered to make the guy. It wasn’t till afterwards when the events of the night were discussed over and over again, that someone remembered that the whole thing had originally been his suggestion.

Instantly his consuming interest became the fashioning of the guy, making it as lifelike as possible. His mother noted with satisfaction his gradual return to health, and as he never mentioned Rusty’s death, she convinced herself at length that he had forgotten it. His reawakening energy was now concentrated almost entirely on the guy, and he was tireless in his efforts in constructing something as above the normal run of guys as he could make it.

Mrs Thomas confided to Mrs Williams that she suspected the dawning of latent artistic talent in David, though she was unsure how her husband would react, should he choose an artistic career. Well, he didn’t. He became a doctor, and then a neurologist: but, Jerry reflected from his height of forty years, it was probably a certain basic knowledge of anatomy, gleaned in his first tentative steps down the road of medicine, that had enabled him to construct such an uncannily life-like figure. Perhaps he had scrounged an anatomical book from the local doctor’s surgery.

When Jerry had first seen the guy he had had a shock. He had almost fancied the thing alive and breathing. He looked at David with admiration. It was almost too good to put on the fire.

He had gone with the other village children up to the Hall to fetch it. David had placed it in the large wing chair in his fathers’ study, in as lifelike an attitude as possible. Now they trundled the old wheelbarrow they had taken from the gardener’s shed up to the French window, and David with four other boys lifted it through. He had fastened its head back to a wooden plank so that the head wouldn’t loll forward and the straw fall out, as he explained. The height of the fire was so great that they needed a ladder to get the thing into position, but eventually it was done with the plank firmly wedged. David himself saw to that, and it was David who lit the fire, with due pomp and ceremony.
Immediately the night was transformed into a fairyland of splendour. The fog, which had been threatening, was held severely at bay. There were hot roast potatoes, and paper bags full of hot chestnuts for the children, and hot spiced and mulled wine for the grownups. Now came the next surprise of the evening. A pig had been roasted whole, and now delicious plates of steaming meat were handed out through the kitchen windows. Only Jerry was checked at the last minute from accepting any, by a slightly pungent odour which seemed to be hanging on the atmosphere, and which he connected in some vague indefinite way with the meat. He noticed, however, that David was eating with relish, so he guessed it was probably the smoke-laden fog.

He did accept the chestnuts, however, and was just eating one when he was tapped on the shoulder by Mrs Thomas.

‘Hello, Jerry,’ she said, ‘enjoying yourself?’

‘Yes, thanks, Mrs Thomas.’

He had been too young then to note the tone of forced casualness in her voice.

‘Have you seen Mr Thomas anywhere?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘That’s funny. He promised to join us in time to see the lighting of the fire. Now I can’t find him anywhere.’

She wandered off. The world of adult affairs did not impinge very heavily on Jerry’s consciousness; and he soon forgot the incident. He caught sight of David watching the blaze intently. David’s face was ecstatic.

‘Terrific, isn’t it?’ he called when he became aware of Jerry’s eye upon him.

‘I’ll say! Did you make the guy all by yourself?’

‘Yes, but it’s a state secret how I made it. Effective though, isn’t it?’

They both watched the guy, now surrounded by a wall of flame. It seemed to Jerry to be dancing with joy as the branches on which it was supported shifted this way and that. As the flame finally touched its feet, delighted cries went up on all sides from the children who flew round and round shouting and singing. Leading the singing was David, eyes shining with excitement.

And then Jerry saw it. He saw it without for one moment taking in all the implications of what he saw. That funny huddled figure on the outside of the crowd, pressing in behind them as far up to the fire as the heat would allow, was Mrs
Thomas. Jerry never saw the expression on her face, except for one brief moment when the light from the flames threw her eyes into sharp relief, and then a shadow blotted it out. She was gesticulating and pointing up at the guy, and then her arms were flailing about in a queer way. Then he lost sight of her completely, until he noticed that the people round her were clearing a hurried space. There was something on the ground, which looked like a heap of clothes: a party of servants had trooped out of the house and were coming towards them. They picked up the bundle, and then Jerry saw that it was Mrs Thomas and that she had fainted. They carried her back to the house; some children near by had begun to cry and were taken home. The older ones stayed, but the best of the night was over, and the fire burnt itself out. Jerry looked round for David, but he was nowhere to be seen. He guessed that he’d gone to his mother. Soon after that he too went home.

He never saw Mrs Thomas again until he was twenty.

A few weeks later David went away to boarding school. Jerry saw him only a couple of times before he left, and each time he seemed ill at ease in Jerry’s company. When Jerry asked after his mother he was reticent and evasive. Jerry gathered only that she had had to go away for a time. It was from Mrs Williams that various snippets of information filtered through. It appeared that Mr Thomas’s brother and his wife had come to the Hall, ostensibly to look after David, but also to help in the search for David’s father. They had been summoned by a frantic housekeeper, at the same time as the doctor was sent for, and had arrived in the small hours.

Much later Jerry heard all the details, pieced together from various sources. Mrs Thomas had had a complete mental breakdown, and it was doubted whether she would ever recover fully. David’s father was missing – in fact, he hadn’t been seen since the night of the party. A complete search was instigated, and only after every possibility had been explored thoroughly was it concluded that he had run off with, or to, someone he had kept successfully concealed in the background of his life. Mrs Thomas was not capable of answering questions: she was kept under sedatives, and the doctors in whose care she was placed by her brother-in-law forbade her to be worried unduly whether by police or any other interested parties. It was assumed that the shock of her husband’s defection had been too much for her, and that in all probability he had left her a note which in her distraction she must have screwed up and thrown
into the bonfire.
The nine days' wonder in the village died down, as nine days' wonders do, and eventually the Hall was sold.

Jerry saw David only rarely after that. In the school holidays David was shunted about among numerous aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandmothers, and when he went up to Oxford Jerry supposed that his friendship with the Thomases belonged to a past chapter in his life.

It was not till ten years later that he was to learn anything further. He was working in an Insurance Office in the City, and living in furnished lodgings at the time, when, on arriving home one evening his landlady informed him that a gentleman had called to see him, and that she had shown him up to his room.

'David Thomas! Good heavens, after all this time! How on earth did you know where to find me?'

'I went to see your mother at Tedham.'

David had just come down from medical school, he explained, and was looking up old friends before settling down to work.

'I've decided to specialize in neurology. You know, nerves and the mind. There's an opening on the staff of St Andrew's as a house surgeon, and I can study while I'm there.'

'I wish you luck.' Jerry poured a sherry. 'Tell me about yourself.'

He was looking well, Jerry thought, except that he had never lost that strained look about the eyes.

He shrugged, 'Not much to tell. I read medicine, and got through the finals last week.'

'Congratulations.'

'Thanks. What are you doing for dinner?'

'Mrs Richards usually cooks me a chop. Stay and have one with me.'

'No, you come out with me. You look as if you could eat a decent meal.'

Over their food Jerry steered the conversation towards David's father.

'Father? He's dead as far as I'm concerned.'

The vehemence in David's tone startled him.

'You've heard something then?' Jerry leaned forward eagerly.

David shook his head. 'No, nothing. And I've never bothered to inquire.'
'Haven't you? I'm sure I would have done in your place.'
'I loathe and detest the ground he walked on. He was a brute when he was here and I hope to God he's dead now.'
Jerry stared in amazement. David's face was a living mask of hate, and he noticed the little vein in his forehead, throbbing until it looked as if it would burst, a legacy from the man he hated.
Jerry felt as if he hazarded the next remark at the risk of his life.
'Surely you're being unreasonable. I know you and him didn't always see eye to eye, but—'
'Jerry, I know you don't mean to annoy me, but if you value my friendship you'll drop the topic.'
There was an awkward pause after Jerry's fumbled apology, and it was only over the mellowing effect of the brandy that David calmed down sufficiently to re-open the subject of his own free will.
'I'm sorry about that outburst. Actually, I do owe you an explanation—'
'No, of course you don't. It's your affair after all.'
'Well, I'll give you one anyway.'
'I must admit I am curious. What exactly did happen that night?'
'Which night?'
Jerry found himself becoming a trifle impatient at David's equanimity, which he felt sure was assumed.
'Why, the night of the bonfire, of course. The night of your father's disappearance.'
David shrugged. 'I don't really know. As far as I remember, we had some people up for dinner, and my parents had arranged a small dance afterwards. Then the guests were all to go out on to the terrace to watch the fireworks and all the quaint village goings-on. Sorry, that was stupid.'
'Go on.'
'I sat next to father at dinner. He always got rather drowsy after a big meal, especially when he had to engage in a lot of small talk with people who bored him. He complained of feeling tired and announced that subject to the permission of the rest of the party, he would go into his study for a short nap so as to feel fresh for the later festivities. Apparently the dance was to continue into the small hours. You may remember that rather enormous wing chair he had in his study?'
'Vaguely.'
'Well, he frequently fell asleep in it. He hated being disturbed, and there was a tacit understanding with Mother that whenever he announced that he wanted ten minutes' sleep she would wait until she was summoned at the end of it.'

His lip curled slightly, and Jerry fancied that there must have been scenes over the disobeying of this rule.

'He retired into his study, the dance began, and — that was it! He was never seen again, as they say in books.'

Jerry remembered Mrs Thomas's inquiry.

'She asked me if I'd seen him, I remember.'

'Oh? When?'

'I think it was just after you'd lit the bonfire. It never dawned on me that there was anything seriously wrong.'

'No, of course not. Why should it?'

'Did they have to force the door of the study?'

'No, he never locked the door. Anyway, the study was quite accessible by the french window. He quite simply wasn't sitting in the wing chair.'

Something about the french window struck a chord in Jerry's memory. 'Were the servants questioned?'

'Oh, of course. Everyone was questioned.'

'Was foul play suspected?'

David laughed. 'Foul play! You've been reading to many whodunits.'

Jerry acknowledged that he enjoyed whodunits.

'Who would want to murder Father?'

'Had he no enemies?'

'All right, Sherlock Holmes! Not that I know of.'

Jerry remembered some incident involving poachers.

'Poachers? Oh yes, I remember.'

Not the smallest change of expression, Jerry noted. Nothing but that strained look, the constant factor.

'Didn't one of them die?'

'Yes, I believe so. First degree burns. No, it couldn't have been anything to do with that.... Revenge you mean? He had a wife I believe, but I heard she died fairly soon afterwards. There were no children. Besides —

'Still, it could have been someone else who remembered the incident.'

'Well the police were fairly satisfied on that score. As I say, all the servants were closely questioned, and no one remembered seeing any suspicious strangers hanging around. After
father put down those bloody traps we never had anyone near the place. They were all too scared. Word got round, you know.'

Jerry thought it wiser not to pursue this aspect of the question. He didn’t know whether Rusty’s death would still affect him to any great degree, but he hadn’t forgotten that this had been responsible for a nervous breakdown once, and he didn’t want to take chances.

‘Was any suitcase missing at all?’ he asked instead.

‘You mean did he take anything with him? No, just what he stood up in.’

‘That in itself was suspicious, surely?’

‘Not if he intended to cut himself off completely. Make a fresh start. It’s been done before, you know. And you must remember, they hadn’t been happy together for some considerable time.’

‘Yes, I had heard.’

‘No, he had some little piece set up and waiting for him. The villainous country squire. All he lacked was twirling moustaches and a title.3

He began to sing softly.

‘Oh, Sir Jasper do not touch me –

‘Anyway, let’s forget it. Another brandy.’

David ordered two more, and Jerry leaned back contentedly. ‘Marvellous meal, David.’

‘Yes, this place was quite a find. Actually . . . ?’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, I might as well be frank.’

For one ghastly moment Jerry thought he was going to be asked to pay the bill. The next, however, he was reassured.

‘The fact is,’ David went on, ‘it wasn’t only disinterested friendship that made me come and see you tonight. The reason I let you go on about Father was because I thought it would form a natural lead-in to – to what I really wanted to see you about.’

He paused.

‘Spit it out,’ said Jerry, trying to keep his voice casual. But he half knew what was coming.

‘It’s about – about Mother. You must know what – what happened to her? It’s that more than anything else I cannot forgive Father for. Though God knows – it was such a great shock. The police thought he must have left her a note saying he’d run off and –’

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‘I understand.’ Jerry patted his arm. David’s face was working.

‘Well, you see she’s no better. She lives in this place in Sussex, on the Downs it is. The doctors and nurses are very kind to her, but,’ he shrugged, ‘it seems her mind is gone.’

‘Oh, David, I’m so sorry. Is it hopeless, quite hopeless?’

David nodded. His voice began to shake. ‘But the most awful part, Jerry, is that she can’t stand me.’

‘Can’t stand you?’ Jerry repeated incredulously.

‘Not at any price. Can’t bear to have me in the same room with her. And I don’t know why. Can you understand that? Now the doctors say it’s better if I don’t go to see her at all.’

‘David, I don’t know what to say.’

‘There’s nothing you can say. Oh God, it’s so awful. The three of us, bound together in some silken bond of hate –’

He buried his face in his hands. The other diners began to look round uneasily. Jerry half rose. David’s voice came from between his fingers.

‘It’s all right, sit down. I’ll be all right in a minute. You see, that’s what decided me to become a nerve specialist. Mother’s illness I mean. But now it’s all so hopeless, I feel I’ve done it all for nothing. There’s no cure.’

‘David, you don’t know yet. Your work hasn’t begun. You may find some new wonder drug.’

But David’s interest in medicine had begun before that night, he thought.

‘No. You see the doctors have just told me that Mother hasn’t long to live. She’s going to die, and she’s going to die hating me.’

‘Die hating you?’ Jerry repeated the last words as if they held no meaning. All this was so foreign to anything in his own experience.

Now, thirty years later, he remembered this conversation in almost every detail. He saw the young man David had been then, sitting opposite him at that cosy table for two, surrounded by all the opulence of the twenties in that fashionable restaurant; handsome, clever, rich, seemingly with all the world before him and yet with that cloud of darkness and grief pressing down on him. Yes, there had been tales of insanity in the Sadler family, tales to explain the plight of poor Mrs Thomas, tales of hopelessness and terror and dark un-nameable and blasphemous doings: handed down from villager to villager, there were skeletons that rattled as they do in most
long-established county families, though these perhaps rattled rather more loudly than some. But never, until that moment in the restaurant, confronted as he was by that specimen of human misery before him, had these tales come home so forcibly to Jerry as now. For a mother to die hating her son was as intolerable as it was unnatural. In fact it was monstrous.

David was speaking again. 'Sorry if I've shocked you. I didn't mean to spoil your dinner. Look here, I'll get to the point. I want you to go and see her.'

'Go and see her?' Jerry repeated stupidly.

'Yes. See if you can talk to her. She always liked you. More than me, in some ways I think. She'll be pleased to see you, I'm sure of it. She has rational spells you know. But the sight of me only distresses her. Find out if you can why she hates me so.'

'But—'

'Will you do it?'

Jerry gazed at David intently.

'Yes, of course I'll go and see her.'

It was arranged that on the following Saturday when Jerry was free from his office David would call for him at his 'digs' and drive him in his new motor to the Nursing Home. During the interview he would wait outside, and then they would go somewhere to discuss it.

All David's anxious preparation did not prevent Jerry's shock when he first saw Mrs Thomas. She was sitting on the bed at the far end of the severe room, huddled and emaciated, her hair grey and lank. Jerry remembered her former copper tresses, and a great surge of pity for this unfortunate creature welled up inside him.

He advanced tentatively into the centre of the room.

'Mrs Thomas?' he murmured, then stopped, at a loss.

She looked up without much interest.

'I'm Jerry — Jerry Williams. Do you remember me?'

She repeated the name to herself several times, and he was just about to explain further, when to his relief and joy he saw the dawning recognition in her eyes.

'Jerry Williams. Little Jerry! But it's big Jerry now, isn't it? Come closer and let me look at you. How old are you?'

'Nineteen.'

She nodded. 'Nineteen. And how is your dear mother? She
used to do sewing for me, and help me with all my pretty dresses.'

It was Jerry's turn to nod. He felt tongue-tied, like a little boy again. 'She's very well, thank you.'

'Give her my love, dear. Now be sure to do as I say.'

'I will indeed.'

'Little Jerry Williams.' She sighed. 'How nice of you to come and see me. But you were always a nice boy. Yes, you were. A kind, dear, thoughtful boy.' Jerry shifted uneasily. He had always hated being praised. It made him feel somehow a fraud.

Mrs Thomas sighed again, then she shivered violently.

'Are you cold, Mrs Thomas?'

'A little. Hand me that coat will you? That's better. Just someone passing over my grave, I expect. My - grave.' Her voice tailed off.

'Are you tired? Shall I go, Mrs. Thomas?'

'Nonsense, you've only just come. Sit down. There, that's right. Now talk to me. About yourself. Tell me all the news.'

Jerry began to talk to her, retailing little pieces of gossip which he thought would amuse her. He knew he wasn't a very good talker, but she seemed entertained. Several times, in passing as it were, he mentioned David, but a shadow crossed her face at the name, and a warning voice bade him beware.

This was the first of several visits. Each time David took him there, and each time he waited for him outside, but at the end of the fifth visit Jerry was no nearer to solving the mystery of the violent antagonism he sensed in her towards her son. They would play draughts together, and Mrs Thomas's delight when she won gave new encouragement to her doctors. She began to look forward to Jerry's visits, and Jerry too in some strange way began to welcome them. He wrote to his mother, telling her of the latest development, but when she wrote back offering herself to come up, the doctors warned Jerry that Mrs Thomas was not quite so amenable with other visitors.

It was after the fifth visit that David came round to beg Jerry to come at once as she was not expected to last the night. Although Jerry had known she was dying, latterly she had seemed so much better that this new shock struck him all the more forcibly.

When she saw him her words were so feeble that he had to bend right over her to catch them. David hovered at the door,
but Jerry screened him from her sight.

Now or never, he thought. He whispered, so that only she could hear:

‘Mrs Thomas, your son—’

But he got no farther. She pushed him back violently away from her and sat up, saying in clear, ringing tones:

‘I have no son.’

The doctor eased her gently back, frowning at Jerry and telling him on no account to excite her. David shrank back out of sight.

But it seemed she had asked for Jerry specifically, and now she gestured for him again. He bent forward. ‘Jerry,’ she whispered.

‘I’m here, Mrs Thomas.’
‘Jerry, the smell, the smell—’
This bemused him completely.
‘Smell? What smell, Mrs Thomas? Is it stuffy in here? Shall I open a window?’

He saw that she was trying to shake her head, and there was a look of impatience in her eyes.

‘The p-pills. The sleeping pills. He took the sleeping pills—’

But the effort was too much for her. Jerry was guided gently but firmly from the room.

Half an hour later he heard that she was dead.

‘What did she mean about sleeping pills? Have you any idea?’

Jerry was talking to David in the matron’s office where they had been taken after they had heard it was all over.

David shook his head. ‘Not the remotest. Did you ask the doctor?’

But the doctor hadn’t known either. It seemed that she had mentioned sleeping pills before, but as she had never had access to any, no one had taken her ramblings very seriously. David now remembered that in the old days at Tedham after a quarrel with his father she had sometimes had to take one to compose herself, but when her illness had necessitated her removal from the Hall, the box had been thrown away. No, he didn’t know what they were; only that they were quite strong.

However, the thought of sleeping pills had led invariably to one of her periodic outbursts of violence, during which she had shouted various unconnected words and phrases, often
coupling her son’s name to that of her husband. When one of the doctors had suggested that they try to trace the missing husband, she had given way to peals of hysterical laughter, often losing all control so that they had had to subdue her by force. After that it was considered unwise to mention the husband in her presence at all.

Had she ever mentioned this mysterious smell before? The doctor was not sure, but had thought that she had.

Jerry wished now, not for the first time, that psychiatry had been as advanced and as widely practised in 1929 as it was in 1959.

He had remained with David for the rest of that night, and spent as much time as he could with him until after the funeral. But David had told him then that he would be taking up his new post at St Andrew’s in a few days, and as Jerry himself was more than half concerned in a certain affair of the heart, they had again drifted apart.

That was the last Jerry saw of David Thomas. At first they had written desultory letters, but as they had always moved in different worlds they continued to do so now. David went up and up the ladder of medical eminence while Jerry more or less remained stationary in his own field. He was bothered too by a slight conscience as far as David was concerned. David had come to him in distress asking him to perform a desperately important service. The fact remained that he had failed. Had he tried hard enough? Although David never reproached him he wondered whether David felt he had let him down.

He still kept himself informed of David’s affairs through the medium of the Press, however. He was thin skinned enough to imagine that in the rarefied atmosphere that David now breathed his continued friendship would seem an encumbrance to him. So that was that. He must remain at a distance, but –

He now realized just how many questions remained unanswered. How different life was from books where every i was dotted, and every t so very tidily crossed. Now he would never know the truth: not one truth alone but many. He determined, though, to take every fact he knew and see where, if anywhere, it led. He remembered the golden rule of every whodunit worth the name, and determined to see whether he was the possessor of any such vital piece of information.

Right, here goes:

Mrs Thomas’s last words, for instance. Had they any significance? The sleeping pills. Had sleeping pills figured at any
time in the story? Could she have meant her husband, when she referred to the mysterious ‘he’ who took the sleeping pills? An overdose of sleeping pills perhaps? But if so, they would have found the body. And in the middle of a party? Impossible. But if not her husband, who had taken sleeping pills, and why?

He remembered how very rational she had seemed during those last visits, and found it very hard to believe that the words she had uttered had been the mere ramblings of a madwoman.

And the smell. What did she mean by that? If anything. There was some kind of association in his mind with a disagreeable unexplained odour, but for the life of him he couldn’t remember what it was.

‘Hyde Park Corner!’ He came to himself with a start. Good Lord, he was nearly home! He noticed that the businessman next to him had gone, leaving his evening paper on the seat. He picked it up absently.

Again he was unpleasantly conscious of that warning voice. What did it say? Leave well alone, it was saying. Don’t trespass. Some things it is better not to know. Yes, but what?

That smell now. Yes, of course, he’d got it! The night of the bonfire. He’d noticed a vague smell in the air that he’d connected with the November fog. Or had he? No, he’d connected it with the meat. But why the meat? Yes, why had he connected that smell with the meat? It was perfectly ordinary pork, wasn’t it?

The French window. Odd, that he should think of the French window. What French window? Of the study, of course!

Stop, said the voice. Stop!

He had gone through the French window to fetch the guy. It had been in the study. The wing chair. David’s father had been sitting in the wing chair.

You fool, said the voice, proceed at your peril!

David had hated his father. Poor Mrs Thomas, insanity in the family. Rusty’s death. Traps. Guy Fawkes. The burning of the poachers. DAVID’S FATHER HAD BEEN SITTING IN THE WING CHAIR!

Impressions poured one after the other into Jerry’s mind, and now he realized he was powerless to stop them. He had ignored the warning voice, and now he had to follow, wherever it should lead. It had taken forty years, but now he had to remember.
And David's father had been sitting in the wing chair! 
This phrase repeated itself over and over again like a 
refrain.
And now he had gripped the rail of the seat in front of him, 
and was pressing and pressing so hard that his knuckles showed 
white; because he knew what that smell was.
'Are you all right, dear?'
The conductress was standing over him anxiously.
'You've gone a very funny colour.'
Jerry felt as if he answered through thick layers of cotton 
wool.
'Y-yes. I'm all right, thank you.'
'Bit travel sick, are you?'
'Yes, a bit - travel sick.' Oh, go away, go away! I don't 
want to think about this, but I must, I must.
No trace. The fire would have consumed everything. Who 
would have noticed a piece of charred and blackened bone 
among the litter of paper bags and nutshells and rubbish when 
the bonfire had burnt itself out? And if they had, hadn't roast 
pork been served that evening?
And Mrs Thomas must have seen it - in the fire, twisting 
and turning. Screams drowned by the noise of the flames and 
the cries of the children and the grotesque mask of the guy. 
But Mrs Thomas had known. And she had known who had 
done it. And knowing it, her mind couldn't bear the monstrous 
burden of this knowledge.
A vision was forming itself into Jerry's consciousness. A 
vision at first cloudy and indistinct as if seen through water, 
but forcing upwards through the water with the insistence of 
compulsion. A little boy making a guy; a little boy with that 
strained look about the eyes, making the guy as lifelike as 
possible, showing it to his mother, and getting an old suit 
of clothes for it. And then a mask for the guy, a grotesque, 
staring mask.

And then the picture dissolved like a cinema film. But the 
little boy reappeared. He was opening a cupboard and taking 
out a little white bottle. He was taking four little pills out of 
the bottle, and putting them in his pocket.

Then he was sitting at the dinner table, and there was a 
large party and music and laughter. He was sitting next to a 
man who had disappeared forty years ago, and when the man 
was talking to someone on his other side the little boy had his 
hand poised over the wine-glass.
Jerry tried to force his mind away from what he knew was coming next, but the picture demanded his attention. For a second everything was dark, vague and indeterminate, then he saw a corridor. A small figure stood outside the door, listened for a minute, then opened it slowly and soundlessly. Another figure lay sleeping in a wing chair, in a room surrounded by book-lined shelves, a room Jerry recognized only too well. The small figure carried a jacket and trousers over his arm, patched and ragged and bulging with what Jerry knew was straw. In his hand was something else, and when he put the suit down, Jerry saw that it was the mask of the guy.

‘No.’ Jerry felt that he was shouting, but no word came from his lips. ‘It is impossible. It is monstrous.’

But he knew that it was true.

He saw another picture now, and perhaps to Jerry this was the most terrible picture of all, because he recognized himself. A group of children stood outside the french window, with a wheelbarrow, and the same little boy handed out to them a guy. The head of the guy was fastened to a plank, and he saw now that the hands were tied. . . .

I will not see any more. I will not. It is a nightmare. I am ill. I must get off the bus. Who will believe me? I didn’t know this all the time. Why now? Why now?’

Many thoughts bombarded Jerry’s mind in the split second before his eye focused on the crumpled newspaper he found himself clutching. But then he saw it. On the front page.

DEATH OF FAMOUS NEUROLOGIST

Sir David Thomas, the well-known nerve specialist, was found dead in his flat in Harley Street early this morning. When his housekeeper failed to get any answer to her repeated knockings she became alarmed and called for assistance to force the door. Sir David had apparently died from a heart attack brought on by overwork, according to the diagnosis of his consultant physician.

When questioned by our reporter, Doctor Fielding confirmed that Sir David had lately been suffering from severe nervous debility, and that he had advised him to go away for a long rest. He was 52. Sir David lived over his consulting-rooms, and was unmarried. He was looked after by a housekeeper.

Note: One slightly odd aspect of the affair was that near the body police found traces of some burnt substance includ-
ing what was later identified as human bone. Sir David’s housekeeper denied that he had been in the habit of burning anything in his room, but the police are of the opinion that she was mistaken. They are satisfied with cause of death as given by Doctor Fielding.

Jerry had only the faintest recollection of getting off the bus, superintended anxiously by the conductress, who advised him to take a strong dose of salts and go straight to bed. She confided to one of the other passengers, as the bus drew off, that she didn’t like his colour one bit. Greenish, it was.

But Jerry knew none of this. One question and one question only, still occupied his mind. He felt he would positively never rest until he knew the answer.

What on earth had David done with the original guy?
THE TWO OLD WOMEN

By Vivian Meik

Looking back through the pages of my diaries, I find I have omitted to record exactly when I first had my doubts about the two old women on the hall floor. The record merely states, under the date, March 2nd, 'I don't know why, but I am now definitely satisfied that there is something very wrong about the Misses Kemp.'

For reasons into which it is unnecessary to enter here, I had taken a tiny flatlet — a bed-sitting-room and kitchenette — in a partly converted house not far from Haverstock Hill. At that time I had no place in Dame Fortune's good books, and was trying to stage a 'come-back' from the depths into which I had been driven by old war wounds, illnesses acquired in various out-of-the-way corners of the world, and the fraudulent misuse by a friend of my power-of-attorney.

I had been, I remember, much more interested than depressed at this change in my fortunes, and, in spite of myself, was unable to raise a single grumble at having to do all my own scrubbing and cleaning as well as my own cooking, where before I had but to express a wish to have it satisfied. I even discovered that I was happier than I had ever been once I had begun to get accustomed to this strange new world where my 'all in' expenses were less in a week than they had formerly been in an evening.

I recall, too, how I used to wake every morning with a strange exhilarating feeling of adventure — as if there was always a chance of finding something of value or interest just round every corner. Things which once would have been of no interest whatever now claimed my attention, and I found myself, more and more as the days wore on, becoming, I almost said curious, about everything and everyone about me.

There were quite a number of flatlets similar to mine in the house, and I was very soon on at least nodding terms with their occupants. I liked them all, though compared with me they were little more than inexperienced boys and girls. Not one of them, I daresay, earned more than five pounds a week,
and yet not one of them had anything stronger than an academic jealousy of what I had once been so foolish to consider as necessary to existence — eight thousand a year and all that. You know what I mean.

Among these delightful ‘kids’, as I was happy to call them, was a slip of a girl, hardly twenty-one, whose tiny flatlet was next to mine. Naturally I noticed her. Out every morning at nine, back every evening at six, I concluded she was a typist somewhere in the city.

Up to that time I had never spoken to a typist except on business, and had a vague idea that those of them who were not senior supervisors, either lived with their people or shared some sort of a room with another girl under the Medusa-like eye of a gorgon landlady.

Yet here was a girl — more of a ‘lady’ than almost anyone I had known — living a happy independent life. . . . Naturally I was interested.

She had been extraordinarily nice to me from the moment of my arrival. On my very first evening she had knocked on my door, and, seeing my obviously futile efforts to make the most of the few things I had, asked if she might lend a hand. The first ten minutes of my acquaintance with her was a liberal education in what a girl can do to a man’s ideas of decoration!

You can imagine then (I have already emphasized how keenly interested I was in the everyday occurrences of my new life), how upset I was when, through the thin partition that divided our quarters, I distinctly heard, a few evenings later, the sound of subdued sobbing.

I did not feel brave enough to inquire into the reason, but the matter settled itself a little later when I heard her footsteps on the landing. As it was about time the last post came, I decided to give her a minute or two and then follow her downstairs to see if there was any mail for me. By doing this I knew I should meet her on her way up, and intended to speak to her.

When I went down, however, the hall was empty. The front door had not been opened, for I would have heard it being shut. There was simply no sign of my ‘little lady’, as I called her — to myself, I add hastily.

The only alternative was that if she had not gone out, she had gone into one of the rooms on the hall floor. Up to this time I knew nothing about the people on this floor, because,
while I had been gladly civil to the young people who lived on the first and second floors, I had never seen anyone either come or go from the entrance floor flat. Diffident about the standing of a newcomer of my age in a ‘flatlet’ house, I had not broached the subject. Beyond guessing that they answered to the name of Kemp, I was quite in the dark about them. And their name I guessed only from occasional letters I had noticed on the hall table.

And now, unless she had gone out, my little lady had disappeared into the Kemps’ flat.

There was no reason whatsoever why the fact should have disturbed me. The Kemps were doubtless good people – whoever or whatever they were – and there was less reason still why the little girl next door should not be on friendly terms with them. Arguments, for and against, raced through my mind, just as they would race through anyone’s. Nevertheless I was disturbed, much more disturbed than I cared to admit.

Collecting my letters, I returned to my room and slipped on a dressing-gown. Some time after midnight I heard stealthy footsteps by my door. A moment later I heard the sound of a key turning slowly. For a little while everything was quiet. Then again came the sound of sobbing.

I have no idea when she slipped out the next morning. Possibly want of sleep had dulled my hearing. I met her, however, when she returned from business; as I pretended to cross the landing casually, using as an excuse my belief that I thought I had heard the postman.

I was more worried than ever as I looked at her. Her face was dead white, and there were big black circles under her eyes. Lamely muttering something about being late myself and being just about to make tea, I invited her to join me. She came in, poor tired little thing, gladly enough, and threw herself into my big chair before the fire.

For a while she lay back, her eyes closed, enjoying the comforting glow of the blaze, while I busied myself in the kitchenette. I did the best I could, rooting among the things I had, and was delighted by her cry of delight at my first attempt at a seed cake.

Rested and refreshed, she turned to me with a smile. ‘And now, Mr Meik, please tell me why you told me a great big lie to get me in here?’

‘A – a lie?’ I stammered helplessly.

‘Yes – a great big lie! You told me you had been late, when
obviously this fire has been going for hours and, even for
beginners, seed cake takes some time to make.’

One of the things I learnt in the old days was never to lie
to a decent person, unless of course it’s for their own ultimate
happiness, and you know it. I had the sense not to make any
further excuse. . . .

Her face became serious. Then, ‘I’ll tell you.’ Suddenly she
put her arms out and clung to me like the child she really was.
‘I’m frightened,’ she almost whispered, ‘at first they threatened
to ruin me. Now I’m afraid they’re going to kill me.’

I let her talk on without interruption. The story that she
told me was, frankly, incredible. She had, it appeared, come
to the house about two years before. One of the lucky ones of
this world, everyone had been kind to her, and in her eager
youth she had mistaken this kindness as disinterested. The
people of her own age and type – healthy, normal, clean living
youth, she understood, but when one day she had been invited
into the Kemps’ flat, she felt that she had been signally
honoured. The Kemps, it seemed, were really the dominant
figures in the house. Two old maids, they had come there
before the war, taking over the entrance floor and the base-
ment. That was their domain, which they guarded jealously,
and when the rest of the house was converted into flatlets,
the Kemps’ premises had, perforce, to remain undisturbed.

Everything that happened in the place, the flat dwellers
maintained, was scrutinized by the Kemps – and so on. Those
of the many thousands who are forced to live in rooms, and
who read this will appreciate better than others what it
means. . . .

However, my little lady had been invited into what turned
out to be the witches’ parlour itself. When one saw these
women outside, one hardly noticed their mental or physical
abnormalities. One was fair, the other dark. Both were fat
and ill-favoured. It was when she entered their rooms that my
lady was shocked. Even the furniture, she maintained, was
uncanny and abnormal. Dirty, shabby, ill-used . . . of queer
shapes and in still queerer repair. ‘I can’t explain,’ she ended,
‘you’ll have to see it. But I can describe the women. They’re
vile, Mr Meik. They walk, or rather waddle, as if they move
about on stumps. Their feet seem all buniony and their faces
seem to take on the shape of frogs’ heads after a little while.
Even their skins. . . . Oh, I can’t go into more detail.

‘After a little while,’ she continued, ‘I felt myself being –
what's the word? - hypnotized like, they say, a bird is by a snake. Then I don't remember any more.

'About a month before you came here, one of them beckoned me into her room, and confronted me with a note which said I would pay them what I had borrowed - ten pounds - on the first of the following month... I swear to you that I have never borrowed a penny from anyone, yet here was a letter in my own handwriting. You should have seen how the elder sister looked at me when she held the paper towards me. It was... ugh!' I felt the child shiver with fear as she held me.

'Last night,' she ended the incredible recital, 'they demanded payment, and said that if I didn't pay they would inform Devonhurst's - that's where I work. Devonhurst's are very particular, and it means instant dismissal. I didn't know what to do. In desperation I went down to see them. Oh, my God! It was horrible. First they refused to listen. Then - please believe me - they offered to let me redeem my letter with - with half a pint of my blood... My heart froze and I tried to scream, but before I could move they fell on me... Oh, my God! the horror...'

I suddenly felt a dead weight in my arms. The child had fainted...

The entry in my diary under date March 6th is extensive. I make no excuse for quoting it in full.

'This morning I got a glimpse of the Misses Kemp. Only my lady's inexperience prevented her from describing them correctly. They are human ghouls - perverted, secret drinkers, and probably given to morally corrupt practices.

'They reminded me of something or somebody of whom I had previous knowledge. After many hours I discovered the startling connection between my thoughts. Three years ago, in Africa, while on safari, on the Mikalonge Nawadzi border, I came up with Vereker and Strang, commissioner and medical officer in that part of the world. Strang told me a queer story of a white man whom he had in charge, and whom he was taking up to the asylum in Zomba. I had a look at the man. He was a raving maniac, and his body was already showing the marks of leprosy in its definitely incurable form. I remembered that his name was Kemp.*

'Where was the connection? Besides - this is London, and the other Kemp probably died an agonizing death long ago.

* See Devils' Drums (Allen, 2s. 6d. net).
‘Still – something had to be done. I had had to drop all the threads of my old life – all, but one. I had hung on to the club – though, of course, I never went there. The ‘Wanderers’, however, was rather different to the others. Members are always coming and going – mostly to and from places which are not marked on standard maps.

‘Hutton – the commissionaire – who has the finest memory for faces in the world, greeted me as casually as if he had seen me only the day before. I stood chatting with him a little while, and learnt that both Vereker and Strang had been home on leave. Strang, in fact, had just returned to Central Africa – where, Hutton could not say – only the previous week. He had sailed by the Mashobra.

‘Having got the information I wanted, I sent him a short cable and waited at the club for a reply. Within the hour I read, “Kemp died last year – vile demise. Body claimed by agent acting for sister. Cremated and sent home.”

‘Wild thoughts began to race through my mind. But it seemed to me I could go no farther. I turned the thing over from every angle, but wherever I looked I came up against a blank wall. In the meantime my little lady was suffering the tortures of hell. She cannot explain what happened, and has been ill in bed since the 4th – three days now.

‘When I saw her on my return from the club, she showed me a scrap of paper with the single word “Tonight” scrawled on it. The paper was initialled M.K.

‘I practically lived on the landing during the evening, but saw no signs of the two women. As the hours wore on my lady grew more and more feverish. So far she had merely kept her room, being visited off and on by her friends on our two floors. By ten o’clock she was running a high temperature, and Miss Barnard, from the room below, came to me and suggested a doctor.

‘Knowing something about the horrors of Central African voodoo, and realizing that this was being practised here in some way for which I could not account, I hesitated to send for a medico, who, after all, could only be expected to have the orthodox general practitioner’s knowledge. I had enough experience to know for certain that what was happening to the girl was something no Western, or indeed physical, medicine could help. She was steadily losing her reason under the stress of intense fear. More – had I called for a doctor, I should probably have been certified as a lunatic myself. Anybody will
tell you that, admitting African voodoo, it isn’t practised in flatlets near Haverstock Hill. That is one of those things that simply don’t happen. Yet here was my little lady . . . being killed.

‘Suddenly, almost against my own volition, I decided to face the Kems. How I was going to do it, Heaven alone knew . . .

I therefore told Miss Barnard that I would fetch a doctor, and asked her to remain with the sick girl till I returned. I got her to understand that in no circumstances whatever was she to allow my lady to move. I’m afraid I must have frightened her by the emphasis I placed on the possible consequences.

‘For a little while, at least, I believed my neighbour was in safe hands. I slipped down the stairs to the hall floor. The only light threw its brilliance over the table by the house telephone, and lit up the stairs which ran up almost from the front door.

‘The side of the stairs was in comparative gloom, and the hall-way, which ran from the front of the house to the back, was hardly lit. As I got to the bottom of the stairs I turned sharply to the right and walked back against the side of the staircase in the deep shadow.

‘At the end of the hall was a door leading into a room that overlooked the basement. A tiny chink revealed that there was a light behind the door. This, I guessed, was the door behind which my lady had disappeared a few nights previously. I trod as lightly as I could and pressed against the handle. Without a sound the door swung back, and at the same second the light went out.

‘I heard a sibilant whisper, “You’ve come, have you, you – now we’ll teach you to disobey N’Kazi.” Still sibilant, the whisper became a harsh monotone. At that I smiled. I had seen fakirs talk to hypnotized chelas many times. “Two steps forward . . .” the voice continued. “Go through the door and walk down the thirteen steps to the temple of N’Kazi.”

‘I followed the instructions, wondering when I would be discovered, and what would happen then. At first I was confident of dealing with the situation – at a pinch I could certainly handle a couple of old maids. As I went slowly down the steps, however, I was not so sure.

‘Gradually a feeling of terror overcame me. It was pitch dark, and the inky veil of impenetrable blackness seemed to
overwhelm me like a blanket. I felt stifled. “Count the steps,”
the voice continued. “There are thirteen....”

“It dawned on me then that I didn’t know where the voice was
coming from. Was it a woman’s or a man’s? ... Icy terror
gripped me. What awaited me beyond the thirteenth step? ...
My hair stood on end, and my whole body was clammy with
sweat.

“I remembered a visit I once paid to the famous château of
Loches in the Touraine. I had been shown the dungeons which
had been hewn out of the solid rock in the bowels of the
earth. Once the door was closed it was pitch black. Slowly the
prisoners used to grope their way along the wall. Suddenly,
without warning, in that pitch black prison, the hands which
groped along the rock clutched vainly at thin air. The feet
which crawled along the floor, as suddenly found no foothold.
... The explanation was simple. At one end of the dungeon
a pit was hewn down deep into the earth till it reached a
subterranean river. The mouth of the pit was flush with the
floor and wall of the dungeon. And in pitch blackness one has,
of course, no sense of direction....

“With an effort of will, I tried to fight the terror that was
enveloping me. “Six ... seven ... eight ... nine ... ten ...”
the sibilant voice ground out, “Eleven ... twelve ...” The
voice hesitated, then went on, “You have given your blood as
drink to N’Kazi’s man ... now your body, then your flesh ...

“Forward ... THIRTEEN,” the voice seemed almost at
my elbow. Still in the grip of that icy horror, I turned like a
trapped rat and leaped upwards. There was an inhuman shriek
of hate and rage, and a heavy body fell on me. Clammy hands
pressed against my throat, and a horrible cold breath, reeking
of corruption itself, almost froze the blood in my veins.

“Kill him, Marion – he’s discovered it all. She said he had
been to Africa. He’ll know what ... Quick, Marion, the N’Kazi
totem, and Martin’s voodoo urn ... N’Kazi ...”

“Suddenly rage pervaded me. Realization of what they did
came to me. I had met it before. ... Death was too good for
these two ghouls. “By the living God,” I cried, “I’ll –”

“Something seemed to crumble at my feet. A low whine
whistled along the stairs – then silence. ...”

March 8th – ‘There has been a great “to-do”. It seems that
the butcher’s boy failed to get a reply from the Kemps this
morning, and informed the police. He said he had noticed a terrible smell.

'It ended by the police breaking in. What they found was almost unbelievable – bones by the hundred in a pit in the basement, mostly beef and mutton, but some human bones too...

'A part of the back basement room was done up as an African "ju-ju" place of worship. . . . The place was a disgusting shambles. Up till then, the sergeant told me, the smell had been kept down by liberal applications of hydraulic lime.

'Of the Kemps there is no trace. A bundle of clothes was found at the bottom of the steps leading down to the pit which apparently belonged to them. But that was all.

'My little lady is now as well as she was ill two nights ago.'

March 9th – 'The sanitation authorities have been busy. I spent a little while talking to the very delightful young inspector. He told me that there were more of these filthy dumps dotted about in London than one would imagine. As we were talking, he suddenly leaped forward and struck at something. A moment later I saw he had killed two huge rats. "Gee!" he said, "never seen anything like them in my life. Snarled at me even as I moved to hit them. One would think they owned this place..."'
MOONLIGHT SONATA

by Alexander Woollcott

If this report were to be published in its own England, I would have to cross my fingers in a little foreword explaining that all the characters were fictitious—which stern requirement of the British libel law would embarrass me slightly because none of the characters is fictitious, and the story—told to Katharine Cornell by Clemence Dane and by Katharine Cornell told to me—chronicles what, to the best of my knowledge and belief, actually befell a young English physician whom I shall call Alvan Barach, because that does not happen to be his name. It is an account of a hitherto unreported adventure he had two years ago when he went down into Kent to visit an old friend—let us call him Ellery Cazalet—who spent most of his days on the links and most of his nights wondering how he would ever pay the death duties on the collapsing family manor-house to which he had indignantly fallen heir.

This house was a shabby little cousin to Compton Wynyates, with roof-tiles of Tudor red making it cosy in the noonday sun, and a hoarse bell which, from the clock tower, had been contemptuously scattering the hours like coins ever since Henry VIII was a rosy stripling. Within, Cazalet could afford only a doddering couple to fend for him, and the once sumptuous gardens did much as they pleased under the care of a single gardener. I think I must risk giving the gardener’s real name, for none I could invent would have so appropriate a flavour. It was John Scripture, and he was assisted, from time to time, by an aged and lunatic father who, in his lucid intervals, would be let out from his captivity under the eaves of the lodge to potter amid the lewd topiarian extravagance of the hedges.

The doctor was to come down when he could, with a promise of some good golf, long nights of exquisite silence, and a ghost or two thrown in if his fancy ran that way. It was characteristic of his rather ponderous humour that, in writing to fix a day, he addressed Cazalet at ‘The Creeps,
Sevenoaks, Kent. When he arrived, it was to find his host away from home and not due back until all hours. Barach was to dine alone with a reproachful setter for a companion, and not wait up. His bedroom on the ground floor was beautifully panelled from footboard to ceiling, but some misguided housekeeper under the fourth George had fallen upon the lovely woodwork with a can of black varnish. The dowry brought by a Cazalet bride of the mauve decade had been invested in a few vintage bathrooms, and one of these had replaced a prayer closet that once opened into this bedroom. There was only a candle to read by, but the light of a full moon came waveringly through the wind-stirred vines that half curtained the mullioned windows.

In this museum, Barach dropped off to sleep. He did not know how long he had slept when he found himself awake again, and conscious that something was astir in the room. It took him a moment to place the movement, but at last, in a patch of moonlight, he made out a hunched figure that seemed to be sitting with bent, engrossed head in the chair by the door. It was the hand, or rather the whole arm, that was moving, tracing a recurrent if irregular course in the air. At first the gesture was teasingly half-familiar, and then Barach recognized it as the one a woman makes when embroidering. There would be a hesitation as if the needle were being thrust through some taut, resistant material, and then, each time, the long, swift, sure pull of the thread.

To the startled guest, this seemed the least menacing activity he had ever heard ascribed to a ghost, but just the same he had only one idea, and that was to get out of that room with all possible dispatch. His mind made a hasty reconnaissance. The door into the hall was out of the question, for madness lay that way. At least he would have to pass right by that weaving arm. Nor did he relish a blind plunge into the thorny shrubbery beneath his window, and a barefoot scamper across the frosty turf. Of course, there was the bathroom, but that was small comfort if he could not get out of it by another door. In a spasm of concentration, he remembered that he had seen another door. Just at the moment of this realization, he heard the comfortingly actual sound of a car coming up the drive, and guessed that it was his host returning. In one magnificent movement, he leaped to the floor, bounded into the bathroom, and bolted its door behind him. The floor of the room beyond was quilted with moonlight.
Wading through that, he arrived breathless, but unmolested, in the corridor. Farther along he could see the lamp left burning in the entrance hall and hear the clatter of his host closing the front door.

As Barach came hurrying out of the darkness to greet him, Cazalet boomed his delight at such affability, and famished by his long, cold ride, proposed an immediate raid on the larder. The doctor, already sheepish at his recent panic, said nothing about it, and was all for food at once. With lighted candles held high, the foraging party descended on the offices, and mine host was descanting on the merits of cold roast beef, Cheddar cheese, and milk as a light midnight snack, when he stumbled over a bundle on the floor. With a cheerful curse at the old goody of the kitchen who was always leaving something about, he bent to see what it was this time, and let out a whistle of surprise. Then, by two candles held low, he and the doctor saw something they will not forget while they live. It was the body of the cook. Just the body. The head was gone. On the floor alongside lay a bloody cleaver.

‘Old Scripture, by God!’ Cazalet cried out, and, in a flash, Barach guessed. Still clutching a candle in one hand, he dragged his companion back through the interminable house to the room from which he had fled, motioning him to be silent, tiptoeing the final steps. That precaution was wasted, for a regiment could not have disturbed the rapt contentment of the ceremony still in progress within. The old lunatic had not left his seat by the door. Between his knees he still held the head of the woman he had killed. Scrupulously, happily, crooning at his work, he was plucking out the grey hairs one by one.
THE LITTLE GIRL EATER

by M. S. Waddell

The girder that lay across his shoulders was gradually pressing Mason’s body down into the sand. He could no longer remember how long he had been lying there beneath the old coal jetty, only that it was a long time. The tide had been half-way out when he had taken the short-cut beneath it, clambering over the slippery girders. He knew that the tide must have turned by this time and would soon be coming back in. He knew that unless he could remove the fallen girder from his shoulders the tide would come in over him.

Once more he braced himself in a desperate effort to try and dislodge the thing. It would not budge.

He lay still, forcing himself to reason. The girder lay across his trunk. His head and arms poked out from one end of it, his legs were free at the other. Something was wrong with his back but he did not know what. There was blood in the puddle of water near his left elbow.

He was waiting for someone to come and find him. He had not much longer to spare if he was to be freed in time to escape the sea that was creeping up behind him. Yet it was a lonely beach and a cold, blustery day; it was early April and there were not many visitors in the town. Someone would come. Someone must come.

He had to conserve his strength, that was important. He was feeling sick and weak, waves of nausea creeping over him. He could no longer move the bottom half of his legs. He heard the caw of a gull, a wail of despair. He must force himself to reason a way out.

It was too heavy to lift. He had tried to lever himself forward using one of the upright girders that his hands could reach. It was no use.

It was dark and silent beneath the pier. Thin banks of concrete criss-crossed the sand, the upright girders were built solidly into these banks. It was a complex structure, a nightmare of criss-crossed metal stretching for twenty yards on each side of him.
He had tried calling to start with. His voice was weak and
came echoing off the girders around him, reminding him that
he was alone on the beach; that no one could possibly hear
him. He kept calling long after that realization, measuring
time by counting to a thousand between each series of hails.
But it was no use. He gave up, dispirited, too weak to continue,
convinced that no one would pay any heed to his call.

A crab had slipped out from under one of the fallen girders.
It hovered uncertainly, seeming unaware of his presence, its
clawes clanging back and forth. Then it changed its mind
and fled back to the safety of the hiding place beneath the
girder, scraping the sand away from its hiding place as it
did so.

Perhaps there was still hope. Perhaps like Bruce with the
spider the crab had come to give him a message of hope. He
looked more closely at the concrete banks. The sand had risen
high around those nearest to him. Perhaps if he were to bur-
row downward instead of trying to force himself upright he
could bring the girder to rest on the concrete and dig himself
sufficient clearance beneath it to crawl clear.

It all depended on what lay beneath. If the banks of con-
crete were isolated, independent of each other, and the sand
went down to a sufficient depth before meeting a rock floor,
he could do it. He needed a foot or so.

He brought his hands as far back down his body as he could
manage and began to scrape the sand away, rather as a dog
digs for a bone. Now and then his fingers rasped against
jutting rock as he worked round the outline of his body as far
as his hands could reach; he could feel the skin tearing, feel
the blood warm on his hands as it flowed from his nails.

Miranda was not a very pretty little girl. Her nose was too
long and her body was too fat. She sat in the back of her
Mummy’s friend Johnny’s car and looked out of the window.

It was a funny bumpy road, she thought, running down
between whin bushes and a barbed-wire fence, not really a
motor-car road at all. It was not a road that Daddy would
have taken his car along because Daddy didn’t like bumps.
They made his car sick in its tummy.

Mummy’s friend Johnny was nice and he didn’t mind
where he took his car, which was all nice and shiny, not like
Daddy’s at all.

Mummy’s friend Johnny was taking Miranda to see the sea.
‘Don’t be silly,’ Mummy said, ‘honestly, darling. I mean you mustn’t say that sort of thing in front of the child.’
‘She doesn’t understand.’

Mummy lit a cigarette. ‘Little you know. She’s repeated things I’ve said to her Daddy before now.’
‘What things?’ Miranda asked from the back seat.
‘Don’t interrupt, Miranda,’ said Mummy crossly. ‘You mustn’t interrupt when big people are talking.’
‘We can send the child down to play on the beach. We’ll park by the old pier. Nobody ever comes down that way so there’s very little chance of our being spotted. It’ll be just like old times again.’
‘She mightn’t be safe,’ Mummy said.
‘Yes I would,’ Miranda said at once. ‘I’d be very extra, extra special safe.’

‘Course she will,’ said Johnny, and he stroked Mummy’s hair with his free hand. ‘No reason why she shouldn’t have her fun while we’re having ours, is there?’
‘Innocent ears,’ said Mummy crossly. ‘Won’t you ever learn not to speak in front of you-know-who.’

Johnny laughed and put his hand on Mummy’s leg. Mummy slapped it off. Johnny said something in a whisper to Mummy.
‘Not with the child, Johnny. Honestly, she repeats everything. If she’d heard that . . .’

The car bounced to a stop at the end of the little track, its front facing out along the disused coal pier. There was a shack by the side of the pier gate and Johnny backed the car into the shade of it.

‘Look, Miranda,’ said Mummy, ‘there’s the lovely sea.’

Miranda had seen the lovely sea before and she wasn’t unduly impressed. Perhaps there might be something to play with on the beach. She might even venture under the dark, scarey pier.

‘May I go and play?’ she asked.
‘You must promise not to go too near the sea, darling,’ said Mummy, ‘and not to get your nice clothes all messed up with sand.’
‘You are a caution,’ Johnny said.

‘All right, Mummy,’ said Miranda, and hopped out of the car. She knew that the longer she waited the more things Mummy would think of that she wasn’t to do.

Mummy rested back against Johnny’s arm, which held her firmly.
‘I do hope she’ll be all right down there on her own. It would be awful if anything happened to her here. How would I ever explain to Dennis what I was doing out here with you?’

‘I should think Dennis would cotton on pretty sharpish,’ said Johnny with a laugh.

Mason could hear the lapping of the water.

The numbness had spread; he could no longer feel anything below his waist. He could no longer make any movement with his legs. He lay with his bloodstained hands stretched on the sand before him.

The burrowing had finally worn him out. He had scratched and scratched at the sand, building a wall of it around him as he sank into it. He even thought at one time that the girder had shifted a little. Then his hands came up against a rough surface. He changed position, tried again, with the same result. He made a hole just by his head, the same. The pier had been constructed on a solid concrete base which the sand had gradually silted over. The concrete banks simply were not high enough to hold the girder above him whilst he edged his way out.

He lay with his cheek resting on the bare concrete where he had cleared away the sand. He must think, think. He had been repeating that to himself for some time now. Even the thought of thinking was becoming negative.

What could he do?

He summarized his position for the umpteenth time. Logic and method, he must apply logic and method. From the sounds behind him he deduced that the water was getting considerably nearer to him. He could not have much longer to wait. He was trapped in an improvised coffin formed by the concrete banks and the base of the structure with the girder as a coffin lid. He could not move the girder. It was no use calling for help because there was no one who could possibly hear him. All he could do was to lie in the sand and wait for the sea to creep slowly around him, to cover his hands and then his arms, to rise over his chin, to swirl over his head. Probably he would die long before that. Probably the continued ducking by the incoming waves would finish him. It would be a slow business. A large wave to cover him up, a small one to let him gasp for breath again.

There was a tin can lying half submerged in the sand near
his right hand. The lid was almost prised off. It had a raw edge, a cutting edge.

If only he could reach the lid. He could cut his throat with the lid, that would be quicker than drowning, less unpleasant. There would be a moment of startling pain as he drew the rusty tin across his throat, a spurt of blood, and then ... nothing. That was how it happened in books. But there were people who failed. You read about them in the papers. People who were rushed to hospital bleeding to death, slowly, taking their time about it. He might faint when the first cut was made. You probably had to know something about it to be able to cut your throat properly the first time. Of course once the sea was around him it wouldn’t matter terribly. Even if he failed to slit his throat the sea would finish him off. But it would be better at least to have an alternative, the possibility of a quick end if the worst came to the worst and no rescue appeared.

By digging his head and shoulders down into the sand his fingers could reach out to touch the end of the tin. His fingers were numb and torn by the scrabbling at the concrete. As they scraped against the tin the cuts which the sand had stopped from bleeding burst open again and the blood trickled down the back of his hand and began to soak through the sleeve of his shirt. The tin cut a fresh sliver from his thumb, but it would not budge. He tried to reach it with his left hand also, but he could not quite make it. He gathered himself for a special effort. The tin had become very important to him. It offered a hope, even though it was only a faint hope, of having some choice in the time and manner of his death. Admittedly it was a poor choice that lay between the sea he could hear remorselessly slapping the more remote stanchions of the pier and the cruel edge of a tin that he might press to his throat if he elected for a quick and painful exit rather than a slow, choking one. But it was still a choice. It left him some dignity. He wanted to reach the tin.

Miranda stood on the girder and gazed down at the man below her.

Carefully, for she was afraid of dirtying her dress, she hopped down on to the sand.

He was a funny sort of man, not like her Daddy. She could only see his head and shoulders and his arms, the rest of him was hidden in a funny hole in the ground. Perhaps he lived
under the pier and only came out like the crabs when he thought there was nobody about.

She stood three or four feet from the man, watching him with round fearful eyes. He was making a curious noise, a gulping, sucking sound, and his fingers were bloody. He had a funny old tin in his hand. His face lay on a little patch of concrete where he had been digging a hole, but he had no spade. The sand was nasty bloody too.

Miranda stood very still. She did not know what to do. Perhaps she should wake the man up and ask him what he was doing. She was afraid that he might get cross. Big people got cross very easily. Perhaps she could wake him accidentally-on-purpose. She decided to sing him a song, to see if that would make him get up.

Mason could hear the lapping of the sea. His mind was befuddled and filled with the din of his thoughts, but he could hear something else as well, something nonsensical. He pressed his face against the concrete patch. His mind was going. His mind was going.

‘Eight green bottles sitting on the wall.
‘If one green bottle should accidentally fall,
‘There’d be seven green bottles sitting on the wall.
‘Seven green bottles sitting on the wall.
‘If one green bottle should accidentally fall,
‘There’d be six green bottles sitting on the wall.’

On and on it went, a monotonous chant that his mind had conjured up. All right, so he was going crazy. He raised his head and began to sing with the other voice, the other voice inside him.

‘Three green bottles sitting on the wall.
‘If one green bottle should accidentally fall,
‘There’d be two green bottles sitting on the wall.’

The other voice stopped.

Then he saw Miranda. She was standing there in her pretty frock, looking down at him. A child, but another person.

It was all over, all over. He had only to speak to this child and he would be safe. He was going to escape the sea. He raised his hands towards her, he opened his mouth but the words would not come.

She jumped quickly over the girders and ran away.

He began to shout after her, anything to attract the attention of the people who were looking after her.
She would tell someone, surely she would tell someone about him.

Miranda ran up the shore to the car. She clambered up on to the gravel that led up to the pier. She had something to tell Mummy.

Mummy was seated half in and half out of the front seat of the car, vainly trying to fix up her shattered ‘face’. Johnny, Mummy’s friend, came down the path to meet Miranda.

‘Enjoy yourself, then?’ he said, bending down to speak to her. ‘What do you think of the big blue sea?’

Miranda looked at him. She wasn’t certain of Johnny somehow.

‘Nice,’ she said.

‘There’s big fishes and boats and …’ Johnny went on in his talking-to-little-girls voice that Miranda knew and disliked. ‘I want to speak to Mummy, please,’ she said, edging her way past him.

‘There you see. Always wants her mummy,’ said Mummy, holding out her arms. ‘Come on Miranda, love, come to Mummy.’

‘Good thing she didn’t come to Mummy a little sooner,’ said Johnny with a grin, ‘Mummy might have had a bit of very tricky explaining to do.’

‘Don’t pay any attention to him, darling,’ said Mummy. Mummy was looking very pretty.

‘Listen to your mummy,’ Johnny mimicked.

‘There was a man beneath the pier and we were singing,’ said Miranda.

‘You shouldn’t say things like that. How often do I have to tell you. She repeats things to her father, the poor little mite.’

‘Dennis shouldn’t grill the child. He must realize what’s going on now, anyway, without having to resort to that.’

‘Still we don’t want poor little Miranda mixed up in any more than she has to be.’

‘Have it your way,’ said Johnny, pulling a face.

‘There was a man, Mummy.’

‘What man, darling?’

‘A bloody man.’

Mummy had gone back to fixing her face, but she paused. ‘You mustn’t say things like that, darling, it isn’t nice.’

‘But he was. He was down there in a hole beneath the pier and he sang a song with me.’
‘Darling I have talked to you before about making up silly stories, haven’t I? Only naughty little girls make up silly stories and their daddies and mummies get very cross with them when they do.’

‘We sang “Ten Green Bottles” and he shouted and . . .’

‘Miranda!’ The little girl could see that Mummy was really very cross indeed. But there had been a man, there had.

‘You shouldn’t shout at the child like that,’ said Johnny, coming back to the car. ‘I could hear you right over by the gate.’

‘She’s telling stories again. I’m fed up with her telling stories.’

‘I’m not,’ said Miranda sulkily. ‘There is a man under the pier.’

‘Miranda!’ Mummy said again.

‘Did you say there was a man under the pier,’ Johnny said, winking at Mummy.

Miranda nodded.

‘Johnny . . .’ Mummy protested.

‘Leave this to me.’ He turned back to Miranda. ‘I know all about that nasty man. Do you know what he does, Miranda?’

‘No,’ said Miranda, wide-eyed.

‘He’s a little girl eater. He lives down there under the sea and when the tide is out he stays there, waiting for silly little girls who go playing there. Then he gobbles them up, just like that.’

‘Oh,’ said Miranda in dismay. He didn’t seem to be a good person at all somehow.

‘You’re as bad as the child, Johnny,’ said Mummy. ‘You’ll give her nightmares.’

‘I’ve put an end to that story anyway,’ said Johnny, looking at Miranda’s shocked face. ‘You won’t be hearing any more about men under piers I fancy.’

‘You shouldn’t encourage the child.’

‘Can I go down on to the beach again, Mummy?’ said Miranda earnestly.

‘Oh yes, for goodness’ sake do. I’ll never get peace to tidy myself otherwise.’

‘Thank you, Mummy.’

Mummy watched her run off, away down the sand towards the end of the pier, where the water was slowly rising.

‘Watch her get soaked,’ said Johnny ruefully.
‘Mhuh,’ said Mummy, then she took the hairpin from her mouth. ‘She’s been picking up your language you know. She said there was a “bloody man” under the pier to start with. You’ll have to be more careful. Her father will want to know where she’s picked that up from as it is.’

Miranda found the flat heavy stone very hard to manage, but she was almost there now. She shivered. She was afraid that the little girl eater might jump out upon her as she moved through the girders.

She knew he was the man who ate little girls as Mummy’s friend Johnny had said. She remembered the blood on his hand and the way he had roared and shouted when she ran away, just like the tigers in the circus. He was a nasty, beastly man who jumped out from beneath the ground and gobbled up little girls like Miranda who came to play under his pier.

She clambered over the last girder. He was still there.

Mason saw her. The water was lapping round his ankles. He looked at the little girl; she was wheeling a great flat stone towards him with great difficulty; the stone was almost as big as the child.

‘You’re a good little girl,’ he said faintly. ‘I want you to do something for me, quickly.’

The spray had fallen upon the back of his shirt.

Miranda wheeled the stone to a stop. She bent down and lifted it as high as she could above Mason’s head, then she let it drop. His skull was crushed, his face ground into the little patch of concrete he had scraped clear from sand.

Miranda ran away. She was happy. Mummy would be pleased. She had killed the nasty little girl eater.
HARRY

by Rosemary Timperley

SUCH ordinary things make me afraid. Sunshine. Sharp shadows on grass. White roses. Children with red hair. And the name—Harry. Such an ordinary name.

Yet the first time Christine mentioned the name, I felt a premonition of fear.

She was five years old, due to start school in three months' time. It was a hot, beautiful day and she was playing alone in the garden, as she often did. I saw her lying on her stomach in the grass, picking daisies and making daisy-chains with laborious pleasure. The sun burned on her pale red hair and made her skin look very white. Her big blue eyes were wide with concentration.

Suddenly she looked towards the bush of white roses, which cast its shadow over the grass, and smiled.

'Yes, I'm Christine,' she said. She rose and walked slowly towards the bush, her little plump legs defenceless and endearing beneath the too short cotton skirt. She was growing fast.

'With my mummy and daddy,' she said clearly. Then, after a pause, 'Oh, but they are my mummy and daddy.'

She was in the shadow of the bush now. It was as if she'd walked out of the world of light into darkness. Uneasy, without knowing why, I called her:

'Chris, what are you doing?'

'Nothing.'

'Come indoors now.'

She said: 'I must go in now. Good-bye,' then walked towards the house.

'Chris, who were you talking to?'

'Harry,' she said.

'Who's Harry?'

'Harry.'

I couldn't get anything else out of her, so I just gave her some cake and milk and read to her until bedtime. As she listened, she stared out at the garden. Once she smiled and
waved. It was a relief finally to tuck her up in bed and feel she was safe.

When Jim, my husband, came home I told him about the mysterious ‘Harry’. He laughed.

‘Oh, she’s started that lark, has she?’

‘What do you mean, Jim?’

‘It’s not so very rare for only children to have an imaginary companion. Some kids talk to their dolls. Chris has never been keen on her dolls. She hasn’t any brothers or sisters. She hasn’t any friends her own age. So she imagines someone.’

‘But why has she picked that particular name?’

He shrugged. ‘You know how kids pick things up. I don’t know what you’re worrying about, honestly I don’t.’

‘Nor do I really. It’s just that I feel extra responsible for her. More so than if I were her real mother.’

‘I know, but she’s all right. Chris is fine. She’s a pretty, healthy, intelligent little girl. A credit to you.’

‘And to you.’

‘In fact, we’re thoroughly nice parents!’

‘And so modest!’

We laughed together and he kissed me. I felt consoled.

Until next morning.

Again the sun shone brilliantly on the small, bright lawn and white roses. Christine was sitting on the grass, cross-legged, staring towards the rose bush, smiling.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘I hoped you’d come … Because I like you. How old are you? … I’m only five and a piece … I’m not a baby! I’m going to school soon and I shall have a new dress. A green one. Do you go to school? … What do you do then?’ She was silent for a while, nodding, listening, absorbed.

I felt myself going cold as I stood there in the kitchen. ‘Don’t be silly. Lots of children have an imaginary companion,’ I told myself desperately. ‘Just carry on as if nothing were happening. Don’t be a fool.’

But I called Chris in earlier than usual for her mid-morning milk.

‘Can Harry come too?’

‘No!’ The cry burst from me harshly.

‘Good-bye, Harry. I’m sorry you can’t come in but I’ve got to have my milk,’ Chris said, then ran towards the house.

‘Why can’t Harry have some milk too?’ she challenged me. ‘Who is Harry, darling?’
‘Harry’s my brother.’
‘But Chris, you haven’t got a brother. Daddy and Mummy have only got one child, one little girl, that’s you. Harry can’t be your brother.’

‘Harry’s my brother. He says so.’ She bent over the glass of milk and emerged with a smudgy top lip. Then she grabbed at the plate of biscuits. At least ‘Harry’ hadn’t spoilt her appetite!

I didn’t mention any of this to Jim that night. I know he’d only scoff as he’d done before. But when Christine’s ‘Harry’ fantasy went on day after day, I found it got more and more on my nerves.

One Sunday, when Jim heard her at it he said:
‘I’ll say one thing for imaginary companions, they help a child on with her talking. Chris is talking much more freely than she used to.’

‘With an accent,’ I blurted out.
‘An accent?’
‘A slight cockney accent.’
‘My dearest, every London child gets a slight cockney accent. It’ll be much worse when she goes to school and meets lots of other kids.’

‘We don’t talk cockney. Where does she get it from? Who can she be getting it from except Ha—’ I couldn’t say the name.

‘The baker, the milkman, the dustman, the coalman, the window cleaner – want any more?’
‘I suppose not.’ I laughed rather ruefully.
‘Do you know what I think you should do to put your mind at rest?’
‘What?’
‘Take Chris along to see old Dr Webster tomorrow. Let him have a little talk with her.’
‘Do you think she’s ill – in her mind?’
‘Good heavens, no! But when we come across something that’s beyond us, it’s as well to take professional advice.’

Next day I took Christine to see Dr Webster. I left her in the waiting-room while I told him briefly about Harry. He nodded sympathetically, then he said:

‘It’s a fairly unusual case, Mrs James, but by no means unique. I’ve had several cases of children’s imaginary companions becoming so real to them that the parents got the jitters. Christine is rather a lonely little girl, isn’t she?’

‘She doesn’t know any other children. We’re new to the
neighbourhood, you see. But that will be put right when she starts school."

‘And I think you’ll find that when she goes to school and meets other children, these fantasies will disappear. You see, every child needs company of her own age, and if she doesn’t get it, she invents it. Older people who are lonely talk to themselves. That doesn’t mean that they’re crazy, just that they need to talk to someone. A child is more practical. Seems silly to talk to oneself, she thinks, so she invents someone to talk to. I honestly don’t think you’ve anything to worry about.’

‘That’s what my husband says.’

‘I’m sure he does. Still, I’ll have a chat with Christine as you’ve brought her. Leave us alone together.’

I went to the waiting-room to fetch Chris. She was at the window. She said: ‘Harry’s waiting.’

‘Where, Chris?’ I said quietly.

‘There. By the rose bush.’

The doctor had a bush of white roses in his garden.

‘There’s no one there,’ I said. Chris gave me a glance of un-childlike scorn. ‘Dr Webster wants to see you now, darling,’ I said shakily. ‘You remember him, don’t you? He gave you sweets when you were getting better from chicken pox.’

‘Yes,’ she said and went willingly enough to the doctor’s surgery. I waited restlessly. Faintly I heard their voices through the wall, heard the doctor’s chuckle, Christine’s high peal of laughter. She was talking away to the doctor in a way she didn’t talk to me.

When they came out, he said: ‘Nothing wrong with her whatever. She’s just an imaginative little monkey. A word of advice, Mrs James. Let her talk about Harry. Let her become accustomed to confiding in you. I gather you’ve shown some disapproval of this “brother” of hers so she doesn’t talk much to you about him. He makes wooden toys, doesn’t he, Chris?’

‘Yes, Harry makes wooden toys.’

‘And he can read and write, can’t he?’

‘And swim and climb trees and paint pictures. Harry can do everything. He’s a wonderful brother.’ Her little face flushed with adoration.

The doctor patted me on the shoulder and said: ‘Harry sounds a very nice brother for her. He’s even got red hair like you, Chris, hasn’t he?’

‘Harry’s got red hair,’ said Chris proudly, ‘redder than my hair. And he’s nearly as tall as daddy, only thinner. He’s as
tall as you, mummy. He’s fourteen. He says he’s tall for his age. What is tall for his age?"

‘Mummy will tell you about that as you walk home,’ said Dr Webster. ‘Now, good-bye, Mrs James. Don’t worry. Just let her prattle. Good-bye, Chris. Give my love to Harry.’

Another week passed. It was Harry, Harry all the time. The day before she was to start school, Chris said: ‘Not going to school.’

‘You’re going to school tomorrow, Chris. You’re looking forward to it. You know you are. There’ll be lots of other little girls and boys.’

‘Harry says he can’t come too.’

‘You won’t want Harry at school. He’ll —’ I tried hard to follow the doctor’s advice and appear to believe in Harry — ‘He’ll be too old. He’d feel silly among little boys and girls, a great lad of fourteen.’

‘I won’t go to school without Harry. I want to be with Harry.’ She began to weep, loudly, painfully.

She slept with tear stains still on her face.

It was still daylight. I went to the window to draw the curtains. Golden shadows and long strips of sunshine in the garden. Then, almost like a dream, the long thin clear-cut shadow of a boy near the white roses. Like a mad woman I opened the window and shouted: ‘Harry! Harry!’

I thought I saw a glimmer of red among the roses, like close red curls on a boy’s head. Then there was nothing.

Next day I started on my secret mission. I took a bus to town and went to the big, gaunt building I hadn’t visited for over five years. Then, Jim and I had gone together. The top floor of the building belonged to the Greythorne Adoption Society. I climbed the four flights and knocked on the familiar door with its scratched paint.

Miss Cleaver, a tall, thin grey-haired woman with a charming smile, a plain, kindly face and a very wrinkled brow, rose to meet me. ‘Mrs James. How nice to see you again. How’s Christine?’

‘She’s very well. Miss Cleaver, I’d better get straight to the point. I know you don’t normally divulge the origin of a child to its adopters and vice versa, but I must know who Christine is.’

‘Sorry, Mrs James,’ she began, ‘our rules . . .’

‘Please let me tell you the whole story, then you’ll see I’m not just suffering from vulgar curiosity.’

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I told her about Harry.

When I'd finished she said: 'It's very queer. Very queer indeed. Mrs James, I'm going to break my rule for once. I'm going to tell you in confidence where Christine came from.

'She was born in a very poor part of London. There were four in the family, father, mother, son, and Christine herself.'

'Son?'

'Yes. He was fourteen when – when it happened.'

'When what happened?'

'Let me start at the beginning. The parents hadn't really wanted Christine. The family lived in one room at the top of an old house which should have been condemned by the Sanitary Inspector in my opinion. It was difficult enough when there were only three of them, but with a baby as well life became a nightmare. The mother was a neurotic creature, slatternly, unhappy, too fat. After she'd had the baby she took no interest in it. The brother, however, adored the little girl from the start. He got into trouble for cutting school so he could look after her.

'One morning in the small hours, a woman in the ground-floor room saw something fall past her window and heard a thud on the ground. She went out to look. The son of the family was there on the ground. Christine was in his arms. The boy's neck was broken. He was dead. Christine was blue in the face but still breathing faintly.

'The woman woke the household, sent for the police and the doctor, then they went to the top room. They had to break down the door, which was locked and sealed inside. An overpowering smell of gas greeted them, in spite of the open window.

'They found husband and wife dead in bed and a note from the husband saying:

'I can't go on. I am going to kill them all. It's the only way.'

'The police concluded that he'd sealed up door and windows and turned on the gas when his family were asleep, then lain beside his wife until he drifted into unconsciousness, and death. But the son must have wakened. Perhaps he struggled with the door but couldn't open it. He'd been too weak to shout. All he could do was pluck away the seals from the window, open it, and fling himself out, holding his adored little sister tightly in his arms.'

'So her brother saved her life and died himself?' I said.

'Yes. He was a very brave boy.'

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Perhaps he thought not so much of saving her as of keeping her with him. Oh dear! That sounds ungenerous. I didn’t mean to be. Miss Cleaver, what was his name?"

"I’ll have to look that up for you." She referred to one of her many files and said at last: "The family’s name was Jones and the fourteen-year-old brother was called "Harold".

"And did he have red hair?" I murmured.

"That I don’t know, Mrs James."

"But it’s Harry. The boy was Harry. What does it mean? I can’t understand it."

"It’s not easy, but I think perhaps deep in her unconscious mind Christine has always remembered Harry, the companion of her babyhood. We don’t think of children as having much memory, but there must be images of the past tucked away somewhere in the little heads. Christine doesn’t invent this Harry. She remembers him. So clearly that she’s almost brought him to life again."

"May I have the address of the house where they lived?"

The house seemed deserted. It was filthy and derelict. But one thing made me stare and stare. There was a tiny garden. A scatter of bright uneven grass splashed the bald brown patches of earth. But the little garden had one strange glory that none of the other houses in the poor sad street possessed — a bush of white roses.

A voice startled me: "What are you doing here?" It was an old woman, peering from the ground-floor window.

"I thought the house was empty," I said.

"Should be. Been condemned. But they can’t get me out. Nowhere else to go. Won’t go. The others went quickly enough after it happened. No one else wants to come. They say the place is haunted. So it is. But what’s the fuss about? Life and death. They’re very close. You get to know that when you’re old. Alive or dead. What’s the difference?"

She looked at me with yellowish, bloodshot eyes and said: "I saw him fall past my window. That’s where he fell. Among the roses. He still comes back. I see him. He won’t go away until he gets her."

"Who — who are you talking about?"

"Harry Jones. Nice boy he was. Red hair. Very thin. Too determined though. Always got his own way. Loved Christine too much, I thought. Died among the roses. Used to sit down here with her for hours, by the roses. Then he died there. Or do people die? The church ought to give us an answer, but it
doesn’t. Not one you can believe. Go away, will you? This place isn’t for you. It’s for the dead who aren’t dead, and the living who aren’t alive.

The crazy eyes staring at me beneath the matted white fringe of hair frightened me. Mad people are terrifying. One can pity them, but one is still afraid. I murmured:

‘I’ll go now. Good-bye,’ and tried to hurry across the hard hot pavements although my legs felt heavy and half-paralysed, as in a nightmare.

The sun blazed down on my head, but I was hardly aware of it. I lost all sense of time or place as I stumbled on.

Then I heard something that chilled my blood.

A clock struck three.

At three o’clock I was supposed to be at the school gates, waiting for Christine.

Where was I now? How near the school? What bus should I take?

I made frantic inquiries of passers-by, who looked at me fearfully, as I had looked at the old woman.

At last I caught the right bus and, sick with dust, petrol fumes, and fear, reached the school. I ran across the hot, empty playground. In a classroom, the young teacher in white was gathering her books together.

‘I’ve come for Christine James. I’m her mother. I’m so sorry I’m late. Where is she?’ I gasped.

‘Christine James?’ The girl frowned, then said brightly:

‘Oh yes, I remember, the pretty little red-haired girl. That’s all right, Mrs James. Her brother called for her. How alike they are, aren’t they? And so devoted. It’s rather sweet to see a boy of that age so fond of his baby sister. Has your husband got red hair, like the two children?’

‘What did – her brother – say?’ I asked faintly.

‘He didn’t say anything. When I spoke to him, he just smiled. They’ll be home by now, I should think. I say, do you feel all right?’

‘Yes, thank you. I must go home.’

I ran all the way home through the burning streets.

‘Chris! Christine, where are you? Chris! Chris!’ Sometimes even now I hear my own voice of the past screaming through the cold house. ‘Christine! Chris! Where are you? Answer me! Chrrrriiiiiss!’ Then: ‘Harry! Don’t take her away! Come back! Harry! Harry!’

Demented, I rushed out into the garden. The sun struck
me like a hot blade. The roses glared whitely. The air was so still I seemed to stand in timelessness, placelessness. For a moment, I seemed very near to Christine, although I couldn’t see her. Then the roses danced before my eyes and turned red. The world turned red. Blood red. Wet red. I fell through redness to blackness to nothingness.

For weeks I was in bed with sunstroke which turned to brain fever. During that time Jim and the police searched for Christine in vain. The futile search continued for months. The papers were full of the strange disappearance of the red-haired child. The teacher described the ‘brother’ who had called for her. There were newspaper stories of kidnapping, baby-snatching, child-murders. Then the sensation died down. It became just another unsolved mystery in police files.

And only two people knew what had happened. An old crazed woman living in a derelict house, and myself.

Years have passed. But I walk in fear.

Such ordinary things make me afraid. Sunshine. Sharp shadows on grass. White roses. Children with red hair. And the name – Harry. Such an ordinary name!
SARDONICUS

by Ray Russell

AN ‘S’ OF VULGAR PRETENSION

In the late summer of the year 18—, a gratifying series of professional successes had brought me to a state of such fatigue that I had begun seriously to contemplate a long rest on the Continent. I had not enjoyed a proper holiday in nearly three years, for, in addition to my regular practice, I had been deeply involved in a programme of research, and so rewarding had been my progress in this special work (it concerned the ligaments and muscles, and could, it was my hope, be beneficially applied to certain varieties of paralysis) that I was loath to leave the city for more than a week at a time. Being unmarried, I lacked a solicitous wife who might have expressed concern over my health; thus it was that I had overworked myself to a point that a holiday had become absolutely essential to my well-being; hence, the letter which was put in my hand one morning near the end of that summer was not welcome.

When it was first presented to me by my valet, at breakfast, I turned it over and over, feeling the weight of its fine paper which was almost of the heaviness and stiffness of parchment; pondering the large seal of scarlet wax upon which was imprinted a device of such complexity that it was difficult to decipher; examining finally the hand in which the address had been written: Sir Robert Cargrave, Harley Street, London. It was a feminine hand, that much was certain, and there was a curious touch of familiarity to its delicacy as well as to its clearness (this last an admirable quality far too uncommon in the handwriting of ladies). The fresh clarity of that hand—and where had I seen it before?—bespoke a directness that seemed contrary to the well nigh unfathomable ornamentation of the seal, which, upon closer and more concentrated perusal, I at length concluded to be no more than a single ‘S’, but an ‘S’ whose writhing curls seemed almost to grin presumptuously at one, an ‘S’ which seemed to be constructed of little else than
these grins, an 'S' of such vulgar pretension that I admit to having felt vexed for an instant, and then, in the next instant, foolish at my own vexation — for surely, I admonished myself, there are things a deal more vexing than a seal which you have encountered without distemper?

Smiling at my foible, I continued to weigh the letter in my hand, searching my mind for a friend or acquaintance whose name began with 'S.' There was old Shipley of the College of Surgeons; there was Lord Henry Stanton, my waggish and witty friend; and that was the extent of it. Was it Harry? He was seldom in one place for very long and was a faithful and gifted letter-writer. Yet Harry's bold hand was far from effeminate, and, moreover, he would not use such a seal — unless it were as a lark, as an antic jest between friends. My valet had told me, when he put the letter in my hand, that it had come not by the post but by special messenger, and although this intelligence had not struck me as remarkable at the time, it now fed my curiosity and I broke that vexing seal and unfolded the stiff, crackling paper.

The message within was written in the same clear, faintly familiar hand. My eye first travelled to the end to find the signature, but that signature — Madame S. — told me nothing, for I knew of no Madam S. among my circle.

I read the letter. It is before me now as I set down this account, and I shall copy it out verbatim:

'My dear Sir Robert,

'It has been close to seven years since we last met — indeed, at that time you were not yet Sir Robert at all, but plain Robert Cargrave (although some talk of imminent knighthood was in the air), and so I wonder if you will remember Maude Randall?'

Remember Maude Randall! Dear Maude of the bell-like voice, of the chestnut hair and large brown eyes, of a temperament of such sweetness and vivacity that the young men of London had eyes for no one else. She was of good family, but during a stay in Paris there had been something about injudicious speculation by her father that had diminished the family fortunes to such an extent that the wretched man had taken his own life and the Randalls had vanished from London society, altogether. Maude, or so I had heard, had married a foreign gentleman and had remained in Europe. It had been sad news, for no young man of London had ever had more doting eyes for Maude than had I, and it had pleased my fancy.
to think that my feelings were, at least in part, reciprocated. Remember Maude Randall? Yes, yes, I almost said aloud. And now, seven years later, she was ‘Madam S.’, writing in that same hand I had seen countless times on invitations. I continued to read:

‘I often think of you, for — although it may not be seemly to say it — the company of few gentlemen used to please me so much as yours, and the London soirées given by my dear mother, at which you were present, are among my most cherished recollections now. But there! Frankness was always my failing, as Mother used to remind me. She, dear kind lady, survived less than a year after my poor father died, but I suppose you know this.

‘I am quite well, and we live in great comfort here, although we receive but rarely and are content with our own company most of the time. Mr S. is a gracious gentleman, but of quiet and retiring disposition, and throngs of people, parties, balls, etc., are retrograde to his temperament; thus it is a special joy to me that he has expressly asked me to invite you here to the castle for a fortnight — or, if I may give you his exact words: “For a fortnight at least, but howsoever long as it please Sir Robert to stay among such drab folk as he will think us.” (You see, I told you he was gracious!)

I must have frowned while reading, for the words of Mr S. were not so much gracious, I thought, as egregious, and as vulgar as his absurd seal. Still, I held these feelings in check, for I knew that my emotions towards this man were not a little coloured by jealousy. He, after all, had wooed and won Maude Randall, a young lady of discernment and fine sensibilities: could she have been capable of wedding an obsequious boor? I thought it not likely. And a castle! Such romantic grandeur! ‘... Invite you here to the castle ...’ she had written, but where was ‘here’? The letter’s cover, since it had not come by the post, offered no clue; therefore I read on:

‘It was, indeed, only yesterday in the course of conversation, that I was recalling my old life in London, and mentioned your name. Mr S., I thought, was, of a sudden, interested. “Robert Cargrave?” he said. “There is a well-known physician of that name, but I do not imagine it is the same gentleman.” I laughed and told him it was the same gentleman, and that I had known you before you had become so illustrious. “Did you know him well?” Mr S. then asked me, and you will think me silly, but I must tell you that for a moment I
assumed him to be jealous! Such was not the case, however, as further conversation proved. I told him you had been a friend of my family's and a frequent guest at our house. "This is a most happy coincidence," he said. "I have long desired to meet Sir Robert Cargrave, and your past friendship with him furnishes you with an excellent opportunity to invite him here for a holiday."

'And so, Sir Robert, I am complying with his request -- and at the same time obeying the dictates of my own inclination -- by most cordially inviting you to visit us for as long as you choose. I entreat you to come, for we see so few people here and it would be a great pleasure to talk with someone from the old days and to hear the latest London gossip. Suffer me, then, to receive a letter from you at once. Mr S. does not trust the post, hence I have sent this by a servant of ours who was to be in London on special business; please relay your answer by way of him--'

I rang for my man. 'Is the messenger who delivered this letter waiting for a reply?' I asked.

'He is sitting in the vestibule, Sir Robert,' he said.

'You should have told me.'

'Yes, sir.'

'At any rate, send him in now. I wish to see him.'

My man left, and it took me but a minute to dash off a quick note of acceptance. It was ready for the messenger when he was ushered into the room. I addressed him: 'You are in the employ of Madam --' I realized for the first time that I did not know her husband's name.

The servant -- a taciturn fellow with Slavic features -- spoke in a thick accent: 'I am in the employ of Mr Sardonicus, sir.'

Sardonicus! A name as flamboyant as the seal, I thought to myself. 'Then deliver this note, if you please, to Madam Sardonicus, immediately you return.'

He bowed slightly and took the note from my hand. 'I shall deliver it to my master straight away, sir,' he said.

His manner nettled me. I corrected him. 'To your mistress,' I said coldly.

'Madam Sardonicus will receive your message, sir,' he said.

I dismissed him, and only then did it strike me that I had not the faintest idea where the castle of Mr Sardonicus was located. I referred once again to Maude's letter:

'... Please relay your answer by way of him and pray make it affirmative, for I do hope to make your stay in -- a
pleasant one.'

I consulted an atlas. The locality she mentioned, I discovered, was a district in a remote and mountainous region of Bohemia.

Filled with anticipation, I finished my breakfast with renewed appetite, and that very afternoon began to make arrangements for my journey.

II The Sight of a Giant Skull

I am not—as my friend Harry Stanton is—fond of travel for its own sake. Harry has often chided me on this account, calling me a dry-as-dust academician and 'an incorrigible Londoner'—which I suppose I am. For, in point of fact, few things are more tiresome to me than ships and trains and carriages; and although I have found deep enjoyment and spiritual profit in foreign cities, having arrived, the tedium of travel itself has often made me think twice before starting out on a long voyage.

Still, in less than a month after I had answered Maude's invitation, I found myself in her adopted homeland. Sojourn ing from London to Paris, thence to Berlin, finally to Bohemia, I was met at——by a coachman who spoke imperfect English but who managed, in his solemn fashion, to make known to me that he was a member of the staff at Castle Sardonicus. He placed at my disposal a coach drawn by two horses, and, after taking my bags, proceeded to drive me on the last leg of my journey.

Alone in the coach, I shivered, for the air was brisk and I was very tired. The road was full of ruts and stones, and the trip was far from smooth. Neither did I derive much pleasure by bending my glance to the view afforded by the windows, for the night was dark, and the country was, at any rate, wild and raw, not made for serene contemplation. The only sounds were the clatter of hooves and wheels, the creak of the coach, and the harsh, unmusical cries of unseen birds.

'We receive but rarely,' Maude had written, and now I told myself—little wonder! in this ragged and, one might say, uninhabitable place, far from the graces of civilized society, who indeed is there to be received, or, for the matter of that, to receive one? I sighed, for the desolate landscape and the thought of what might prove a holiday devoid of refreshing incident, had combined to cloak my already wearied spirit in

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a melancholic humour.

It was when I was in this condition that Castle Sardonicus met my eye – a dense, hunched outline at first, then, with an instantaneous flicker of moonlight, a great gaping death’s head, the sight of which made me inhale sharply. With the exhalation, I chuckled at myself. ‘Come, come, Sir Robert,’ I inwardly chided, ‘it is, after all, but a castle, and you are not a green girl who starts at shadows and quails at midnight stories!’

The castle is situated at the terminus of a long and upward-winding mountain road. It presents a somewhat forbidding aspect to the world, for there is little about it to suggest gaiety or warmth or any of those qualities that might assure the wayfarer of welcome. Rather, this vast edifice of stone exudes an austerity, cold and repellant, a hint of ancient mysteries long buried, an effluvium of medieval dankness and decay. At night, and most particularly on nights when the moon is slim or cloud-enshrouded, it is a heavy blot upon the horizon, a shadow only, without feature save for its many-turreted outline; and should the moon be temporarily released from her cloudy confinement, her fugitive rays lend scant comfort, for they but serve to throw the castle into sudden, startling chiaroscuro, its windows fleetingly assuming the appearance of sightless though all-seeing orbs, its portcullis becoming for an instant a gaping mouth, its entire form striking the physical and the mental eye as would the sight of a giant skull.

But, though the castle had revealed itself to my sight, it was a full quarter of an hour before the coach had creaked its way up the steep and tortuous road to the great gate that barred the castle grounds from intruders. Of iron the gate was wrought – black it seemed in the scant illumination – and composed of intricate twists that led, every one of them, to a central, huge device, of many curves, which in the infrequent glints of moonglow appeared to smile metallically down, but which, upon gathering my reason about me, I made out to be no more than an enlarged edition of that presumptuous seal: a massive single ‘S’. Behind it, at the end of the rutted road, stood the castle itself – dark, save for lights in two of its many windows.

Some words in a foreign tongue passed between my coachman and a person behind the gate. The gate was unlocked from within and swung open slowly, with a long rising shriek of rusted hinges; and the coach passed through.
As we drew near, the door of the castle was flung open and cheery light spilled out upon the road. The portcullis, which I had previously marked, was evidently a remnant from older days and now inactive. The coach drew to a halt, and I was greeted with great gravity by a butler whom I saw to be he who had carried Maude’s invitation to London. I proffered him a nod of recognition. He acknowledged this and said, ‘Sir Robert, Madam Sardonicus awaits you, and if you will be good enough to follow me, I will take you to her presence.’ The coachman took charge of my bags, and I followed the butler into the castle.

It dated, I thought, to the twelfth or thirteenth century. Suits of armour – priceless relics, I ascertained them to be – stood about the vast halls; tapestries were in evidence throughout; strong, heavy, richly-carved furniture was everywhere. The walls were of time-defying stone, great grey blocks of it. I was led into a kind of salon, with comfortable chairs, a tea table, and a spinet. Maude rose to greet me.

‘Sir Robert,’ she said softly, without smiling. ‘How good to see you at last.’

I took her hand. ‘Dear lady,’ said I, ‘we meet again.’

‘You are looking well and prosperous,’ she said.

‘I am in good health, but just now rather tired from the journey.’

She gave me leave to sit, and did so herself, venturing the opinion that a meal and some wine would soon restore me. ‘Mr Sardonicus will join us soon,’ she added.

I spoke of her appearance, saying that she looked not a day older than when I last saw her in London. This was true, in regard to her physical self, for her face bore not a line, her skin was of the same freshness, and her glorious chestnut hair was still rich in colour and gleaming with health. But what I did not speak of was the change in her spirit. She who had been so gay and vivacious, the delight of soirées, was now distant and aloof, of serious mien, unsmilng. I was sorry to see this, but attributed it to the seven years that had passed since her carefree girlhood, to the loss of her loved parents, and even to the secluded life she now spent in this place.

‘I am eager to meet your husband,’ I said.

‘And he, Sir Robert, is quite eager to meet you,’ Maude assured me. ‘He will be down presently. Meanwhile, do tell me how you have fared in the world.’

I spoke, with some modesty, I hope, of my successes in my
chosen field, of the knighthood I had received from the Crown; I described my London apartment, laboratory and office; I made mention of certain mutual friends, and generally gave her news of London life, speaking particularly of the theatre (for I knew Maude had loved it) and describing Mr Macready's farewell appearance as Macbeth at The Haymarket. When Maude had last been in London, there had been rumours of making an opera house out of Covent Garden theatre, and I told her that those plans had been carried through. I spoke of the London première of Mr Verdi's latest œuvre at Her Majesty's. At my mention of these theatres and performances, her eyes lit up, but she was not moved to comment until I spoke of the opera.

'The opera!' she sighed. 'Oh, Sir Robert, if you could but know how I miss it. The excitement of a première, the ladies and gentlemen in their finery, the thrilling sounds of the overture, and then the curtain rising —' She broke off, as if ashamed of her momentary transport. 'But I receive all the latest scores, and derive great satisfaction from playing and singing them to myself. I must order the new Verdi from Rome. It is called Ernani, you say?'

I nodded, adding, 'With your permission, I will attempt to play some of the more distinctive airs.'

'Oh, pray do, Sir Robert!' she said.

'You will find them, perhaps, excessively modern and dissonant.' I sat down at the spinet and played — just passably, I fear, and with some improvisation when I could not remember the exact notes — a potpourri of melodies from the opera.

She applauded my playing. I urged her to play also, for she was an accomplished keyboard artist and possessed an agreeable voice, as well. She complied by playing the minuet from Don Giovanni and then singing the Voi che sapete from Le Nozze di Figaro. As I stood over her, watching her delicate hands move over the keys, hearing the pure, clear tones of her voice, all my old feelings washed over me in a rush, and my eyes smarted at the unalloyed sweetness and goodness of this lady. When she asked me to join her in the duet, Là ci darem la mano, I agreed to do it, although my voice is less than ordinary. On the second singing of the word ' mano' — 'hand' — I was seized by a vagrant impulse and took her left hand in my own. Her playing was hampered, of course, and the music limped for a few measures; and then, my face burning, I released her hand and we finished out the duet. Wisely, she
neither rebuked me for my action nor gave me encouragement; rather, she acted as if the rash gesture had never been committed.

To mask my embarrassment, I now embarked upon some light chatter, designed to ease whatever tension existed between us; I spoke of many things, foolish things, for the most part, and even asked if Mr. Sardonicus had later demonstrated any of the jealousy she had said, in her letter, that she had erroneously thought him to have exhibited. She laughed at this—and it brightened the room, for it was the first time her face had abandoned its grave expression; indeed, I was taken by the thought that this was the first display of human merriment I had marked since stepping into the coach—and she said, 'Oh, no! To the contrary, Mr. Sardonicus said that the closer we had been in the old days, the more he would be pleased.'

This seemed an odd and even coarse thing for a man to say to his wife, and I jovially replied: 'I hope Mr. Sardonicus was smiling when he said that.'

At once, Maude's own smile vanished from her face. She looked away from me and began to talk of other things. I was dumbfounded. Had my innocent remark given offence? It seemed not possible. A moment later, however, I knew the reason for her strange action, for a tall gentleman entered the room with a gliding step, and one look at him explained many things.

**III He Who Must Smile For Ever**

'SIR ROBERT CARGRAVE?' he asked, but he spoke with difficulty, certain sounds—such as the b in Robert and the v in Cargrave—being almost impossible for him to utter. To shape these sounds, the lips must be used, and the gentleman before me was the victim of some terrible affliction that had caused his lips to be pulled perpetually apart from each other, baring his teeth in a continuous ghastly smile. It was the same humourless grin I had seen once before: on the face of a person in the last throes of lockjaw. We physicians have a name for that chilling grimace, a Latin name, and as it entered my mind, it seemed to dispel yet another mystery, for the term we use to describe the lockjaw smile is: *Ritus sardonicus*. A pallor approaching phosphorescence completed his astonishing appearance.
‘Yes,’ I replied, covering my shock at the sight of his face. ‘Do I have the pleasure of addressing Mr Sardonicus?’

We shook hands. After an exchange of courtesies, he said, ‘I have ordered dinner to be served in the large dining hall one hour hence. In the meantime, my valet will show you to your rooms, for I am sure you will wish to refresh yourself after your journey.’

‘You are most kind.’ The valet appeared – a man of grave countenance, like the butler and the coachman – and I followed him up a long flight of stone stairs. As I walked behind him, I reflected on the unsmiling faces in this castle, and no longer were they things of wonder. For who would be disposed to smile under the same roof with him who must smile for ever? The most spontaneous of smiles would seem a mockery in the presence of that afflicted face. I was filled with pity for Maude’s husband: of all God’s creatures, man alone is blest with the ability to smile; but for the master of Castle Sardonicus, God’s great blessing had become a terrible curse. As a physician, my pity was tempered with professional curiosity. His smile resembled the risus of lockjaw, but lockjaw is a mortal disease, and Mr Sardonicus, his skullish grin notwithstanding, was very much alive. I felt shame for some of my earlier uncharitable thoughts towards this gentleman, for surely such an unfortunate could be forgiven much. What bitterness must fester in his breast; what sharp despair gnaw at his inwards!

My rooms were spacious and certainly as comfortable as this dank stone housing could afford. A hot tub was prepared, for which my tired and dusty frame was most grateful. As I lay in it, I began to experience the pleasant pangs of appetite. I looked forward to dinner. After my bath, I put on fresh linen and a suit of evening clothes. Then, taking from my bag two small gifts for my host and hostess – a bottle of scent for Maude, a box of cigars for her husband – I left my rooms.

I was not so foolish as to expect to find my way, unaided, to the main dining hall; but since I was early, I intended to wander a bit and let the ancient magnificence of the castle impress itself upon me.

Tapestries bearing my host’s ‘S’ were frequently displayed. They were remarkably new, their colours fresh, unlike the faded grandeur of their fellow tapestries. From this – and from Mr Sardonicus’s lack of title – I deduced that the castle
had not been inherited through a family line, but merely pur-
chased by him, probably from an impoverished nobleman. 
Though not titled, Mr Sardonicus evidently possessed enor-
mous wealth. I pondered its source. My ponderings were in-
terrupted by the sound of Maude’s voice.

I looked up. The acoustical effects in old castles are often 
strange – I had marked them in our own English castles – and 
though I stood near neither room nor door of any kind, I 
could hear Maude speaking in a distressed tone. I was standing 
at an open window which overlooked a kind of courtyard. 
Across this court, a window was likewise open. I took this to 
be the window of Maude’s room; her voice was in some way 
being amplified and transported by the circumstantial shape 
of the courtyard and the positions of the two windows. By 
listening very attentively, I could make out most of her words.

She was saying, ‘I shan’t. You must not ask me. It is un-
seemly.’ And then the voice of her husband replied: ‘You 
shall and will, madam. In my castle, it is I who decide what 
is seemly or unseemly. Not you.’ I was embarrassed at over-
hearing this private discussion on what was obviously a painful 
subject, so I made to draw away from the window that I might 
hear no more, but was restrained by the sound of my own 
name on Maude’s lips. ‘I have treated Sir Robert with cour-
tesy,’ she said. ‘You must treat him with more than courtesy,’ 
Mr Sardonicus responded. ‘You must treat him with warmth. 
You must rekindle in his breast those affections he felt for you 
in other days . . .’

I could listen no longer. The exchange was vile. I drew 
away from the window. What manner of creature was this 
Sardonicus who threw his wife into the arms of other men? 
As a practitioner of medicine, a man dedicated to healing the 
ils of humankind, I had brought myself to learn many things 
about the minds of men, as well as about their bodies. I fully 
believed that, in some future time, physicians would heal the 
body by way of the mind, for it is in that terra incognita that 
all secrets lie hidden. I knew that love has many masks; masks 
of submission and of oppression; and even more terrible masks 
that make Nature a stranger to herself and ‘turn the truth of 
God into a lie’, as St Paul wrote. There is even a kind of love, 
if it can be elevated by that name, that derives its keenest 
pleasure from the sight of the beloved in the arms of another. 
These are unpleasant observations, which may one day be 
codified and studied by healers, but which, until then, may
not be thought on for too long, lest the mind grow morbid and stagger under its load of repugnance.

With a heavy heart, I sought out a servant and asked to be taken to the dining hall. It was some distance away, and by the time I arrived there, Sardonicus and his lady were already at table, awaiting me. He arose, and with that revolting smile, indicated a chair; she also arose, and took my arm, addressing me as ‘Dear Sir Robert’ and leading me to my place. Her touch, which at any previous time would have gladdened me, I now found distinctly not to my liking.

A hollow joviality hung over the dinner table throughout the meal. Maude’s laughter struck me as giddy and false; Sardonicus drank too much wine and his speech became even more indistinct. I contrived to talk on trivial subjects, repeating some anecdotes about the London theatre which I had hitherto related to Maude, and describing Mr Macready’s interpretation of Macbeth.

‘Some actors,’ said Sardonicus, ‘interpret the Scottish chieftain as a creature compounded of pure evil, unmixed with good qualities of any kind. Such interpretations are often criticized by those who feel no human being can be so unremittingly evil. Do you agree, Sir Robert?’

‘No,’ I said evenly; then, looking Sardonicus full in the face, I added, ‘I believe it is entirely possible for a man to possess not a single one of the virtues, to be a daemon in human flesh.’ Quickly, I embarked upon a discussion of the character of Iago, who took ghoulish delight in tormenting his fellow man.

The dinner was, I suppose, first rate, and the wine an honourable vintage, but I confess to tasting little of what was placed before me. At the end of the meal, Maude left us for a time and Sardonicus escorted me into the library, whither he ordered brandy to be brought. He opened the box of cigars, expressed his admiration of them and gratitude for them, and offered them to me. I took one and we both smoked. The smoking of the cigar made Sardonicus look even more grotesque: being unable to hold it in his lips, he clenched it in his constantly visible teeth, creating an unique spectacle. Brandy was served; I partook of it freely, though I am not customarily given to heavy drinking, for I now deemed it to be beneficial to my dampened spirits.

‘You used the word “ghoulish” a few moments ago, Sir Robert,’ said Sardonicus. ‘It is one of those words one uses so easily in conversation – one utters it without stopping to think
of its meaning. But, in my opinion, it is not a word to be used lightly. When one uses it, one should have in one’s mind a firm, unwavering picture of a ghoul.’

‘Perhaps I did,’ I said.

‘Perhaps,’ he admitted. ‘And perhaps not. Let us obtain a precise definition of the word.’ He arose and walked to one of the bookcases that lined the room’s walls. He reached for a large two-volume dictionary. ‘Let me see,’ he murmured. ‘We desire Volume One, from A to M, do we not? Now then: “ghee” . . . “gherkin” . . . “ghetto” . . . “ghoom” (an odd word, eh, Sir Robert? “To search for game in the dark”) . . . “ghost” . . . ah, “ghoul!” “Among Eastern nations, an imaginary evil being who robs graves and feeds upon corpses.” One might say, then, that he ghooms?’ Sardonicus chuckled. He returned to his chair and helped himself to more brandy. ‘When you described Iago’s actions as “ghoulish”,’ he continued, ‘did you think of him as the inhabitant of an Eastern nation? Or an imaginary being as against the reality of Othello and Desdemona? And did you mean seriously to suggest that it was his custom to rob graves and then to feed upon the disgusting nourishment he found therein?’

‘I used the word in a figurative sense,’ I replied.

‘Ah,’ said Sardonicus. ‘That is because you are English and do not believe in ghouls. Were you a Middle-European, as am I, you would believe in their existence, and would not be tempted to use the word other than literally. In my country – I was born in Poland – we understood such things. I, in point of fact, have known a ghoul.’ He paused for a moment and looked at me, then said, ‘You English are so blasé. Nothing shocks you. I sit here and tell you a thing of dreadful import and you do not even blink your eyes. Can it be because you do not believe me?’

‘It would be churlish to doubt the word of my host,’ I replied.

‘And an Englishman may be many things, but never a churl, eh, Sir Robert? Let me refill your glass, my friend, and then let me tell you about ghouls – which, by the way, are by no means imaginary, as that stupid lexicon would have us think, and which are not restricted to Eastern nations. Neither do they – necessarily – feed upon carrion flesh, although they are interested, most interested, in the repellent contents of graves. Let me tell you a story from my own country, Sir Robert, a story that – if I have any gift at all as a spinner of
tales — will create in you a profound belief in ghouls. You will be entertained, I hope, but I also hope you will add to your learning. You will learn, for example, how low a human being can sink, how truly monstrous a man can become.'

IV The Moon His Undoing

'You must transport your mind,' said Sardonicus, 'back a few years and to a rural region of my homeland. You must become acquainted with a family of country folk — hard-working, law-abiding, God-fearing, of moderate means — the head of which was a simple, good man named Tadeusz Boleslawski. He was an even-tempered personage, kindly disposed to all men, the loving husband of a devoted wife and father of five strong boys. He was also a firm churchman, seldom even taking the Lord’s name in vain. The painted women who plied their trade in certain elaborate houses of the nearest large city, Warsaw, held no attraction for him, though several of his masculine neighbours, on their visits to the metropolis, succumbed to such blandishments with tidal regularity. Neither did he drink in excess: a glass of beer with his evening meal, a toast or two in wine on special occasions. No: hard liquor, strong language, fast women — these were not the weaknesses of Tadeusz Boleslawski. His weakness was gambling.

'Every month he would make the trip to Warsaw, to sell his produce at the markets and to buy certain necessaries for his home. While his comrades visited the drinking and wenching houses, Tadeusz would attend strictly to business affairs — except for one minor deviation. He would purchase a lottery ticket, place it securely in a small, tight pocket of his best waistcoat — which he wore only on Sundays and on his trips to the city — then put it completely out of his mind until the following month, when, on reaching the city, he would remove it from his pocket and closely scan the posted list of winners. Then, after methodically tearing the ticket to shreds (for Tadeusz never lived to win a lottery), he would purchase another. This was a ritual with him; he performed it every month for twenty-three years, and the fact that he never won did not discourage him. His wife knew of this habit, but since it was the good man’s only flaw, she never remarked upon it.'

Outside, I could hear the wind howling dismally. I took more brandy as Sardonicus continued:
Years passed; three of the five sons married; two (Henryck and Marek, the youngest) were still living with their parents, when Tadeusz — who had been of sturdy health — collapsed one day in the fields and died. I will spare you an account of the family’s grief; how the married sons returned with their wives to attend the obsequies; of the burial in the small graveyard of that community. The good man had left few possessions, but these few were divided, according to his written wish, among his survivors, with the largest share going, of course, to the eldest son. Though this was custom, the other sons could not help feeling a trifle disgruntled, but they held their peace for the most part — especially the youngest, Marek, who was perhaps the most amiable of them and a lad who was by nature quiet and interested in improving his lot through the learning he found in books.

Imagine, sir, the amazement of the widow when, a full three weeks after the interment of her husband, she received word by men returning from Warsaw that the lottery ticket Tadeusz had purchased had now been selected as the winner. It was a remarkable irony, of course, but conditions had grown hard for the poor woman, and would grow harder with her husband dead, so she had no time to reflect upon that irony. She set about looking through her husband’s possessions for the lottery ticket. Drawers were emptied upon the floor; boxes and cupboards were ransacked; the family Bible was shaken out; years before, Tadeusz had been in the habit of temporarily hiding money under a loose floorboard in the bedroom — this cavity was thoroughly but vainly plumbed. The sons were sent for; among the few personal effects they had been bequeathed, did the ticket languish there? In the snuff box? In any article of clothing?

“And at that, Sir Robert, the eldest son leapt up. “An article of clothing!” he cried. “Father always wore his Sunday waistcoat to the city when he purchased the lottery tickets — the very waistcoat in which he was buried!”

“Yes, yes!” the other sons chorused, saving Marek, and plans began to be laid for the exhuming of the dead man. But the widow spoke firmly: “Your father rests peacefully,” she said. “He must not be disturbed. No amount of gold would soothe our hearts if we disturbed him.” The sons protested with vehemence, but the widow stood her ground. “No son of mine will profane his father’s grave — unless he first kills his mother!” Grumbling, the sons withdrew their plans. But
that night, Marek awoke to find his mother gone from the house. He was frightened, for this was not like her. Intuition sent him to the graveyard, where he found her, keeping a lonely vigil over the grave of her husband, protecting him from the greed of grave robbers. Marek implored her to come out of the cold, to return home; she at first refused; only when Marek offered to keep vigil all night himself did she relent and return home, leaving her youngest son to guard the grave from profanation.

‘Marek waited a full hour. Then he produced from under his shirt a small shovel. He was a strong boy, and the greed of a youngest son who has been deprived of inheritance lent added strength to his arms. He dug relentlessly, stopping seldom for rest, until finally the coffin was uncovered. He raised the creaking lid. An overpowering feter filled his nostrils and nearly made him faint. Gathering courage, he searched the pockets of the mouldering waistcoat.

‘The moon proved to be his undoing, Sir Robert. For suddenly its rays, hitherto hidden, struck the face of his father, and at the sight of that face, the boy recoiled and went reeling against the wall of the grave, the breath forced from his body. Now, you must know that the mere sight of his father – even in an advanced state of decomposition – he had steeled himself to withstand; but what he had not foreseen –’

Here, Sardonicus leaned close to me and his pallid, grinning head filled my vision. ‘What he had not foreseen, my dear sir, was that the face of his father, in the rigour of death, would look directly and hideously upon him.’ Sardonicus’ voice became an ophidian hiss. ‘And, Sir Robert,’ he added, ‘most terrible and most unforeseen of all, the dead lips were drawn back from the teeth in a constant and soul-shattering smile!’

V THE REMEMBRANCE OF THAT NIGHT

I KNOW NOT whether it was the ghastliness of his story, or the sight of his hideous face so close to mine, or the cheerless keening of the wind outside, or the brandy I had consumed, or all of these in combination; but when Sardonicus uttered those last words, my heart was clutched by a cold hand, and for a moment – a long moment ripped from the texture of time – I was convinced beyond doubt and beyond logic that the
face I looked into was the face of that cadaver, reanimated by obscure arts, to walk among the living, dead though not dead.

The moment of horror passed, at length, and reason triumphed. Sardonicus, considerably affected by his own tale, sat back in his chair, trembling. Before too long, he spoke again:

‘The remembrance of that night, Sir Robert, though it is now many years past, fills me still with dread. You will appreciate this when I tell you what you have perhaps already guessed – that I am that ghoulish son, Marek.’

I had not guessed it; but since I had no wish to tell him that I had for an instant thought he was the dead father, I said nothing.

‘When my senses returned,’ said Sardonicus, ‘I scrambled out of the grave and ran as swiftly as my limbs would carry me. I had reached the gate of the graveyard when I was smitten by the fact that I had not accomplished the purpose of my mission – the lottery ticket remained in my father’s pocket!’

‘But surely –’ I started to say.

‘Surely I ignored the fact and continued to run? No, Sir Robert. My terror notwithstanding, I halted, and forced myself to retrace those hasty steps. My fear notwithstanding, I descended once more into that noisome grave. My disgust notwithstanding, I reached into the pocket of my decaying father’s waistcoat and extracted the ticket! I need hardly add that, this time, I averted my eyes from his face.

‘But the horror was not behind me. Indeed, it had only begun. I reached my home at a late hour, and my family was asleep. For this I was grateful, since my clothes were covered with soil and I still trembled from my fearful experience. I quietly poured water into a basin and prepared to wash some of the graveyard dirt from my face and hands. In performing my ablutions, I looked up into a mirror – and screamed so loudly as to wake the entire house!

‘My face was as you see it now, a replica of my dead father’s: the lips drawn back in a perpetual, mocking grin. I tried to close my mouth. I could not. The muscles were immovable, as if held in the gelid rigour of death. I could hear my family stirring at my scream, and since I did not wish them to look upon me, I ran from the house – never, Sir Robert, to return.

‘As I wandered the rural roads, my mind sought the cause of the affliction that had been visited upon me. Though but
a country lad, I had read much and I had a blunt, rational mind that was not susceptible to the easy explanations of the supernatural. I would not believe that God had placed a malediction upon me to punish me for my act. I would not believe that some black force from beyond the grave had reached out to stamp my face. At length, I began to believe it was the massive shock that had forced my face to its present state, and that my great guilt had helped to shape it even as my father's dead face was shaped. Shock and guilt: strong powers not from God above or the Fiend below, but from within my own breast, my own brain, my own soul.

'Let me bring this history to a hasty close, Sir Robert. You need only know that, despite my blighted face, I redeemed the lottery ticket and thus gained an amount of money that will not seem large to you, but which was more than I had ever seen before that time. It was the fulcrum from which I plied the lever that was to make me, by dint of shrewd speculation, one of the richest men in Central Europe. Naturally, I sought out physicians and begged them to restore my face to its previous state. None succeeded, though I offered them vast sums. My face remained fixed in this damnable unceasing smile, and my heart knew the most profound despair imaginable. I could not even pronounce my own name! By a dreadful irony, the initial letters of my first and last names were impossible for my frozen lips to form. This seemed the final indignity. I will admit to you that, at this period, I was perilously near the brink of self-destruction. But the spirit of preservation prevailed, and I was saved from that course. I changed my name. I had read of the Rius sardonicus, and its horrible aptness appealed to my bitter mind, so I became Sardonicus — a name I can pronounce with no difficulty.'

Sardonicus paused and sipped his brandy. 'You are wondering,' he then said, 'in what way my story concerns you.'

I could guess, but I said: 'I am.'

'Sir Robert,' he said, 'you are known throughout the medical world. Most laymen, perhaps, have not heard of you; but a layman such as I, a layman who avidly follows the medical journals for tidings of any recent discoveries in the curing of paralysed muscles, has heard of you again and again. Your researches into these problems have earned you high professional regard; indeed, they have earned you a knighthood. For some time, it has been in my mind to visit London and seek you out. I have consulted many physicians, renowned
men – Keller in Berlin, Morignac in Paris, Buonagente in Milan – and none have been able to help me. My despair has been utter. It prevented me from making the long journey to England. But when I heard – sublime coincidence! – that my own wife had been acquainted with you, I took heart. Sir Robert, I entreat you to heal me, to lift from me this curse, to make me look once more like a man, that I may walk in the sun again, among my fellow human beings, as one of them, rather than as a fearsome gargoyle to be shunned and feared and ridiculed. Surely you cannot, will not deny me?’

My feelings for Sardonicus, pendulumlike, again swung towards his favour. His story, his plight, had rent my heart, and I reverted to my earlier opinion that such a man should be forgiven much. The strange overheard conversation between Maudie and him was momentarily forgotten. I said, ‘I will examine you, Mr Sardonicus. You were right to ask me. We must never abandon hope.’

He clasped his hands together. ‘Ah, sir! May you be blest for ever!’

I performed the examination then and there. Although I did not tell him this, never had I encountered muscles as rigid as those of his face. They could only be compared to stone, so inflexible were they. Still, I said, ‘Tomorrow we will begin treatment. Heat and massage.’

‘These have been tried,’ he said, hopelessly.

‘Massage differs from one pair of hands to another,’ I replied. ‘I have had success with my own techniques, and therefore place faith in them. Be comforted then, sir, and share my faith.’

He seized my hand in his. ‘I do,’ he said. ‘I must. For if you – if even you, Sir Robert Cargrave, fail me . . .’ He did not complete the sentence, but his eyes assumed an aspect so bitter, so full of hate, so strangely cold yet flaming, that they floated in my dreams that night.

VI AN ABBYSS OF HUMILIATION AND SHAME

I slept not well, awakening many times in a fever compounded of drink and turbulent emotions. When the first rays of morning crept on to my pillow, I arose, little refreshed. After a cold tub and a light breakfast in my room, I went below to the salon whence music issued. Maudie was already there,
playing a pretty little piece upon the spinet. She looked up and greeted me. 'Good morning, Sir Robert. Do you know the music of Mr Gottschalk? He is an American pianist: this is his Maiden's Blush. Amiable, is it not?'

'Most amiable,' I replied, dutifully although I was in no mood for the embroideries of politesse.

Maude soon finished the piece and closed the album. She turned to me and said, in a serious tone, 'I have been told what you are going to do for my poor husband, Sir Robert. I can scarce express my gratitude.'

'There is no need to express it,' I assured her. 'As a physician – as well as your old friend – I could not do less. I hope you understand, however, that a cure is not a certainty. I will try, and I will try to the limit of my powers, but beyond that I can promise nothing.'

Her eyes shone with supplication: 'Oh, cure him, Sir Robert! That I beg of you!'

'I understand your feelings, madam,' I said. 'It is fitting that you should hope so fervently for his recovery; a devoted wife could feel no other way.'

'Oh, sir,' she said, and into her voice crept now a harshness, 'you misunderstand. My fervent hope springs from unalloyed selfishness.'

'How may that be?' I asked.

'If you do not succeed in curing him,' she told me, 'I will suffer.'

'I understand that, but –'

'No, you do not understand,' she said. 'But I can tell you little more without offending. Some things are better left unspoken. Suffice it to be said that, in order to urge you towards an ultimate effort, to the "limit of your powers" as you have just said, my husband intends to hold over your head the threat of my punishment.'

'This is monstrous!' I cried. 'It cannot be tolerated. But in what manner, pray, would he dare punish you? Surely he would not beat you?'

'I wish he would be content with a mere beating,' she groaned, 'but his cleverness knows a keener torture. No, he holds over me – and over you, through me – a punishment far greater; a punishment (believe me!) so loathsome to the sensibilities, so unequivocally vile and degraded, that my mind shrinks from contemplating it. Spare me your further questions, sir, I enjoin you; for to describe it would plunge me
into an abyss of humiliation and shame!"

She broke into sobbing, and tears coursed down her cheeks. No longer able to restrain my tender feelings for her, I flew to her side and took her hands in mine. 'Maude,' I said, 'may I call you that? In the past I addressed you only as Miss Randall; at present I may only call you Madam Sardonicus; but in my heart — then as now — you are, you always have been, you always will be, simply Maude, my own dear Maude!'

'Robert,' she sighed; 'dearest Robert. I have yearned to hear my Christian name from your lips all these long years.'

'The warmth we feel,' I said, 'may never, with honour, reach fulfilment. But — trust me, dearest Maude! — I will in some wise deliver you from the tyranny of that creature: this I vow!'

'I have no hope,' she said, 'save in you. Whether I go on as I am, or am subjected to an unspeakable horror, rests with you. My fate is in your hands — these strong, healing hands, Robert.' Her voice dropped to a whisper: 'Fail me not! oh fail me not!'

' Govern your fears,' I said. 'Return to your music. Be of good spirits; or, if you cannot, make a show of it. I go now to treat your husband, and also to confront him with what you have told me.'

'Do not!' she cried. 'Do not, I beseech you, Robert; lest, in the event of your failure, he devise foul embellishments upon the agonies into which he will cast me!'

' Very well,' I said, I will not speak of this to him. But my heart aches to learn the nature of the torments you fear.'

' Ask no more, Robert,' she said, turning away. 'Go to my husband. Cure him. Then I will no longer fear those torments.'

I pressed her dear hand and left the salon.

Sardonicus awaited me in his chambers. Thither, quantities of hot water and stacks of towels had been brought by the servants, upon my orders. Sardonicus was stripped to the waist, displaying a trunk strong and of good musculature, but with the same near-phosphorescent pallor of his face. It was, I now understood, the pallor of one who has avoided daylight for years. 'As you see, sir,' he greeted me, 'I am ready for your ministrations.'

I bade him recline upon his couch, and began the treatment.

Never have I worked so long with so little reward. After alternating applications of heat and of massage, over a period of three and a quarter hours, I had made no progress. The muscles of his face were still as stiff as marble; they had not
relaxed for an instant. I was mortally tired. He ordered our luncheon brought to us in his chambers, and after a short respite, I began again. The clock tolled six when I at last sank into a chair, shaking with exhaustion and strain. His face was exactly as before.

'What remains to be done, sir?' he asked me.

'I will not deceive you,' I said. 'It is beyond my skill to alleviate your condition. I can do no more.'

He rose swiftly from the couch. 'You must do more!' he shrieked. 'You are my last hope!'

'Sir,' I said, 'new medical discoveries are ever being made. Place your trust in Him who created you—'

'Cease that detestable gibberish at once!' he snapped. 'Your puling sentiments sicken me! Resume the treatment.'

I refused. 'I have applied all my knowledge, all my art, to your affliction,' I assured him. 'To resume the treatment would be idle and foolish, for—as you have divined—the condition is a product of your own mind.'

'At dinner last night,' countered Sardonicus, 'we spoke of the character of Macbeth. Do you not remember the words he addressed to his doctor?—'

"Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd;\nPluck from the memory a rooted sorrow;\nRaze out the written troubles of the brain;\nAnd with some sweet oblivious antidote\nCleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff\nWhich weighs upon the heart?"

'I remember them,' I said; 'and I remember, as well, the doctor's reply: "Therein the patient must minister to himself."' I arose and started for the door.

'One moment, Sir Robert,' he said. I turned. 'Forgive my precipitate outburst a moment ago. However, the mental nature of my affliction notwithstanding, and even though this mode of treatment has failed, surely there are other treatments?'

'None,' I said, 'that have been sufficiently tested. None I would venture to use upon a human body.'

'Ah!' he cried. 'Then other treatments do exist!'

I shrugged. 'Think not of them, sir. They are at present unavailable to you.' I pitied him, and added: 'I am sorry.'

'Doctor!' he said; 'I implore you to use whatever treatments exist, be they ever so untried!'

'They are fraught with danger,' I said.

'Danger?' He laughed. 'Danger of what? Of disfigurement?
Surely no man has ever been more disfigured than I! Of death? I am willing to gamble my life!'

'I am not willing to gamble your life,' I said. 'All lives are precious. Even yours.'

'Sir Robert, I will pay you a thousand pounds.'

'This is not a question of money.'

'Five thousand pounds, Sir Robert, ten thousand!'

'No.'

He sank on to the couch. 'Very well,' he said. 'Then I will offer you the ultimate inducement.'

'Were it a million pounds,' I said, 'you could not sway me.'

'The inducement I speak of,' he said, 'is not money. Will you hear?'

I sat down. 'Speak, sir,' I said, 'since that is your wish. But nothing will persuade me to use a treatment that might cost you your life.'

'Sir Robert,' he said, after a pause, 'yestereve, when I came down to meet you for the first time, I heard happy sounds in the salon. You were singing a charming melody with my wife. Later, I could not help but notice the character of your glances towards her . . .'

'They were not reciprocated, sir,' I told him, 'and herewith I offer you a most abject apology for my unbecoming conduct.'

'You obscure my point,' he said. 'You are a friend of hers, from the old days in London; at that period, you felt an ardent affection for her, I would guess. This is not surprising: for she is a lady whose face and form promise voluptuous delights and yet a lady whose manner is most decorous and correct. I would guess further: that your ardour has not diminished over the years; that, at the sight of her, the embers have burst into a flame. No, sir, hear me out. What would you say, Sir Robert, were I to tell you — that you may quench that flame?'

I frowned. 'Your meaning, sir? —'

'Must I speak even more plainly? I am offering you a golden opportunity to requite the love that burns in your heart. To requite it in a single night, if that will suffice you, or over an extended period of weeks, months; a year, if you will; as long as you need —'

'Scoundrel!' I roared, leaping up.

He heeded me not, but went on speaking: ' . . . As my guest, Sir Robert! I offer you a veritable Oriental paradise of unlimited raptures!' He laughed, then entered into a catalogue of his wife's excellences. 'Consider, sir,' he said, 'that match-
less bosom, like alabaster which has been imbued with the
pink of the rose, those creamy limbs —

'Enough!' I cried. 'I will hear no more of your foulness.' I
strode to the door.

'Yes, you will, Sir Robert,' he said immediately. 'You will
hear a good deal more of my foulness. You will hear what I
plan to do to your beloved Maude, should you fail to relieve
me of this deformity.'

Again, I stopped and turned. I said nothing, but waited for
him to speak further.

'I perceive that I have caught your interest,' he said. 'Hear
me: for if you think I spoke foully before, you will soon be
forced to agree that my earlier words were, by comparison, as
blameless as The Book of Common Prayer. If rewards do not
tempt you, then threats may coerce you. In fine, Maude will
be punished if you fail, Sir Robert.'

'She is innocent.'

'Just so. Hence, the more exquisite and insupportable to you
should be the thought of her punishment.'

My mind reeled. I could not believe such words were be-
ing uttered.

'Deep in the bowels of this old castle,' said Sardonicus, 'are
dungeons. Suppose I were to tell you that my intention is to
drag my wife thither and stretch her smooth body to un-
endurable length upon the rack —

'You would not dare!' I cried.

'My daring or lack of it is not the issue here. I speak of the
rack only that I may go on to assure you that Maude would
infiniely prefer that dreadful machine to the punishment I
have in truth designed for her. I will describe it to you. You
will wish to be seated, I think.'

**VII ENTERTAINMENT FOR A MONSTER**

'I WILL STAND,' I said.

'As you please.' Sardonicus himself sat down. 'Perhaps you
have marvelled at the very fact of Maude's marriage to me.
When the world was so full of personable men — men like
yourself, who adored her — why did she choose to wed a
monster, a creature abhorrent to the eyes and who did not,
moreover, have any redeeming grace of spiritual beauty, or
kindness, or charm?
I first met Maude Randall in Paris. I say “met”, but it would be truer to simply say I saw her – from my hotel window, in fact. Even in Paris society, which abounds in ladies of remarkable pulchritude, she was to be remarked upon. You perhaps would say I fell in love with her, but I dislike that word “love”, and will merely say that the sight of her smote my senses with most agreeable emphasis. I decided to make her mine. But how? By presenting my irresistibly handsome face to her view? Hardly. I began methodically: I hired secret operatives to find out everything about her and about her mother and father – both of whom were then alive. I discovered that her father was in the habit of speculating, so I saw to it that he received some supposedly trustworthy but very bad advice. He speculated heavily and was instantly ruined. I must admit I had not planned his consequent suicide, but when that melancholy event occurred, I rejoiced, for it worked to my advantage. I presented myself to the bereaved widow and daughter, telling them the excellent qualities of Mr Randall were widely known in the world of affairs and that I considered myself almost a close friend. I offered to help them in any possible way. By dint of excessive humility and persuasiveness, I won their trust and succeeded in diminishing their aversion to my face. This, you must understand, from first to last, occupied a period of many months. I spoke nothing of marriage, made no sign of affection towards the daughter for at least six of these months; when I did – again, with great respect and restraint – she gently refused me. I retreated gracefully, saying only that I hoped I might remain her and her mother’s friend. She replied that she sincerely shared that hope, for, although she could never look upon me as an object of love, she indeed considered me a true friend. The mother, who pined excessively after the death of the father, soon expired: another incident unplanned but welcomed by me. Now the lovely child was alone in the world in a foreign city, with no money, no one to guide her, no one to fall back upon – save kindly Mr Sardonicus. I waited many weeks, then I proposed marriage again. For several days, she continued to decline the offer, but her declinations grew weaker and weaker until, at length, on one day, she said to me:

“Sir, I esteem you highly as a friend and benefactor, but my other feelings towards you have not changed. If you could be satisfied with such a singular condition; if you could agree to enter into marriage with a lady and yet look upon her as no
more than a companion of kindred spirit; if the prospect of a
dispassionate and childless marriage does not repulse you –
as well it might – then, sir, my unhappy circumstances would
compel me to accept your kind offer."

'Instantly, I told her my regard for her was of the purest
and most elevated variety; that the urgings of the flesh were
unknown to me; that I lived on a spiritual plane and desired
only her sweet and stimulating companionship through the
years. All this, of course, was a lie. The diametric opposite
was true. But I hoped, by this falsehood, to lure her into
marriage; after which, by slow and strategic process, I could
bring about her submission and my rapture. She still was
hesitant; for, as she frankly told me, she believed that love was
a noble and integral part of marriage; and that marriage with-
out it could be only a hollow thing; and that though I knew
not the urgings of the flesh, she could not with honesty say
the same of herself. Yet she reiterated that, so far as my own
person was concerned, a platonic relationship was all that
could ever exist between us. I calmed her misgivings. We were
married not long after.

'And now, Sir Robert, I will tell you a surprising thing. I
have confessed myself partial to earthly pleasures; as a physi-
cian and as a man of the world, you are aware that a gentle-
man of strong appetites may not curb them for very long
without fomenting turmoil and distress in his bosom. And yet,
sir, not once in the years of our marriage – not once, I say –
have I been able to persuade or cajole my wife into relenting
and breaking the stringent terms of our marriage agreement.
Each time I have attempted, she has recoiled from me with
horror and disgust. This is not because of an abhorrence of all
fleshly things – by her own admission – but because of my
monstrous face.

'Perhaps now you will better understand the vital necessity
for this cure. And perhaps also you will understand the full
extent of Maude's suffering should you fail to effect that cure.
For, mark me well: if you fail, my wife will be made to be-
come a true wife to me – by main force, and not for one fleet-
ing hour, but every day and every night of her life, whenso-
ever I say, in whatsoever manner I choose to express my con-
jugal privilege!' As an afterthought, he added, 'I am by nature
imaginative.'

I had been shocked into silence. I could only look upon him
with disbelief. He spoke again:
‘If you deem it a light punishment, Sir Robert, then you do not know the depth of her loathing for my person, you do not know the revulsion that wells up inside her when I but place my fingers upon her arm, you do not know what mastery of her very gorge is required of her when I kiss her hand. Think, then; think of the abomination she would feel were my attentions to grow more ardent, more demanding! It would unseat her mind, sir; of that I am sure, for she would as soon embrace a reptile.’

Sardonicus arose and put on his shirt. ‘I suggest we both begin dressing for dinner,’ he said. ‘Whilst you are dressing, reflect. Ask yourself, Sir Robert: could you ever again look upon yourself with other than shame and loathing if you were to sacrifice the beautiful and blameless Maude Randall on an altar of the grossest depravity? Consider how ill you would sleep in your London bed, night after night, knowing what she was suffering at that very moment; suffering because you abandoned her, because you allowed her to become an entertainment for a monster.’

viii A Token of Detestation

The days that passed after that time were, in the main, tedious yet filled with anxiety. During them, certain supplies were being brought from London and other places; Sardonicus spared no expense in procuring for me everything I said was necessary to the treatment. I avoided his society as much as I could, shunning even his table, and instructing the servants to bring my meals to my rooms. On the other hand, I sought out the company of Maude, endeavouring to comfort her and allay her fears. In those hours when her husband was occupied with business affairs, we talked together in the salon, and played music. Thus, they were days spotted with small pleasures that seemed the greater for having been snatched in the shadow of wretchedness.

I grew to know Maude, in that time, better than I had ever known her in London. Adversity stripped the layers of ceremony from her congress, and we spoke directly. I came to know her warmth, but I came to know her strength, too. I spoke outright of my love, though in the next breath I assured her I was aware of the hopelessness of that love. I did not tell her of the ‘reward’ her husband had offered me – and which I
had refused — and I was gladdened to learn (as I did by in-
direction) that Sardonicus, though he had abjured her to be
excessively cordial to me, had not revealed the ultimate and
ignoble purpose of that cordiality.

‘Robert,’ she said once, ‘is it likely that he will be cured?’

I did not tell her how unlikely it was. ‘For your sake, Maude,’ I said, ‘I will persevere more than I have ever done
in my life.’

At length, a day arrived when all the necessaries had been
gathered: some plants from the New World, certain equip-
ment from London, and a vital instrument from Scotland. I
worked long and late, in complete solitude, distilling a needed
liquor from the plants. The next day, dogs were brought to
me alive, and carried out dead. Three days after that, a dog
left my laboratory alive and my distilling labours came to an
end.

I informed Sardonicus that I was ready to administer the
treatment. He came to my laboratory, and I imagined there
was almost a gloating triumph in his immobile smile. ‘Such
are the fruits of concentrated effort,’ he said. ‘Man is an in-
dolent creature, but light the fire of fear under him, and of
what miracles is he not capable!’

‘Speak not of miracles,’ I said, ‘though prayers would do
you no harm now, for you will soon be in peril of your life.’ I
motioned him towards a table and bade him lie upon it. He
did so, and I commenced explaining the treatment to him.
‘The explorer Magellan,’ I said, ‘wrote of a substance used
on darts by the savage inhabitants of the South American
continent. It killed instantly, dropping large animals in their
tracks. The substance was derived from certain plants, and is,
in essence, the same substance I have been occupied in ex-
tracting these past days.’

‘A poison, Sir Robert?’ he asked, wryly.

‘When used full strength,’ I said, ‘it kills by bringing about
a total relaxation of the muscles — particularly the muscles of
the lungs and heart. I have long thought that a dilution of that
poison might beneficially slacken the rigidly tensed muscles
of paralysed patients.’

‘Most ingenious, sir,’ he said.

‘I must warn you,’ I went on, ‘that this distilment has never
been used on a human subject. It may kill you. I must, per-
force, urge you again not to insist upon its use; to accept your
lot; and to remove the threat of punishment you now hold

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over your wife’s head.’

“You seek to frighten me, Doctor,” chuckled Sardonicus; “to plant distrust in my bosom. But I fear you not — an English knight and a respected physician would never do a deed so dishonourable as to wittingly kill a patient under his care. You would be hamstrung by your gentleman’s code as well as by your professional oath. Your virtues are, in short, my vices’ best ally.”

I bristled. “I am no murderer such as you,” I said. “If you force me to use this treatment, I will do everything in my power to ensure its success. But I cannot conceal from you the possibility of your death.”

“See to it that I live,” he said flatly, “for if I die, my men will kill both you and my wife. They will not kill you quickly. See to it, also, that I am cured — lest Maude be subjected to a fate she fears more than the slowest tortures.” I said nothing. “Then bring me this elixir straightway,” he said, “and let me drink it off and make an end of this!”

“It is not to be drunk,” I told him.

He laughed. “Is it your plan to smear it on darts, like the savages?”

“Your jest is most apposite,” I said. “I indeed plan to introduce it into your body by means of a sharp instrument — a new instrument not yet widely known, that was sent me from Scotland. The original suggestion was put forth in the University of Oxford some two hundred years ago by Dr Christopher Wren, but only recently, through development by my friend, Dr Wood of Edinburgh, has it seemed practical. It is no more than a syringe” — I showed him the instrument — “attached to a needle; but the needle is hollow, so that, when it punctures the skin, it may carry healing drugs directly into the bloodstream.”

“The medical arts will never cease earning my admiration,” said Sardonicus.

I filled the syringe. My patient said, “Wait.”

“Are you afraid?” I asked.

“Since that memorable night in my father’s grave,” he replied, “I have not known fear. I had a surfeit of it then; it will last out my lifetime. No: I simply wish to give instructions to one of my men.” He arose from the table, and, going to the door, told one of his helots to bring Madam Sardonicus to the laboratory.

“Why must she be here?” I asked.
‘The sight of her,’ he said, ‘may serve you as a remembrancer of what awaits her in the event of my death, or of that other punishment she may expect should your treatment prove ineffectual.’

Maude was brought into our presence. She looked upon my equipment – the bubbling retorts and tubes, the pointed syringe – with amazement and fright. I began to explain the principle of the treatment to her, but Sardonicus interrupted: ‘Madam is not one of your students, Sir Robert; it is not necessary she know these details. Delay no longer; begin at once!”

He stretched out upon the table again, fixing his eyes upon me. I proffered Maude a comforting look, and walked over to my patient. He did not wince as I drove the needle of the syringe into the left, and then the right, side of his face. ‘Now, sir,’ I said – and the tremor in my voice surprised me – ‘we must wait a period of ten minutes.’ I joined Maude, and talked to her in low tones, keeping my eyes always upon my patient. He stared at the ceiling; his face remained solidified in that unholy grin. Precisely ten minutes later, a short gasp escaped him; I rushed to his side, and Maude followed close behind me.

We watched with consuming fascination as that clenched face slowly softened, relaxed, changed; the lips drawing closer and closer to each other, gradually covering those naked teeth and gums, the graven creases unfolding and becoming smooth. Before a minute had passed, we were looking down upon the face of a serenely handsome man. His eyes flashed with pleasure, and he made as if to speak.

‘No,’ I said, ‘do not attempt speech yet. The muscles of your face are so slackened that it is beyond your power, at present, to move your lips. This condition will pass.’ My voice rang with exultation, and for the moment our enmity was forgotten. He nodded, then leapt from the table and dashed to a mirror which hung on a wall near by. Though his face could not yet express his joy, his whole body seemed to unfurl in a great gesture of triumph and a muffled cry of happiness burst in his throat.

He turned and seized my hand; then he looked full into Maude’s face. After a moment, she said, ‘I am happy for you, sir,’ and looked away. A rasping laugh sounded in his throat, and he walked to my work bench, tore a leaf from one of my notebooks, and scribbled upon it. This he handed to Maude,
who read it and passed it over to me. The writing said: *Fear not, lady. You will not be obliged to endure my embraces. I know full well that the restored beauty of my face will weigh not a jot in the balance of your attraction and repugnance. By this document, I dissolve our pristine marriage. You who have been a wife only in name are no longer even that. I give you your freedom.*

I looked up from my reading. Sardonicus had been writing again. He ripped another leaf from the notebook and handed it directly to me. It read: *This paper is your safe conduct out of the castle and into the village. Gold is yours for the asking, but I doubt if your English scruples will countenance the accepting of my money. I will expect you to have quit these premises before morning, taking her with you.*

‘We will be gone within the hour,’ I told him, and guided Maude towards the door. Before we left the room, I turned for the last time to Sardonicus.

‘For your unclean threats,’ I said; ‘for the indirect but no less vicious murder of this lady’s parents; for the defiling of your own father’s grave; for the greed and inhumanity that moved you even before your blighted face provided you with an excuse for your conduct; for these and for what crimes unknown to me blacken your ledger – accept this token of my censure and detestation.’ I struck him forcibly on the face. He did not respond. He was standing there in the laboratory when I left the room with Maude.

IX NOT GOD ABOVE NOR THE FIEND BELOW

*This strange account should probably end here. No more can be said of its central character, for neither Maude nor I saw him or heard of him after that night. And of us two, nothing need be imparted other than the happy knowledge that we have been most contentedly married for the past twelve years and are the parents of a sturdy boy and two girls who are the lovely images of their mother.*

However, I have mentioned my friend Lord Henry Stanton, the inveterate traveller and faithful letter-writer, and I must copy out now a portion of a missive I received from him only a week since, and which, in point of fact, has been the agent that has prompted me to unfold this whole history of Mr Sardonicus:
"... But, my dear Bobbie," wrote Stanton, "in truth there is small pleasure to be found in this part of the world, and I shall be glad to see London again. The excitements and the drama have all departed (if, indeed, they ever existed) and one must content one's self with the stories told at the hearthstones of inns, with the flames crackling and the mulled wine agreeably stinging one's throat. The natives here are most fond of harrowing stories, tales of gore and grue, of ghosts and ghastly events, and I must confess a partiality to such entertainments myself. They will show you a stain on a wall and tell you it is the blood of a murdered innocent who met her death there fifty years before: no amount of washing will ever remove that stain, they tell you in sepulchral tones, and indeed it deepens and darkens on a certain day of the year, the anniversary of her violent passing. One is expected to nod gravely, of course, and one does, if one wishes to encourage the telling of more stories. Back in the eleventh century, you will be apprised, a battalion of foreign invaders were vanquished by the skeletons of long-dead patriots who arose from their tombs to defend their homeland and then returned to the earth when the enemy had been driven from their borders. (And since they are able to show you the very graves of these lively bones, how can one disbelieve them, Bobbie?) Or they will point to a desolate skull of a castle (the country here abounds in such depressing piles) and tell you of the spectral tyrant who, a scant dozen years before, despaired and died alone there. Deserted by the minions who had always hated him, the frightening creature roamed the village, livid and emaciated, his mind shattered, mutely imploring the succour of even the lowliest beggars. I say mutely, and that is the best part of this tall tale: for, as they tell it around the fire, these inventive folk, this poor unfortunate could not speak, could not eat, and could not drink. You ask why? For the simple reason that, though he clawed most horribly at his own face, and though he enlisted the aid of strong men - he was absolutely unable to open his mouth. Cursed by Lucifer, they say, he thirsted and starved in the midst of plenty, surrounded by kegs of drink and tables full of the choicest viands, suffering the torments of Tantalus, until he finally died. Ah, Bobbie! the efforts of our novelists are pale stuff compared to this! English littéra- teurs have not the shameless wild imaginations of these people! I will never again read Mrs Radcliffe with pleasure. I assure you, and the ghost of King Hamlet will, from this day hence,
strike no terror to my soul, and will fill my heart with but paltry pity. Still, I have journeyed in foreign climes quite enough for one trip, and I long for England and that good English dullness which is relieved only by you and your dear lady (to whom you must commend me most warmly). Until next month, I remain,

‘Your wayward friend,

‘Harry Stanton

‘(Bohemia, March, 18—)’

Now, it would not be a difficult feat for the mind to instantly assume that the unfortunate man in that last tale was Sardonicus — indeed, it is for that reason that I have not yet shewn Stanton’s letter to Maude: for she, albeit she deeply loathed Sardonicus, is of such a compassionate and susceptible nature that she would grieve to hear of him suffering a death so horrible. But I am a man of science, and I do not form conclusions on such gossamer evidence. Harry did not mention the province of Bohemia that is supposed to have been the stage of that terrible drama; and his letter, though written in Bohemia, was not mailed by Harry until he reached Berlin, so the postmark tells me nothing. Castles like that of Sardonicus are not singular in Bohemia — Harry himself says the country ‘abounds in such depressing piles’ — so I plan to suspend conclusive thoughts on the matter until I welcome Harry home and can elicit from him details of the precise locality.

For if that ‘desolate skull of a castle’ is Castle Sardonicus, and if the story of the starving man is to be believed, then I will be struck by an awesome and curious thing:

Five days I occupied myself in extracting a liquor from the South American plants. During those days, dogs were carried dead from my laboratory. I had deliberately killed the poor creatures with the undiluted poison, in order to impress Sardonicus with its deadliness. I never intended to — and, in fact, never did — prepare a safe dilution of that lethal drug, for its properties were too unknown, its potentiality too dangerous. The liquid I injected into Sardonicus was pure, distilled water — nothing more. This had always been my plan. The ordering of materia medica from far-flung lands was but an elaborate façade designed to work not upon the physical part of Sardonicus, but upon his mind; for after Keller, Morignac, Buonagente, and my own massaging techniques had failed, I was convinced that it was only through his mind that his body
could be cured. It was necessary to persuade him, however, that he was receiving a powerful medicament. His mind, I had hoped, would provide the rest — as, in truth, it did.

If the tale of the 'spectral tyrant' proved true, then we must look upon the human mind with wonderment and terror. For, in that case, there was nothing — nothing corporeal — to prevent the wretched creature from opening his mouth and eating his fill. Alone in that castle, food aplenty at his fingertips, he had suffered a dire punishment which came upon him — to paraphrase Sardonicus' very words — not from God above or the Fiend below, but from within his own breast, his own brain, his own soul.
RINGING THE CHANGES

by Robert Aickman

He had never been among those many who deeply dislike church bells, but the ringing that evening at Holihaven changed his view. Bells could certainly get on one's nerves, he felt, although he had only just arrived in the town.

He had been too well aware of the perils attendant upon marrying a girl twenty-four years younger than himself to add to them by a conventional honeymoon. The strange force of Phrynne's love had borne both of them away from their previous selves: in him a formerly haphazard and easy-going approach to life had been replaced by much deep planning to wall in happiness; and she, though once thought cold and choosy, would now agree to anything as long as she was with him. He had said that if they were to marry in June, it would be at the cost of not being able to honeymoon until October. Had they been courting longer, he had explained, gravely smiling, special arrangements could have been made; but, as it was, business claimed him. This, indeed, was true; because his business position was less influential than he had led Phrynne to believe. Finally, it would have been impossible for them to have courted longer, because they had courted from the day they met, which was less than six weeks before the day they married.

"A village," he had quoted as they entered the branch-line train at the junction (itself sufficiently remote), "from which (it was said) persons of sufficient longevity might hope to reach Liverpool Street." By now he was able to make jokes about age, although perhaps he did so rather too often.

'Who said that?'
'Bertrand Russell.'

She had looked at him with her big eyes in her tiny face.
'Really.' He had smiled confirmation.
'I'm not arguing.' She had still been looking at him. The romantic gas light in the charming period compartment had left him uncertain whether she was smiling back or not. He had given himself the benefit of the doubt, and kissed her.
The guard had blown his whistle and they had rumbled into the darkness. The branch line swung so sharply away from the main line that Phrynne had been almost toppled from her seat.

‘Why do we go so slowly when it’s so flat?’

‘Because the engineer laid the line up and down the hills and valleys such as they are, instead of cutting through and embanking over them.’ He liked being able to inform her.

‘How do you know? Gerald! You said you hadn’t been to Holihaven before.’

‘It applies to most of the railways in East Anglia.’

‘So that even though it’s flatter, it’s slower?’

‘Time matters less.’

‘I should have hated going to a place where time mattered or that you’d been to before. You’d have had nothing to remember me by.’

He hadn’t been quite sure that her words exactly expressed her thought, but the thought had lightened his heart.

Holihaven station could hardly have been built in the days of the town’s magnificence, for they were in the Middle Ages; but it still implied grander functions than came its way now. The platforms were long enough for visiting London expresses, which had since gone elsewhere; and the architecture of the waiting-rooms would have been not insufficient for occasional use by Foreign Royalty. Oil lamps on perches like those occupied by macaws lighted the uniformed staff, who numbered two, and, together with every other native of Holihaven, looked like storm-habituated mariners.

The stationmaster and porter, as Gerald took them to be, watched him approach down the platform, with a heavy suitcase in each hand and Phrynne walking deliciously by his side. He saw one of them address a remark to the other, but neither offered to help. Gerald had to put down the cases in order to give up their tickets. The other passengers had already disappeared.

‘Where’s the Bell?’

Gerald had found the hotel in a reference book. It was the only one the book allotted to Holihaven. But as Gerald spoke, and before the ticket collector could answer, the sudden deep note of an actual bell rang through the darkness. Phrynne caught hold of Gerald’s sleeve.

Ignoring Gerald, the stationmaster, if such he was, turned to his colleague. ‘They’re starting early.’
'Every reason to be in good time,' said the other man.
The stationmaster nodded, and put Gerald's tickets in-
differently in his jacket pocket.
'Can you please tell me how I get to the Bell Hotel?'
The stationmaster's attention returned to him. 'Have you a
room booked?'
'Certainly.'
'Tonight?' The stationmaster looked inappropriately sus-
picious.
'Of course.'
Again the stationmaster looked at the other man.
'It's them Pascoes.'
'Yes,' said Gerald. 'That's the name, Pascoe.'
'We don't use the Bell,' explained the stationmaster. 'But
you'll find it in Wrack Street.' He gesticulated vaguely and
unhelpfully. 'Straight ahead. Down Station Road. Then down
Wrack Street. You can't miss it.'
'Thank you.'
As soon as they entered the town, the big bell began to boom
regularly.
'What narrow streets!' said Phrynne.
'They follow the lines of the medieval city. Before the river
silted up, Holihaven was one of the most important seaports
in Great Britain.'
'Where's everybody got to?'
Although it was only six o'clock, the place certainly seemed
deserted.
'Where's the hotel got to?,' rejoined Gerald.
'Poor Gerald! Let me help.' She laid her hand beside his
on the handle of the suitcase nearest to her, but as she was
about fifteen inches shorter than he, she could be of little
assistance. They must already have gone more than a quarter
of a mile. 'Do you think we're in the right street?'
'Most unlikely, I should say. But there's no one to ask.'
'Must be early closing day.'
The single deep notes of the bell were now coming more
frequently.
'Why are they ringing that bell? Is it a funeral?'
'Bit late for a funeral.'
She looked at him a little anxiously.
'Anyway it's not cold.'
'Considering we're on the east coast it's quite astonishingly
warm.'
‘Not that I care.’
‘I hope that bell isn’t going to ring all night.’
She pulled on the suitcase. His arms were in any case almost parting from his body. ‘Look! We’ve passed it.’
They stopped, and he looked back. ‘How could we have done that?’
‘Well, we have.’
She was right. He could see a big ornamental bell hanging from a bracket attached to a house about a hundred yards behind them.
They retraced their steps and entered the hotel. A woman dressed in a navy blue coat and skirt, with a good figure but dyed red hair and a face ridged with make-up, advanced upon them.
‘Mr and Mrs Banstead?’ I’m Hilda Pascoe. Don, my husband, isn’t very well.’
Gerald felt full of doubts. His arrangements were not going as they should. Never rely on guide-book recommendations. The trouble lay partly in Phrynee’s insistence that they go somewhere he did not know. ‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ he said.
‘You know what men are like when they’re ill?’ Mrs Pascoe spoke understandingly to Phrynee.
‘Impossible,’ said Phrynee. ‘Or very difficult.’
‘Talk about Woman in our hours of ease.’
‘Yes,’ said Phrynee. ‘What’s the trouble?’
‘It’s always the same trouble with Don,’ said Mrs Pascoe, then checked herself. ‘It’s his stomach,’ she said. ‘Ever since he was a kid, Don’s had trouble with the lining of his stomach.’
Gerald interrupted, ‘I wonder if we could see our room?’
‘So sorry,’ said Mrs Pascoe. ‘Will you register first?’ She produced a battered volume bound in peeling imitation leather. ‘Just the name and address.’ She spoke as if Gerald might contribute a résumé of his life.
It was the first time he and Phrynee had ever registered in a hotel; but his confidence in the place was not increased by the long period which had passed since the registration above.
‘We’re always quiet in October,’ remarked Mrs Pascoe, her eyes upon him. Gerald noticed that her eyes were slightly bloodshot. ‘Except sometimes for the bars, of course.’
‘We wanted to come out of the season,’ said Phrynee soothingly.
‘Quite,’ said Mrs Pascoe.
‘Are we alone in the house?’ inquired Gerald. After all
the woman was probably doing her best.
‘Except for Commandant Shotcroft. You won’t mind him, will you? He’s a regular.’
‘I’m sure we shan’t,’ said Phrynne.
‘People say the house wouldn’t be the same without Commandant Shotcroft.’
‘I see.’
‘What’s that bell?’ asked Gerald. Apart from anything else, it really was much too near.
Mrs Pascoe looked away. He thought she looked shifty under her entrenched make-up. But she only said, ‘Practice.’
‘Do you mean there will be more of them later?’
She nodded. ‘But never mind,’ she said encouragingly. ‘Let me show you to your room. Sorry there’s no porter.’
Before they had reached the bedroom, the whole peal had commenced.
‘Is this the quietest room you have?’ inquired Gerald. ‘What about the other side of the house?’
‘This is the other side of the house. Saint Guthlac’s is over there.’ She pointed out through the bedroom door.
‘Darling,’ said Phrynne, her hand on Gerald’s arm, ‘they’ll soon stop. They’re only practising.’
Mrs Pascoe said nothing. Her expression indicated that she was one of those people whose friendliness has a precise and seldom exceeded limit.
‘If you don’t mind,’ said Gerald to Phrynne, hesitating.
‘They have ways of their own in Holihaven,’ said Mrs Pascoe. Her undertone of militancy implied, among other things, that if Gerald and Phrynne chose to leave, they were at liberty to do so. Gerald did not care for that either: her attitude would have been different, he felt, had there been anywhere else for them to go. The bells were making him touchy and irritable.
‘It’s a very pretty room,’ said Phrynne. ‘I adore four-posters.’
‘Thank you,’ said Gerald to Mrs Pascoe. ‘What time’s dinner?’
‘Seven-thirty. You’ve time for a drink in the bar first.’
She went.
‘We certainly have,’ said Gerald when the door was shut.
‘It’s only just six.’
‘Actually,’ said Phrynne, who was standing by the window looking down into the street, ‘I like church bells.’

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‘All very well,’ said Gerald, ‘but on one’s honeymoon they distract the attention.’

‘Not mine,’ said Phrynne simply. Then she added, ‘There’s still no one about.’

‘I expect they’re all in the bar.’

‘I don’t want a drink. I want to explore the town.’

‘As you wish. But hadn’t you better unpack?’

‘I ought to, but I’m not going to. Not until after I’ve seen the sea.’ Such small shows of independence in her enchanted Gerald.

Mrs Pascoe was not about when they passed through the lounge, nor was there any sound of activity in the establishment.

Outside, the bells seemed to be booming and bounding immediately over their heads.

‘It’s like warriors fighting in the sky,’ shouted Phrynne. ‘Do you think the sea’s down there?’ She indicated the direction from which they had previously retraced their steps.

‘I imagine so. The street seems to end in nothing. That would be the sea.’

‘Come on. Let’s run.’ She was off, before he could even think about it. Then there was nothing to do but run after her. He hoped there were not eyes behind blinds.

She stopped, and held wide her arms to catch him. The top of her head hardly came up to his chin. He knew she was silently indicating that his failure to keep up with her was not a matter for self-consciousness.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’

‘The sea?’ There was no moon; and little was discernible beyond the end of the street.

‘Not only.’

‘Everything but the sea. The sea’s invisible.’

‘You can smell it.’

‘I certainly can’t hear it.’

She slackened her embrace and cocked her head away from him. ‘The bells echo so much, it’s as if there were two churches.’

‘I’m sure there are more than that. There always are in old towns like this.’ Suddenly he was struck by the significance of his words in relation to what she had said. He shrank into himself, tautly listening.

‘Yes,’ cried Phrynne delightedly. ‘It is another church.’

‘Impossible,’ said Gerald. ‘Two churches wouldn’t have
practice ringing on the same night."
'I'm quite sure. I can hear one lot of bells with my left ear, and another lot with my right.'

They had still seen no one. The sparse gas lights fell on the furnishings of a stone quay, small but plainly in regular use.
'The whole population must be ringing the bells.' His own remark discomfited Gerald.
'Good for them.' She took his hand. 'Let's go down on the beach and look for the sea.'

They descended a flight of stone steps at which the sea had sucked and bitten. The beach was as stony as the steps, but lumpier.
'We'll just go straight on,' said Phryne. 'Until we find it.'

Left to himself, Gerald would have been less keen. The stones were very large and very slippery, and his eyes did not seem to be becoming accustomed to the dark.
'You're right, Phryne, about the smell.'
'Honest sea smell.'
'Just as you say.' He took it rather to be the smell of dense rotting weed; across which he supposed they must be slithering. It was not a smell he had previously encountered in such strength.

Energy could hardly be spared for talking, and advancing hand in hand was impossible.

After various random remarks on both sides and the lapse of what seemed a very long time, Phryne spoke again. 'Gerald, where is it? What sort of seaport is it that has no sea?'

She continued onwards, but Gerald stopped and looked back. He had thought the distance they had gone overlong, but was startled to see how great it was. The darkness was doubtless deceitful, but the few lights on the quay appeared as on a distant horizon.

The far glimmering specks still in his eyes, he turned and looked after Phryne. He could barely see her. Perhaps she was progressing faster without him.
'Phryne! Darling!'
Unexpectedly she gave a sharp cry.
'Phryne!'
She did not answer.
'Phryne!'
Then she spoke more or less calmly. Panic over. 'Sorry, darling. I stood on something.'

He realized that a panic it had indeed been; at least in him.
‘You’re all right?’
‘Think so.’
He struggled up to her. ‘The smell’s worse than ever.’ It was overpowering.
‘I think it’s coming from what I stepped on. My foot went right in, and then there was the smell.’
‘I’ve never known anything like it.’
‘Sorry, darling,’ she said gently mocking him. ‘Let’s go away.’
‘Let’s go back. Don’t you think?’
‘Yes,’ said Phrynne. ‘But I must warn you I’m very disappointed. I think that seaside attractions should include the sea.’
He noticed that as they retreated, she was scraping the sides of one shoe against the stones, as if trying to clean it.
‘I think the whole place is a disappointment,’ he said. ‘I really must apologize. We’ll go somewhere else.’
‘I like the bells,’ she replied, making a careful reservation.
Gerald said nothing.
‘I don’t want to go somewhere where you’ve been before.’
The bells rang out over the desolate, unattractive beach. Now the sound seemed to be coming from every point along the shore.
‘I suppose all the churches practice on the same night in order to get it over with,’ said Gerald.
‘They do it in order to see which can ring the loudest,’ said Phrynne.
‘Take care you don’t twist your ankle.’
The din as they reached the rough little quay was such as to suggest that Phrynne’s idea was literally true.
The Coffee Room was so low that Gerald had to dip beneath a sequence of thick beams.
‘Why “Coffee Room”?’ asked Phrynne, looking at the words on the door. ‘I saw a notice that coffee will only be served in the lounge.’
‘It’s the *lucus a non lucendo* principle.’
‘That explains everything. I wonder where we sit.’ A single electric lantern, mass produced in an antique pattern, had been turned on. The bulb was of that limited wattage which is peculiar to hotels. It did little to penetrate the shadows.
‘The *lucus a non lucendo* principle is the principle of calling white black.’
‘Not at all,’ said a voice from the darkness. ‘On the con-
trary. The word black comes from an ancient root which means “to bleach”.

They had thought themselves alone, but now saw a small man seated by himself at an unlighted corner table. In the darkness he looked like a monkey.

‘I stand corrected,’ said Gerald.

They sat at the table under the lantern.

The man in the corner spoke again. ‘Why are you here at all?’

Phryne looked frightened, but Gerald replied quietly.

‘We’re on holiday. We prefer it out of the season. I presume you are Commandant Shotcroft?’

‘No need to presume.’ Unexpectedly the Commandant switched on the antique lantern which was nearest to him. His table was littered with a finished meal. It struck Gerald that he must have switched off the light when he heard them approach the Coffee Room. ‘I’m going anyway.’

‘Are we late?’ asked Phryne, always the assuager of situations.

‘No, you’re not late,’ said the Commandant in a deep, moody voice. ‘My meals are prepared half an hour before the time the rest come in. I don’t like eating in company.’ He had risen to his feet. ‘So perhaps you’ll excuse me.’

Without troubling about an answer, he stepped quickly out of the Coffee Room. He had cropped white hair; tragic, heavy-lidded eyes; and a round face which was yellow and lined.

A second later his head reappeared round the door.

‘Ring,’ he said; and again withdrew.

‘Too many other people ringing,’ said Gerald. ‘But I don’t see what else we can do.’

The Coffee Room bell, however, made a noise like a fire alarm.

Mrs Pascoe appeared. She looked considerably the worse for drink.

‘Didn’t see you in the bar.’

‘Must have missed us in the crowd,’ said Gerald amiably. ‘Crowd?’ inquired Mrs Pascoe drunkenly. Then, after a difficult pause, she offered them a hand-written menu.

They ordered; and Mrs Pascoe served them throughout. Gerald was apprehensive lest her indisposition increase during the course of the meal; but her insobriety, like her affability, seemed to have an exact and definite limit.

‘All things considered, the food might be worse,’ remarked
Gerald, towards the end. It was a relief that something was going reasonably well. 'Not much of it, but at least the dishes are hot.'

When Phrynette translated this into a compliment to the cook, Mrs Pascoe said, 'I cooked it all myself, although I shouldn't be the one to say so.'

Gerald felt really surprised that she was in a condition to have accomplished this. Possibly, he reflected with alarm, she had had much practice under similar conditions.

'Coffee is served in the lounge,' said Mrs Pascoe.

They withdrew. In a corner of the lounge was a screen decorated with winning Elizabethan ladies in ruffs and hoops. From behind it projected a pair of small black boots. Phrynette nudged Gerald and pointed to them. Gerald nodded. They felt themselves constrained to talk about things which bored them.

The hotel was old and its walls thick. In the empty lounge the noise of the bells could not prevent conversation being overheard, but still came from all around, as if the hotel were a fortress beleaguered by surrounding artillery.

After their second cups of coffee, Gerald suddenly said he couldn’t stand it.

'Darling, it's not doing us any harm. I think it's rather cosy.' Phrynette subsided in the wooden chair with its sloping back and long mud-coloured mock-velvet cushions; and opened her pretty legs to the fire.

'Every church in the town must be ringing its bells. It's been going on for two and a half hours and they never seem to take the usual breathers.'

'We wouldn't hear. Because of all the other bells ringing. I think it's nice of them to ring the bells for us.'

Nothing further was said for several minutes. Gerald was beginning to realize that they had yet to evolve a holiday routine.

'I'll get you a drink. What shall it be?'

' Anything you like. Whatever you have.' Phrynette was immersed in female enjoyment of the fire's radiance on her body.

Gerald missed this, and said, 'I don't quite see why they have to keep the place like a hothouse. When I come back, we'll sit somewhere else.'

'Men wear too many clothes, darling,' said Phrynette drowsily.

Contrary to his assumption, Gerald found the lounge bar as empty as everywhere else in the hotel and the town. There was not even a person to dispense.
Somewhat irritably, Gerald struck a brass bell which stood on the counter. It rang out sharply as a pistol shot.

Mrs Pascoe appeared at a door among the shelves. She had taken off her jacket, and her make-up had begun to run.
‘A cognac, please. Double. And a Kümmel.’

Mrs Pascoe’s hands were shaking so much that she could not get the cork out of the brandy bottle.
‘Allow me.’ Gerald stretched his arm across the bar.
Mrs Pascoe stared at him blearily. ‘O.K. But I must pour it.’
Gerald extracted the cork and returned the bottle. Mrs Pascoe slopped a far from precise dose into a balloon.

Catastrophe followed. Unable to return the bottle to the high shelf where it resided, Mrs Pascoe placed it on a waist-level ledge. Reaching for the alembic of Kümmel, she swept the three-quarters full brandy bottle on to the tiled floor. The stuffy air became fogged with the fumes of brandy from behind the bar.

At the door from which Mrs Pascoe had emerged appeared a man from the inner room. Though still youngish, he was puce and puffy, and in his braces, with no collar. Streaks of sandy hair laced his vast red scalp. Liquor oozed all over him, as if from a perished gourd. Gerald took it that this was Don.

The man was too drunk to articulate. He stood in the doorway clinging with each red hand to the ledge, and savagely struggling to flay his wife with imprecations.
‘How much?’ said Gerald to Mrs Pascoe. It seemed useless to try for the Kümmel. The hotel must have another bar.
‘Three and six,’ said Mrs Pascoe, quite lucidly; but Gerald saw that she was about to weep.

He had the exact sum. She turned her back on him and flicked the cash register. As she returned from it, he heard the fragmentation of glass as she stepped on a piece of the broken bottle. Gerald looked at her husband out of the corner of his eye. The sagging, loose-mouthed figure made him shudder. Something moved him.

‘I’m sorry about the accident,’ he said to Mrs Pascoe. He held the balloon in one hand, and was just going.

Mrs Pascoe looked at him. The slow tears of desperation were edging down her face, but she now seemed quite sober.
‘Mr Banstead,’ she said in a flat, hurried voice. ‘May I come and sit with you and your wife in the lounge? Just for a few minutes.’
‘Of course.’ It was certainly not what he wanted, and he
wondered what would become of the bar, but he felt unexpectedly sorry for her, and it was impossible to say No.

To reach the flap of the bar she had to pass her husband. Gerald saw her hesitate for a second; then she advanced resolutely and steadily and looking straight before her. If the man had let go with his hands, he would have fallen; but as she passed him, he released a great gob of spit. He was far too incapable to aim, and it fell on the side of his own trousers. Gerald lifted the flap for Mrs Pascoe and stood back to let her precede him from the bar. As he followed her, he heard her husband mauldering off into unintelligible inward searchings.

"The Kümmel!" said Mrs Pascoe, remembering in the doorway.

"Never mind," said Gerald. "Perhaps I could try one of the other bars?"

"Not tonight. They're shut. I'd better go back."

"No. We'll think of something else." It was not yet nine o'clock, and Gerald wondered about the Licensing Justices.

But in the lounge was another unexpected scene. Mrs Pascoe stopped as soon as they entered, and Gerald, caught between two imitation-leather armchairs, looked over her shoulder.

Phrynne had fallen asleep. Her head was slightly on one side, but her mouth was shut, and her body no more than gracefully relaxed, so that she looked most beautiful, and, Gerald thought, a trifle unearthly, like a dead girl in an early picture by Millais.

The quality of her beauty seemed also to have impressed Commandant Shotcroft; for he was standing silently behind her and looking down at her, his sad face transfigured. Gerald noticed that a leaf of the pseudo-Elizabethan screen had been folded back, revealing a small cretonne-covered chair, with an open tome face downward in its seat.

"Won't you join us?" said Gerald boldly. There was that in the Commandant's face which boded no hurt. "Can I get you a drink?"

The Commandant did not turn his head, and seemed unable to speak. Then in a low voice he said, "For a moment only."

"Good," said Gerald. "Sit down. And you, Mrs Pascoe." Mrs Pascoe was dabbing at her face. Gerald addressed the Commandant. "What shall it be?"

"Nothing to drink," said the Commandant in the same low mutter. It occurred to Gerald that if Phrynne awoke, the Commandant would go.

"What about you?" Gerald looked at Mrs Pascoe, earnestly
hoping she would decline.

'No, thanks.' She was glancing at the Commandant. Clearly she had not expected him to be there.

Phryinne being asleep, Gerald sat down too. He sipped his brandy. It was impossible to romanticize the action with a toast.

The events in the bar had made him forget about the bells. Now, as they sat silently round the sleeping Phryinne, the tide of sound swept over him once more.

'You mustn't think,' said Mrs Pascoe, 'that he's always like that.' They all spoke in hushed voices. All of them seemed to have reason to do so. The Commandant was again gazing sombrely at Phryinne's beauty.

'Of course not.' But it was hard to believe.

'The licensed business puts temptations in a man's way.'

'It must be very difficult.'

'We ought never to have come here. We were happy in South Norwood.'

'You must do good business during the season.'

'Two months,' said Mrs Pascoe bitterly, but still softly. 'Two and a half at the very most. The people who come during the season have no idea what goes on out of it.'

'What made you leave South Norwood?'

'Don's stomach. The doctor said the sea air would do him good.'

'Speaking of that, doesn't the sea go too far out? We went down on the beach before dinner, but couldn't see it anywhere.'

On the other side of the fire, the Commandant turned his eyes from Phryinne and looked at Gerald.

'I wouldn't know,' said Mrs Pascoe. 'I never have time to look from one year's end to the other.' It was a customary enough answer, but Gerald felt that it did not disclose the whole truth. He noticed that Mrs Pascoe glanced uneasily at the Commandant, who by now was staring neither at Phryinne nor at Gerald but at the toppling citadels in the fire.

'And now I must get on with my work,' continued Mrs Pascoe, 'I only came in for a minute.' She looked Gerald in the face. 'Thank you,' she said, and rose.

'Please stay a little longer,' said Gerald. 'Wait till my wife wakes up.' As he spoke, Phryinne slightly shifted.

'Can't be done,' said Mrs Pascoe, her lips smiling. Gerald noticed that all the time she was watching the Commandant
from under her lids, and knew that were he not there, she would have stayed.

As it was, she went. 'I'll probably see you later to say good night. Sorry the water's not very hot. It's having no porter.'

The bells showed no sign of flagging.

When Mrs Pascoe had closed the door, the Commandant spoke.

'He was a fine man once. Don't think otherwise.'

'You mean Pascoe?'

The Commandant nodded seriously.

'Not my type,' said Gerald.

'DSO and bar. DFC and bar.'

'And now bar only. Why?'

'You heard what she said. It was a lie. They didn't leave South Norwood for the sea air.'

'So I supposed.'

'He got into trouble. He was fixed. He wasn't the kind of man to know about human nature and all its rottenness.'

'A pity,' said Gerald. 'But perhaps, even so, this isn't the best place for him?'

'It's the worst,' said the Commandant, a dark flame in his eyes. 'For him or anyone else.'

Again Phrynne shifted in her sleep: this time more convulsively, so that she nearly awoke. For some reason the two men remained speechless and motionless until she was again breathing steadily. Against the silence within, the bells sounded louder than ever. It was as if the tumult were tearing holes in the roof.

'It's certainly a very noisy place,' said Gerald, still in an undertone.

'Why did you have to come tonight of all nights?' The Commandant spoke in the same undertone, but his vehemence was extreme.

'This doesn't happen often?'

'Once every year.'

'They should have told us.'

'They don't usually accept bookings. They've no right to accept them. When Pascoe was in charge they never did.'

'I expect that Mrs Pascoe felt they were in no position to turn away business.'

'It's not a matter that should be left to a woman.'

'Not much alternative surely?'

'At heart women are creatures of darkness all the time.'

The Commandant's seriousness and bitterness left Gerald
without a reply.

‘My wife doesn’t mind the bells,’ he said after a moment. ‘In fact she rather likes them.’ The Commandant really was converting a nuisance, though an acute one, into a melodrama.

The Commandant turned and gazed at him. It struck Gerald that what he had just said in some way, for the Commandant, placed Phrynne also in a category of the lost.

‘Take her away, man,’ said the Commandant, with scornful ferocity.

‘In a day or two perhaps,’ said Gerald, patiently polite. ‘I admit that we are disappointed with Holihaven.’

‘Now. While there’s still time. This instant.’

There was an intensity of conviction about the Commandant which was alarming.

Gerald considered. Even the empty lounge, with its dreary decorations and commonplace furniture, seemed imimical. ‘They can hardly go on practising all night,’ he said. But now it was fear that hushed his voice.

‘Practising!’ The Commandant’s scorn flickered coldly through the overheated room.

‘What else?’

‘They’re ringing to wake the dead.’

A tremor of wind in the flue momentarily drew on the already roaring fire. Gerald had turned very pale.

‘That’s a figure of speech,’ he said, hardly to be heard. ‘Not in Holihaven.’ The Commandant’s gaze had returned to the fire.

Gerald looked at Phrynne. She was breathing less heavily. His voice dropped to a whisper. ‘What happens?’

The Commandant also was nearly whispering. ‘No one can tell how long they have to go on ringing. It varies from year to year. I don’t know why. You should be all right up to midnight. Probably for some while after. In the end the dead awake. First one or two; then all of them. Tonight even the sea draws back. You have seen that for yourself. In a place like this there are always several drowned each year. This year there’ve been more than several. But even so that’s only a few. Most of them come not from the water but from the earth. It is not a pretty sight.’

‘Where do they go?’

‘I’ve never followed them to see. I’m not stark staring mad.’ The red of the fire reflected in the Commandant’s eyes. There was a long pause.
‘I don’t believe in the resurrection of the body,’ said Gerald. As the hour grew later, the bells grew louder. ‘Not of the body.’

‘What other kind of resurrection is possible? Everything else is only theory. You can’t even imagine it. No one can.’

Gerald had not argued such a thing for twenty years. ‘So,’ he said, ‘you advise me to go. Where?’

‘Where doesn’t matter.’

‘I have no car.’

‘Then you’d better walk.’

‘With her?’ He indicated Phryinne only with his eyes.

‘She’s young and strong.’ A forlorn tenderness lay within the Commandant’s words. ‘She’s twenty years younger than you and therefore twenty years more important.’

‘Yes,’ said Gerald. ‘I agree … What about you? What will you do?’

‘I’ve lived here some time now. I know what to do.’

‘And the Pascoes?’

‘He’s drunk. There is nothing in the world to fear if you’re thoroughly drunk. DSO and bar. DFC and bar.’

‘But you are not drinking yourself?’

‘Not since I came to Holihaven. I lost the knack.’

Suddenly Phryinne sat up. ‘Hullo,’ she said to the Commandant; not yet fully awake. Then she said, ‘What fun! The bells are still ringing.’

The Commandant rose, his eyes averted. ‘I don’t think there’s anything more to say,’ he remarked, addressing Gerald. ‘You’ve still got time.’ He nodded slightly to Phryinne, and walked out of the lounge.

‘What have you still got time for?’ asked Phryinne, stretching. ‘Was he trying to convert you? I’m sure he’s an Anabaptist.’

‘Something like that,’ said Gerald, trying to think.

‘Shall we go to bed? Sorry, I’m so sleepy.’

‘Nothing to be sorry about.’

‘Or shall we go for another walk? That would wake me up besides the tide might have come in.’

Gerald, although he half-despised himself for it, found it impossible to explain to her that they should leave at once; without transport or a destination; walk all night if necessary. He said to himself that probably he would not go even were he alone.

‘If you’re sleepy, it’s probably a good thing.’
‘Darling!’
‘I mean with these bells. God knows when they will stop.’
Instantly he felt a new pang of fear at what he had said.
Mrs Pascoe had appeared at the door leading to the bar,
and opposite to that from which the Commandant had de-
parted. She bore two steaming glasses on a tray. She looked
about, possibly to confirm that the Commandant had really
gone.
‘I thought you might both like a nightcap. Ovaltine, with
something in it.’
‘Thank you,’ said Phrynne. ‘I can’t think of anything nicer.’
Gerald set the glass on a wicker table, and quickly finished
his cognac.
Mrs Pascoe began to move chairs and slap cushions. She
looked very haggard.
‘Is the Commandant an Anabaptist?’ asked Phrynne over
her shoulder. She was proud of her ability to outdistance
Gerald in beginning to consume a hot drink.
Mrs Pascoe stopped slapping for a moment. ‘I don’t know
what that is,’ she said.
‘He’s left his book,’ said Phrynne, on a new tack.
Mrs Pascoe looked at it indifferently across the lounge.
‘I wonder what he’s reading,’ continued Phrynne. ‘Fox’s
Lives of the Martyrs, I expect.’ A small unusual devil
seemed to have entered into her.
But Mrs Pascoe knew the answer. ‘It’s always the same,’ she
said, contemptuously. ‘He only reads one. It’s called Fifteen
Decisive Battles of the World. He’s been reading it ever since
he came here. When he gets to the end, he starts again.’
‘Should I take it up to him?’ asked Gerald. It was neither
courtesy nor inclination, but rather a fear lest the Comman-
dant return to the lounge: a desire, after those few minutes of
reflection, to cross-examine.
‘Thanks very much,’ said Mrs Pascoe, as if relieved of a
similar apprehension. ‘Room One. Next to the suit of Japan-
ese armour.’ She went on tipping and banging. To Gerald’s
inflamed nerves, her behaviour seemed too consciously normal.
He collected the book and made his way upstairs. The
volume was bound in real leather, and the tops of its pages
were gilded: apparently a presentation copy. Outside the
lounge, Gerald looked at the flyleaf: in a very large hand was
written: ‘To my dear Son, Raglan, on his being honoured by
the Queen. From his proud Father, B. Shotcroft, Major-
general.' Beneath the inscription a very ugly military crest had been appended by a stamper of primitive type.

The suit of Japanese armour lurked in a dark corner as the Commandant himself had done when Gerald had first encountered him. The wide brim of the helmet concealed the black eyeholes in the headpiece; the moustache bristled realistically. It was exactly as if the figure stood guard over the door behind it. On this door was no number, but, there being no other in sight, Gerald took it to be the door of Number One. A short way down the dim empty passage was a window, the ancient sashes of which shook in the din and blast of the bells. Gerald knocked sharply.

If there was a reply, the bells drowned it; and he knocked again. When to the third knocking there was still no answer, he gently opened the door. He really had to know whether all would, or could, be well if Phryne, and doubtless he also, were at all costs to remain in their room until it was dawn. He looked into the room and caught his breath.

There was no artificial light, but the curtains, if there were any, had been drawn back from the single window, and the bottom sash forced up as far as it would go. On the floor by the dusky void, a maelstrom of sound, knelt the Commandant, his cropped white hair faintly catching the moonless glimmer, as his head lay on the sill, like that of a man about to be guillotined. His face was in his hands, but slightly sideways, so that Gerald received a shadowy distorted idea of his expression. Some might have called it ecstatic, but Gerald found it agonized. It frightened him more than anything which had yet happened. Inside the room the bells were like plunging roaring lions.

He stood for some considerable time quite unable to move. He could not determine whether or not the Commandant knew he was there. The Commandant gave no direct sign of it, but more than once he writhed and shuddered in Gerald's direction, like an unquiet sleeper made more unquiet by an interloper. It was a matter of doubt whether Gerald should leave the book; and he decided to do so mainly because the thought of further contact with it displeased him. He crept into the room and softly laid it on a hardly visible wooden trunk at the foot of the plain metal bedstead. There seemed no other furniture in the room. Outside the door, the hanging mailed fingers of the Japanese figure touched his wrist.

He had not been away from the lounge for long, but it was
long enough for Mrs Pascoe to have begun again to drink. She had left the tidying up half-completed, or rather the room half-disarranged; and was leaning against the overmantel, drawing heavily on a dark tumbler of whisky. Phrynne had not yet finished her Ovaltine.

‘How long before the bells stop?’ asked Gerald as soon as he opened the lounge door. Now he was resolved that, come what might, they must go. The impossibility of sleep should serve as excuse.

‘I don’t expect Mrs Pascoe can know any more than we can,’ said Phrynne.

‘You should have told us about this – this annual event – before accepting our booking.’

Mrs Pascoe drank some more whisky. Gerald suspected that it was neat. ‘It’s not always the same night,’ she said throatily, looking at the floor.

‘We’re not staying,’ said Gerald wildly.

‘Darling!’ Phrynne caught him by the arm.

‘Leave this to me, Phrynne.’ He addressed Mrs Pascoe.

‘We’ll pay for the room, of course. Please order me a car.’

Mrs Pascoe was now regarding him stonily. When he asked for a car, she gave a very short laugh. Then her face changed. She made an effort, and said, ‘You mustn’t take the Commandant so seriously, you know.’

Phrynne glanced quickly at her husband.

The whisky was finished. Mrs Pascoe placed the empty glass on the plastic overmantel with too much of a thud. ‘No one takes Commandant Shotcroft seriously,’ she said. ‘Not even his nearest and dearest.’

‘Has he any?’ asked Phrynne. ‘He seemed so lonely and pathetic.’

‘He’s Don and I’s mascot,’ she said, the drink interfering with her grammar. But not even the drink could leave any doubt about her rancour.

‘I thought he had personality,’ said Phrynne.

‘That and a lot more, no doubt,’ said Mrs Pascoe. ‘But they pushed him out, all the same.’

‘Out of what?’

‘Cashiered, court-martialled, badges of rank stripped off, sword broken in half, muffled drums, the works.’

‘Poor old man. I’m sure it was a miscarriage of justice.’

‘That’s because you don’t know him.’

Mrs Pascoe looked as if she were waiting for Gerald to offer
her another whisky.

‘It’s a thing he could never live down,’ said Phryne, brooding to herself, and tucking her legs beneath her. ‘No wonder he’s so queer if all the time it was a mistake.’

‘I just told you it was not a mistake,’ said Mrs Pascoe insolently.

‘How can we possibly know?’

‘You can’t. I can. No one better.’ She was at once aggressive and tearful.

‘If you want to be paid,’ cried Gerald, forcing himself in, ‘make out your bill. Phryne, come upstairs and pack.’ If only he hadn’t made her unpack between their walk and dinner.

Slowly Phryne uncoiled and rose to her feet. She had no intention of either packing or departing, nor was she going to argue. ‘I shall need your help,’ she said. ‘If I’m going to pack.’

In Mrs Pascoe there was another change. Now she looked terrified. ‘Don’t go. Please don’t go. Not now. It’s too late.’

Gerald confronted her. ‘Too late for what?’ he asked harshly.

Mrs Pascoe looked paler than ever. ‘You said you wanted a car,’ she faltered. ‘You’re too late.’ Her voice trailed away.

Gerald took Phryne by the arm. ‘Come on up.’

Before they reached the door, Mrs Pascoe made a further attempt. ‘You’ll be all right if you stay. Really you will.’ Her voice, normally somewhat strident, was so feeble that the bells obliterated it. Gerald observed that from somewhere she had produced the whisky bottle and was refilling her tumbler.

With Phryne on his arm he went first to the stout front door. To his surprise it was neither locked nor bolted, but opened at a half-turn of the handle. Outside the building the whole sky was full of bells, the air an inferno of ringing.

He thought that for the first time Phryne’s face also seemed strained and crestfallen. ‘They’ve been ringing too long,’ she said, drawing close to him. ‘I wish they’d stop.’

‘We’re packing and going. I needed to know whether we could get out this way. We must shut the door quietly.’

It creaked a bit on its hinges, and he hesitated with it half-shut, uncertain whether to rush the creak or to ease it. Suddenly, something dark and shapeless, with its arm seeming to hold a black vesture over its head, flitted, all sharp angles, like a bat, down the narrow ill-lighted street, the sound of its passage audible to none. It was the first being that either of
them had seen in the streets of Holihaven; and Gerald was acutely relieved that he alone had set eyes upon it. With his hand trembling, he shut the door much too sharply.

But no one could possibly have heard, although he stopped for a second outside the lounge. He could hear Mrs Pascoe now weeping hysterically; and again was glad that Phryne was a step or two ahead of him. Upstairs the Commandant’s door lay straight before them: they had to pass close beside the Japanese figure, in order to take the passage to the left of it.

But soon they were in their room, with the key turned in the big rim lock.

‘Oh God,’ cried Gerald, sinking on the double bed. ‘It’s pandemonium.’ Not for the first time that evening he was instantly more frightened than ever by the unintended appositeness of his own words.

‘It’s pandemonium all right,’ said Phryne, almost calmly. ‘And we’re not going out in it.’

He was at a loss to divine how much she knew, guessed, or imagined; and any word of enlightenment from him might be inconceivably dangerous. But he was conscious of the strength of her resistance, and lacked the reserves to battle with it.

She was looking out of the window into the main street. ‘We might will them to stop,’ she suggested wearily.

Gerald was now far less frightened of the bells continuing than of their ceasing. But that they should go on ringing until day broke seemed hopelessly impossible.

Then one peal stopped. There could be no other explanation for the obvious diminution in sound.

‘You see!’ said Phryne.

Gerald sat up straight on the side of the bed.

Almost at once further sections of sound subsided, quickly one after the other, until only a single peal was left, that which had begun the ringing. Then the single peal tapered off into a single bell. The single bell tolled on its own, disjointedly, five or six or seven times. Then it stopped, and there was nothing.

Gerald’s head was a cave of echoes,-mountingly muffled by the noisy current of his blood.

‘Oh goodness,’ said Phryne, turning from the window and stretching her arms above her head. ‘Let’s go somewhere else tomorrow.’ She began to take off her dress.

Sooner than usual they were in bed, and in one another’s arms. Gerald had carefully not looked out of the window, and
neither of them suggested that it should be opened, as they usually did.  
'As it's a four-poster, shouldn't we draw the curtains?' asked Phrynne. 'And be really snug? After those damned bells?'  
'We should suffocate.'  
'Did they suffocate when everyone had four-posters?'  
'They only drew the curtains when people were likely to pass through the room.'  
'Darling, you're shivering. I think we should draw them.'  
'Lie still instead and love me.'  
But all his nerves were straining out into the silence. There was no sound of any kind, beyond the hotel or within it; not a creaking floorboard nor a prowling cat nor a distant owl. He had been afraid to look at his watch when the bells stopped, or since; the number of the dark hours before they could leave Holihaven weighed on him. The vision of the Commandant kneeling in the dark window was clear before his eyes, as if the intervening panelled walls were made of stage gauze; and the thing he had seen in the street darted on its angular way back and forth through memory.  
Then passion began to open its petals within him, layer upon slow layer; like an illusionist's red flower which, without soil or sun or sap, grows as it is watched. The languor of tenderness began to fill the musty room with its texture and perfume. The transparent walls became again opaque, the old man's vaticinations mere obsession. The street must have been empty, as it was now; the eye deceived.  
But perhaps rather it was the boundless sequacity of love that deceived, and most of all in the matter of the time which had passed since the bells stopped ringing; for suddenly Phrynne drew very close to him, and he heard steps in the thoroughfare outside, and a voice calling. These were loud steps, audible from afar even through the shut window; and the voice had the possessed stridency of the street evangelist.  
'The dead are awake!'  
Not even the thick bucolic accent, the guttural vibrato of emotion, could twist or mask the meaning. At first Gerald lay listening with all his body, and concentrating the more as the noise grew; then he sprang from the bed and ran to the window.  
A burly, long-limbed man in a seaman's jersey was running down the street, coming clearly into a view for a second at each lamp, and between them lapsing into a swaying lumpy wraith.
As he shouted his joyous message, he crossed from side to side and waved his arms like a negro. By flashes, Gerald could see that his weatherworn face was transfigured.

'The dead are awake!'

Already, behind him, people were coming out of their houses, and descending from the rooms above shops. There were men, women, and children. Most of them were fully dressed, and must have been waiting in silence and darkness for the call; but a few were dishevelled in night attire or the first garments which had come to hand. Some formed themselves into groups, and advanced arm in arm, as if towards the conclusion of a Blackpool beano. More came singly, ecstatic and waving their arms above their heads, as the first man had done. All cried out, again and again, with no cohesion or harmony. 'The dead are awake! The dead are awake!'

Gerald become aware the Phryne was standing behind him.

'The Commandant warned me,' he said brokenly. 'We should have gone.'

Phryne shook her head and took his arm. 'Nowhere to go,' she said. But her voice was soft with fear, and her eyes blank. 'I don't expect they'll trouble us.'

Swiftly Gerald drew the thick plush curtains, leaving them in complete darkness. 'We'll sit it out,' he said, slightly his-trionic in his fear. 'No matter what happens.'

He scrambled across to the switch. But when he pressed it, light did not come. 'The current's gone. We must get back into bed.'

'Gerald! Come and help me.' He remembered that she was curiously vulnerable in the dark. He found his way to her, and guided her to the bed.

'No more love,' she said ruefully and affectionately, her teeth chattering.

He kissed her lips with what gentleness the total night made possible.

'They were going towards the sea,' she said timidly.

'We must think of something else.'

But the noise was still growing. The whole community seemed to be passing down the street, yelling the same dreadful words again and again.

'Do you think we can?'

'Yes,' said Gerald. 'It's only until tomorrow.'

'They can't be actually dangerous,' said Phryne. 'Or it would be stopped.'
‘Yes, of course.’

By now, as always happens, the crowd had amalgamated their utterances and were beginning to shout in unison. They were like agitators bawling a slogan, or masses trouble-makers at a football match. But at the same time the noise was beginning to draw away. Gerald suspected that the entire population of the place was on the march.

Soon it was apparent that a processional route was being followed. The tumult could be heard winding about from quarter to quarter; sometimes drawing near, so that Gerald and Phrynne were once more seized by the first chill of panic, then again almost fading away. It was possibly this great variability in the volume of the sound which led Gerald to believe that there were distinct pauses in the massed shouting; periods when it was superseded by far, disorderly cheering. Certainly it began also to seem that the thing shouted had changed; but he could not make out the new cry, although unwillingly he strained to do so.

‘It’s extraordinary how frightened one can be,’ said Phrynne, ‘even when one is not directly menaced. It must prove that we all belong to one another, or whatever it is, after all.’

In many similar remarks they discussed the thing at one remove. Experience showed that this was better than not discussing it at all.

In the end there could be no doubt that the shouting had stopped, and that now the crowd was singing. It was no song that Gerald had ever heard, but something about the way it was sung convinced him that it was a hymn or psalm set to an out-of-date popular tune. Once more the crowd was approaching; this time steadily, but with strange, interminable slowness.

‘What the hell are they doing now?’ asked Gerald of the blackness, his nerves wound so tight that the foolish question was forced out of them.

Palpably the crowd had completed its perigrination, and was returning up the main street from the sea. The singers seemed to gasp and fluctuate, as if worn out with gay exercise, like children at a party. There was a steady undertow of scraping and scuffling. Time passed and more time.

Phrynne spoke. ‘I believe they’re dancing.’

She moved slightly, as if she thought of going to see.

‘No, no,’ said Gerald and clutched her fiercely.

There was a tremendous concussion on the ground floor below them. The front door had been violently thrown back.
They could hear the hotel filling with a stamping, singing mob. Doors banged everywhere, and furniture was overturned, as the beatific throng surged and stumbled through the involved darkness of the old building. Glasses went and china and Birmingham brass warming pans. In a moment, Gerald heard the Japanese armour crash to the boards. Phrynne screamed. Then a mighty shoulder, made strong by the sea’s assault, rammed at the panelling and their door was down.

_The living and the dead dance together._
_Now’s the time. Now’s the place. Now’s the weather._

At last Gerald could make out the words. The stresses in the song were heavily beaten down by much repetition.

Hand in hand, through the dim grey gap of the doorway, the dancers lumbered and shambled in, singing frenziedly but brokenly; ecstatic but exhausted. Through the stuffy blackness they swayed and shambled, more and more of them, until the room must have been packed tight with them.

Phrynne screamed again. ‘The smell. Oh God, the smell.’

It was the smell they had encountered on the beach; in the congested room, no longer merely offensive, but obscene, unspeakable.

Phrynne was hysterical. All self-control gone, she was scratching and tearing, and screaming again and again. Gerald tried to hold her, but one of the dancers in the darkness struck him so hard that she was jolted out of his arms. Instantly it seemed that she was no longer there at all.

The dancers were thronging everywhere, their limbs whirling, their lungs bursting with the rhythm of the song. It was difficult for Gerald even to call out. He tried to struggle after Phrynne, but immediately a blow from a massive elbow knocked him to the floor, an abyss of invisible trampling feet.

But soon the dancers were going again; not only from the room, but, it seemed, from the building also. Crushed and tormented though he was, Gerald could hear the song being resumed in the street, as the various frenzied groups debouched and reunited. Within, before long there was nothing but the chaos, the darkness, and the putrescent odour. Gerald felt so sick that he had to battle with unconsciousness. He could not think or move, despite the desperate need.

Then he struggled into a sitting position, and sank his head on the torn sheets of the bed. For an uncertain period he was
insensible to everything; but in the end he heard steps approaching down the dark passage. His door was pushed back, and the Commandant entered gripping a lighted candle. He seemed to disregard the flow of hot wax which had already congealed on much of his knotted hand.

'She's safe. Small thanks to you.'

The Commandant stared icily at Gerald's undignified figure. Gerald tried to stand. He was terribly bruised, and so giddy that he wondered if this could be concussion. But relief rallied him.

'Is it thanks to you?'

'She was caught up in it. Dancing with the rest.' The Commandant's eyes glowed in the candle-light. The singing and dancing had almost died away.

Still Gerald could do no more than sit up on the bed. His voice was low and indistinct, as if coming from outside his body. 'Were they... were some of them...'

The Commandant replied more scornful than ever of his weakness. 'She was between two of them. Each had one of her hands.'

Gerald could not look at him. 'What did you do?' he asked in the same remote voice.

'I did what had to be done. I hope I was in time.' After the slightest possible pause he continued. 'You'll find her downstairs.'

'I'm grateful. Such a silly thing to say, but what else is there?'

'Can you walk?'

'I think so.'

'I'll light you down.' The Commandant's tone was as uncompromising as always.

There were two more candles in the lounge, and Phrynne, wearing a woman's belted overcoat which was not hers, sat between them drinking. Mrs Pascoe, fully dressed but with eyes averted, pottered about the wreckage. It seemed hardly more than as if she were completing the task which earlier she had left unfinished.

'Darling, look at you!' Phrynne's words were still hysterical, but her voice was as gentle as it usually was.

Gerald, bruises and thoughts of concussion forgotten, dragged her into his arms. They embraced silently for a long time; then he looked into her eyes.

'Here I am,' she said, and looked away. 'Not to worry.'
Silently and unnoticed, the Commandant had already retreated.

Without returning his gaze, Phryne finished her drink as she stood there. Gerald supposed that it was one of Mrs Pascoe's concoctions.

It was so dark where Mrs Pascoe was working that her labours could have been achieving little; but she said nothing to her visitors, nor they to her. At the door Phryne unexpectedly stripped off the overcoat and threw it on a chair. Her nightdress was so torn that she stood almost naked. Dark though it was, Gerald saw Mrs Pascoe regarding Phryne's pretty body with a stare of animosity.

'May we take one of the candles?' he said, normal standards reasserting themselves in him.

But Mrs Pascoe continued to stand silently staring; and they lighted themselves through the wilderness of broken furniture to the ruins of their bedroom. The Japanese figure was still prostrate, and the Commandant's door shut. And the smell had almost gone.

Even by seven o'clock the next morning surprisingly much had been done to restore order. But no one seemed to be about, and Gerald and Phryne departed without a word.

In Wrack Street a milkman was delivering, but Gerald noticed that his cart bore the name of another town. A minute boy whom they encountered later on an obscure purposeful errand might, however, have been indigenous; and when they reached Station Road, they saw a small plot of land on which already men were silently at work with spades in their hands. They were as thick as flies on a wound, and as black. In the darkness of the previous evening, Gerald and Phryne had missed the place. A board named it the New Municipal Cemetery.

In the mild light of an autumn morning the sight of the black and silent toilers was horrible; but Phryne did not seem to find it so. On the contrary, her cheeks reddened and her soft mouth became fleetingly more voluptuous still.

She seemed to have forgotten Gerald, so that he was able to examine her closely for a moment. It was the first time he had done so since the night before. Then, once more, she became herself. In those previous seconds Gerald had become aware of something dividing them which neither of them would ever mention or ever forget.
THE NARROW city streets are filled with the whine of sirens. The sky is smeared red, as though stained with blood. The lights are out in London, for England is at war.

He is a small furtive man and he slips through the streets quietly. He is dressed in black, a shabby, worn-at-the-elbows suit. His face is pale and his eyes have shrunk back into his head. He carries a gladstone bag which he clutches tightly to him.

He is looking for something, someone. Now and then he pauses to glance around him. He stands in a street-corner doorway, waiting.

The girl is chubby and inelegant. She comes hurrying down the street, her heels clatter on the pavement.

His breath quickens as she approaches. He puts his little bag down in the corner of the doorway and steps out on to the pavement, catching her arm.

She is wearing a cheap white raincoat which takes on a mottled appearance as the blood seeps through it. He pulls her body into the doorway and kneels down beside her to open his bag. He takes out a strip of velvet and a small meat-axe.

He works quickly and quietly and when he has done what has to be done he wraps up his things in the velvet cloth and replaces it in the bag. Then he pads away into the night.

The blood trickles down over the white raincoat and forms a puddle on the doorstep, mingling with the dust. Then it drips on to the pavement and gradually spreads across it.

The warden runs down the street, not looking where he is going, and trips over something soft and bulky. He falls to the pavement and curses as he does so, and when he climbs to his feet he finds that his clothes are damp and sticky and his hands clammy. He puts a finger to his mouth and then thinks better of it . . . He takes out his torch and flashes it into the doorway. He sees the thing in the white raincoat and at first his eyes reject what he sees, but his senses cannot reject the damp that is seeping through his clothes and he begins to feel a little sick.
He takes off his coat and puts it over the thing and somehow gets more blood on his shirt and arms as he does so. As an after-thought he folds its arms across its chest.

In the morning the shopkeeper washes down his front step and tries to pretend that nothing has happened. It is unfortunate for him because he is a butcher and some of his customers have a grisly sense of humour. There it is for them to see, the chalk mark where it sat against his doorway, the door itself freshly washed down by his wife.

The police come and go but there is little that they can do. There is nothing for them there because the job has been well done. They wander in and out of the butcher’s shop and scratch their heads and hold conferences and all with a note of something like despair in their voices. They know that the streets will be empty again that night, that he will be walking through them as he has been every night for a week, that somewhere he will meet a girl, that another hacked body will be sitting on another shop step for them to find and tidy up in the morning. They stand around the doorway and shake their heads.

‘It must be a looney,’ says one, ‘who else but a looney would do a thing like this?’

‘How many of those are there in London – hundreds!’

‘We must find him soon.’

‘How do we even start looking for him, tell me that?’

‘Well he’s got what he’s taken, hasn’t he? A ruddy great collection of them.’

‘Nice to be a collector, eh?’

‘Must be a bit smelly round his way by this time. Someone is going to sniff him out before long.’

Standing talking is about all they can really do. That and wait around for someone to bump into him whilst he’s in action.

Dulcie is a night girl. She comes to life when the lights go down. She stands in her room and looks at her reflection in the mirror. Her skin is creased and puckered round her cheekbones, skin that prickles in the night, eyes that flaunt in the darkness. Her tawny hair, tired hair that does not shine in the candlelight, falls around her sagging breasts as she stretches her plasticine white arms above her head.

She poses there, enjoying herself in the flattering light of a
candle. She lowers her arms and sits on the edge of her bed, and her loneliness engulfs her.

Her room is sparsely furnished and she knows no one in the city. The sound of the siren is almost welcome to her because it gives her a chance to go out on the streets and along to the shelter where she knows there will be other people and she will no longer be alone. She puts her things together into a bag, a few things to see her through the night. She pulls her coat around her and straightens her hair. She blows out the candle and closes the door behind her, then clatters down the stairs.

There is a little man on the landing. He is holding a small gladstone bag and his face is pale and furtive. As she comes down the stairs he opens his bag and fumbles inside and she is suddenly afraid. She wonders if the other flat dwellers have already left, if she is alone with him. She is annoyed with herself for being afraid, for imagining that the little man is waiting for her. But she makes up her mind quickly and pauses on the stair to call back over her shoulder, 'I'll wait for you downstairs, John.'

The little man hesitates and she moves past him quickly. She smiles at him as she passes and she has to restrain a shudder at the longing in his eyes as he gazes at her; they seem to glow in the darkness. She holds herself back from panicking and carries on down the stairs as though she were not afraid. But she does not regret calling out to the mythical John. She is conscious of a great sense of relief when she reaches the hallway below and escapes through the doorway to the street. She is not aware of the soft padding of the little man's feet on the stairs as he follows her.

She walks slowly down the street, regaining her confidence in herself. It is pitch black but she is not afraid. She knows where she is going. She is out in the open and no longer alone. Nothing can happen to her, she has only to cry out and someone will hear.

The little man with the gladstone bag slips out into the street. He hears her walking away from him. He clutches his bag tightly and scuttles along in her wake.

She turns down a side-street and is half-way along it before she hears the first footfall. Somehow she knows that she is being followed. She remembers his face on the landing and the hunger in his eyes and she feels fear creep over her. And yet she must keep cool, she must keep walking until she finds someone to protect her, she must pretend that she is not aware
that he is following her.

She keeps her eyes fixed on the paving stones and her ears alert for any noise behind her. The sounds are unmistakable, the soft pattering of feet. She quickens her step and they quicken, she slows and they stop.

She panics. She begins to run, twisting and turning this way and that. She wants to cry out but something holds her back. A cry will only tell him where she is. She thinks that if she runs fast enough, far enough, then she may elude the little man with the hungry eyes. She runs on and on through the darkness, from one unfamiliar street to the next till at last she has to stop, out of breath.

She stands in a shop doorway. She has shaken him off. There is no sound of following footsteps. She leans against the door and her breath comes in sobs.

Dulcie is afraid.

She is lost. The streets are empty. Her panic has carried her from the area she knows to some other place. She does not know what to do. She is afraid to stay where she is, she is afraid to move in case the little man should find her.

She stands in the doorway and trembles, fingers of fear tugging at her mind. Yet she must get to a shelter.

She peers out of the doorway. She can see no one. She steps into the street. It is totally dark and the sound of her footsteps as she walks along it are the only disturbance of the stillness.

She is almost at the corner of the street when she feels a hand upon her arm and she looks down into his small, sly face and lifts her hand to claw at his eyes; she feels the axe cleave into her side as his hand closes over her mouth to stifle her scream.

She feels a terrible cutting pain as he chops at her body again and again and she is suddenly aware that she is dead, and yet she can still see the small sweating hands that grip the axe as he severs her head at the third attempt.

He brings out a fish knife. He picks her head from her shoulders delicately, snicking through the loose shreds of sinew and muscle as neatly as he can, running caressing fingers through her hair. He takes up a roll of velvet cloth and wraps it round her head. He puts the fish-knife and the axe back into the bag and the velvet bundle is placed on top of them.

'So you'll be cumfy, love,' he whispers in her ear, but she sees only the velvet that covers her face as he does up the clasp of the bag.
The little man sets off walking and the bag swings against his side. Every time he takes a step the bag slaps his thigh and Dulcie jogs a little inside. Her head slips round in the bag so that the blood from her neck streams up into her nose. She feels blood and bile in her throat and there is nothing she can do about it. In her death-pain she has bitten through her tongue.

“You ought to be in the shelter, sir.”

The little man stops nervously as the policeman looms over him.

“I – er lost my way.”

“Easy enough to do, I’m sure. If you like to walk along with me, sir, I’ll make sure you get there safely.”

“Thank you, officer.”

The little man in the black suit with the pale face and the shrunken eyes pads along beside the large policeman.

“Got what you need with you, sir?”

“In the bag, officer.”

Dulcie feels blood flooding through her ears and trickling amongst her tawny locks, roughly chopped off where the axe bit through her neck.

The little man clatters down the stairs into the shelter and Dulcie bounces at every movement.

“How’s it going, Fred?”

“Hitler hasn’t got me yet.”

He sits down on a bench beside his friend and starts to talk. Dulcie can only vaguely hear what they are saying. The velvet is pressed close against her wide open eyes and blood is running from the sockets.

“Got your little bag, I see.”

“Oh yes.”

“Never see you without your little bag, Fred. Got a fortune in it or something?”

“You’d never guess what’s in there, mate, not in a month of Sundays.”

The little man holds the bag tight against his body as he talks, as though he were wrapping himself around it. Each time he changes posture he can feel Dulcie move slightly inside the bag and he finds it very exciting.

They find what is left of Dulcie in the early hours of the morning. She isn’t a pleasant sight and the young special constable who finds her is promptly sick in the gutter.
Soon there is a little cluster of police officers in the doorway, all looking down at Dulcie. Her blood trickles round their heavy black boots, wetting the bottoms of their trouser-legs.

The constable says, 'There was a little man last night. Seemed to be lost. I took him round to the Meep street shelter.'

'Notice anything special about him?'

'A bit flustered maybe. I put it down to being lost. He had a bag with him.'

'Could be him I suppose. Did you recognize him?'

'Never seen him before in my life. Maybe somebody at the shelter might know him.'

'Maybe not. Next time have a look in the bag first. We can't afford to let this one slip away.'

So the convoy of policemen go round to the shelter. It is almost deserted now and nobody seems to remember anything about the little man. They go down into the shelter without much hope and take a look round it, but there is nothing to see.

They return to the daylight and stand talking in the entrance to the shelter. It is then that they become aware of the little man watching them. He is wearing a rumpled black suit and he has a gladstone bag clasped under his arm. He is standing by a coffee stall and looking at them with a silly grin spread all over his face.

The constable makes a move to cross the street and collar him but the detective stops him.

'I'm sure that's him, Sir.'

'It is.'

The detective points after the little man as he trots down the road, and they see the tell-tale trail of blood spots that drip from his bag.

The little man walks jauntily, swinging his bag so that Dulcie rocks to and fro inside. He turns the corner and comes to a doorway – the doorway. There is a freshly-washed look about it and a chalked shape on the step. He passes it cheerfully. He turns another corner and stops before his own front door. He takes out his latch-key and unlocks it. He climbs the stairs to his room. He hears the doorbell ring gently behind him but he does not attempt to answer it. He is tired. He has had another busy night. As he stands before his room door he hears a mumble of conversation from below.
but he pays it no attention. Wearily he goes inside, closing the door firmly behind him.

He opens the bag and lifts the velvet bundle from it. He unwraps it carefully. He takes a flannel and gently sponges away the blood that has clotted over it in the bag. He takes a comb and straightens her hair as best he can. He coos into her ear.

He puts Dulcie's head proudly on the mantelpiece with the others.

He does not attempt to struggle when he is arrested. They take him away and he talks nineteen to the dozen on the way back to the station.

When they get there the arresting officer is looking a little pale. He goes to the washroom and is quietly sick. Then he goes upstairs to make out his report.

He does not quite see how to phrase it. Each time he tries to make a start he finds the same picture rising before his eyes and he knows that official language can never be stretched far enough to describe it.

He sees the little man sitting in bed with his Bible. It is early morning and he has just arrived home. The gladstone bag is upon the table. The fish-knife and the meat-axe have been cleaned and wrapped neatly in the velvet cloth again. The little man is earnestly reading aloud and from the mantelpiece half a dozen pairs of eyes watch him.

He is reading to them, for them, for their redemption. At last he reaches the end. He puts the Bible down. He clambers out of bed and switches off the light. He goes to the mantelpiece and, one by one, he kisses his little friends good night.
THE IMPORTANCE OF REMAINING ERNEST

by M. S. Waddell

Ernest Tracey was playing ‘Snap!’ with the Butcher. It did not disturb him that the Butcher had skinned his nephew and hung him out to dry on a meat-hook. At that moment and in that place it was of no consequence. The Butcher’s mind was still clear enough to play ‘Snap!’

The important thing was to remain sane.

They were in the day hall. It was painted a soft egg-yolk yellow; it was designed to be as little like a penal institution as possible. They were supposed to think of themselves as patients in a hospital, not as prisoners in an asylum for the criminal insane.

Tracey knew that he was a prisoner.

He glanced at the Butcher. ‘Snap!’ with the Butcher was a hazardous business. The third day after his arrival he had played with the Butcher for the first time and won. The Butcher gazed at the cards for a moment, his large pale eyes brimming with tears, his great hands flexing. He raised his head and gazed angrily at Tracey; then he launched himself forward, sending the small card table spinning, his hands seeking Tracey’s eyes.

Berni, the junior nurse, got there just in time. They took the Butcher away, tears streaming down his face, his arms strapped securely by his side.

Jantz, the charge nurse, spoke to Tracey about it later.

‘I would advise you not to play games with the Butcher, Tracey, and to be very careful not to provoke him. The Butcher goes for the eyes you see. If anything annoys him he goes for the eyes with his thumbs. It isn’t very pleasant crawling round on your knees groping for your eyeballs you know, not a nice job at all.’ Jantz grinned at the expression on Tracey’s face. ‘Just you watch out, Tracey. We don’t like people making trouble here.’

Just the same Tracey played ‘Snap!’ with the Butcher
again. It took his mind off things, even if he did have to be careful that the Butcher always came out on top. He knew it was important to keep his mind alive whilst he was in the asylum because otherwise he would never get out.

‘Tracey was sane.

‘Snap!’ said the Butcher, triumphantly, and Tracey’s hand was empty. The Butcher collected his cards together, grinning to himself, tapping the cards together with his thumbs, his lips mouthing soundlessly.

‘I’m tired,’ said Tracey. ‘That’s the last game for tonight, Butcher my son.’

‘I won,’ said the Butcher. ‘I won, didn’t I?’ He twisted the cards against his palm.

‘He lets him win,’ said Freke to no one in particular. ‘Tracey lets you win ’cause he thinks you’re nuts, Butcher.’ Freke did things to cats.

‘You won, Butcher. You’re too good for me at this game, too good by far.’

‘Freke don’t know nothing,’ said the Butcher in a hurt voice. ‘I win every time, don’t I, Tracey?’

‘Nobody can beat the Butcher,’ Tracey agreed.

‘Tracey only lets . . .’ Freke began.

‘Dry up, Freke,’ said Berni from the door.

Freke dried up. He was afraid of Berni because Berni was a new nurse and Freke thought that he mightn’t give him his injection properly. Freke had told Tracey that he thought Berni had made a deliberate mistake with his injection the last time. He wanted to get on the right side of Berni.

Jantz raised his head from the book he was reading. He saw Tracey standing beside the Butcher, who was still playing with the cards. He beckoned to him.

‘I told you about playing cards with the Butcher, didn’t I?’

‘It’s all right. I see to it that he always wins.’

‘It’s not a very good idea to cause trouble for the other patients, Tracey. It gets you a very bad name with the staff. We’re always on the lookout for troublemakers, you know; toadies who try to rouse the others and then play the informer. That won’t wash here.’

‘I haven’t caused any trouble.’

Tracey did not like Jantz. There was something that made him distrust Jantz, some sixth sense that warned him that Jantz was not all that far from the mental dividing line his patients had slipped across. Perhaps Jantz seemed to enjoy
his work too much.

‘Not yet,’ said Jantz, ‘just take this as a friendly warning for the future. One man of your sort can very easily upset a whole section in a place like this. We’re watching you, Tracey, we always watch a new man till we have his little tricks tabbed. Just bear that in mind next time you feel like a little stirring operation.’

‘This is absurd.’ Tracey rose from his seat beside Jantz, his anger rising. ‘Why do you keep pestering me?’

‘Have you always had a violent temper?’ Jantz addressed the question to him sneeringly, his eyes flickering over Tracey as he spoke. ‘Violence doesn’t open any doors here – closes them more like. You can have a “rest period” if you want it, old son, just say the word. We’re always glad to have the violent types doped down for a bit. It makes the job easier.’

Restraint was the important thing. He had to remember that the way to get out was to remain sane, as sane as he was now. You had to keep in with the nurses because the doctors relied on their reports. You had only to convince the doctors and you were free.

‘I’m sorry, Jantz,’ he said.

It had seemed a brilliant idea at the time. A plea of unfit to plead and the threat of death was removed. A year, two at the most, in an asylum, and his lawyers would start pressing for his release. The perfect case of a reformed lunatic.

Now he was not so sure. He looked at the people around him; Simon, the student who kept trying to castrate himself, Freke, who had periods when he tried to beat his brains out against the wall, Mandrake, who had an obsession about his toe-nails, Dejohn, the wobbling feeble thing at the end of the table who had been there so long that nobody seemed to remember just why he had been committed. They were the upper class, the élite of the section, the ones who could eat unassisted and control their bowels. The others simply sat aside and watched, or walked round the hall muttering to themselves. Some of them did not even know they were in the asylum.

He stood at the end of the hall, looking at his companions, his fellow patients. They were dressed in grey, shapeless clothes, suits of canvas. Clothes without buttons that could be swallowed, without belts that could be used to hang themselves with. There were twenty men in the section. They were classified as ‘competent’. Roughly that meant that they could walk
and talk. There were other 'competent' sections of varying ability. There was also another block, 'B' block, where they kept the cases who were in need of constant supervision; those who were a danger to other prisoners, and the 'things'. Nobody knew much about the 'things', though they could hear some of them at night howling and weeping, the sounds carried over the courtyard. For the main part Tracey gathered that they lived in a perpetual drugged sleep. An occasional borderline competent was taken across to 'B' block, usually to make way for a new entry; according to Freke, his main informant, no one ever crossed the courtyard in the opposite direction. Once you were admitted to block 'B' you were there to stay. Of the men in his own section Tracey told himself that at least thirteen were near that borderline, men who sat on the side benches and waited, men who cried all night in the dormitory, men who no longer men but canvas sacks of despair. Then there were the nurses, two to a shift, Marc and Faim at night, Jantz and Berni during the day. They were paid to sit in the hall and watch, little more. They were nurses only in name. There were too many sections, too many patients in the sections, the hours were too long and the pay too little. So the nurses kept the patients from killing themselves and left the nursing to the doctors, who might see an individual patient once a month if nothing else came up. The nurses sat and watched and counted the hours until they were due off duty. They regarded their patients as animals, not men.

It was no place for a sane man, Tracey told himself. But then there had been little choice at the time. If he had been at home, in England, things might have been different. In Rome one did as the Romans did, he thought ruefully, even if it meant going out of your senses.

The only important thing was to remain sane; to remember that the others might be here for ever but that he was not; that he was only in the asylum until a reasonable time had elapsed. Then he would petition for release. It was only a matter of time now, time that could be measured, time that must pass.

Jantz had risen from his seat and was parading round the hall. The long table at which he had been sitting ran down the middle of the hall, leaving two gangways that were flanked by benches where the canvas sacks sat. It was the total day living area for the section; they ate there, with wooden spoons so that they could not slit their throats; they daydreamed there; those who could still write wrote long and
furious letters to anyone they could think of who might pro-
cure their release; they walked there, up and down the two
gangways, just as Jantz was doing now.

He was walking slowly, his eyes watching the canvas sacks,
noting here a frightened face, here a tearful one. Mandrake
was blocking the gangway and Jantz came to a stop before
him.

Mandrake was squatting on the floor. He had taken his
flop-py hall-slippers off and was trying to polish his toe-nails.
His toe-nails were the only thing which seemed to matter to
Mandrake. He let them grow as long as he could and he picked
them clean of imaginary dirt every day. It was always a difficult
time in the section when Mandrake’s toe-nails grew too long
and the nurses had to have them cut.

Jantz prodded Mandrake with his foot.

‘Move over,’ he said, ‘come on, make room there.’

Mandrake paid him no attention. He scraped his thumb
back and forth across the nail of his little toe, then he stuck it
in his mouth and sucked off the grit he imagined he had col-
lected by his labour and repeated the process, again and again
and again. Freke and Berni had broken off their conversation
to watch the affair.

‘The dirty old man,’ said Freke loudly, ‘he’s nuts. He ought
to be in block “B” by now, he’s a nuisance in here.’

‘Let him be,’ said Berni to Jantz uneasily.

Jantz was leaning over Mandrake who still paid him no
attention, continuing to lick his fingers and scrape his toe-nails.

‘Come on, move over,’ there was a dangerous hint of irrita-
tion in Jantz’s voice that communicated itself to Tracey, a
nervous rasp.

‘Jantz is going to break down at last,’ he thought, curiously
pleased at the idea, ‘if he does, they’ll keep him in here. He’ll
really be one of us then.’ He realized with a shock that he
had grouped himself with the others automatically, that his
resolve to be an observer only and not to regard himself as a
patient was being undermined. He reminded himself that it
was only a matter of time in his case.

‘Move over.’ Jantz’s voice had risen to a high squeak, he
poked a bony finger into the folds of Mandrake’s shapeless
uniform. ‘Move over when I tell you and let me pass.’

‘You teach him, Jantz,’ said Freke, ‘he’s nuts.’

‘Let him be,’ said Berni uneasily. Jantz was his superior and
he was only too well aware of his changeable moods.
Jantz drew back his hand and slapped Mandrake across the face.

'Move over. Listen to me, you're blocking the way.'

'Can't you step over him, Jantz,' said Tracey, uneasily. He was loth to intervene with the charge nurse, only that had stayed his tongue so long. He had to depend upon Jantz's report being good after all.

Mandrake had stopped scraping his toe-nails after Jantz's blow. He sat still for a moment, as though preparing himself for some effort. He reached out for Jantz's hand as though to pull himself up by it. The next second the nurse's hand was in Mandrake's mouth. There was a snapping, sucking sound and a scream from Jantz as he wrenched his hand clear. Mandrake smiled like a child and spat out Jantz's fingertips on to the yellow linoleum before him, where they rested in a pool of blood and spittle.

Tracey felt his stomach rise at the sight of the four bleeding fingertips, the nails flapping loose, for Mandrake had made his bite just below the base of the nail. He turned away from the sight and the sound of Jantz's screaming.

'Don't, Jantz,' said Berni, a sudden urgency in his voice, and then Mandrake gave something between a wail and a groan which blossomed into a screech of curdling agony.

Tracey turned reluctantly. It was important that he remain sane, it was important that he remain sane. He was only here for a limited period.

Mandrake was sobbing on the floor, trying to get his feet to his mouth. His long toe-nails, the nails he had protected and cleaned for so long, were broken and cracked. As Tracey watched, Jantz's foot came down again, the heel of his boot smashing into the hand with which Mandrake was grasping the jelly of his toes.

Tracey and Berni leaped forward at almost the same moment. Mandrake had grasped Jantz by the ankle and pulled him down. His hands were clawing at Jantz's face, ripping at the soft flesh of his cheeks. Jantz's hands were round Mandrake's throat in a desperate, throttling grip. The four men clung together in a fatal bloody bundle, hands became claws, teeth were for biting with. Freke danced in excitement. Butcher said 'Snap!' quickly enough to beat himself in the corner. Simon continued with the letter of protest he was drafting. The canvas sacks did not even look up.

Tracey felt something smash into his face. He was aware
suddenly that he was not fighting sensibly, he was fighting from instinct, for his own preservation. There was blood on his face and in his mouth but he was not certain that it was his own. There were alarm whistles blowing somewhere and people dragging them apart. Then he felt the prick of a needle in his thigh and there was suddenly nothing to worry about. He felt gloriously sleepy.

Mandrake’s body was removed from the hall and taken down to the hospital quarters. The official report stated that he had died following an attack by a fellow patient.

Jantz and Berni spent some time compiling their report on the affair. It was important that the matter be presented in the correct light to the Superintendent.

‘... the patient Ernest Tracey objected to the deceased’s habit of cleaning his toe-nails. Tracey is subject to fits of extreme bad temper bordering on frenzy. During one of these attacks Tracey made an assault upon the deceased. Nurse Berni and I heard the deceased call out for assistance and rushed to his aid. We were, however, unable to prevent Tracey, who is a strong and active man physically speaking, from succeeding in what he had set out to do. In the course of the struggle Nurse Berni received extensive external injury and I myself lost the tips of all four fingers on the right hand. We administered a sedative to Tracey and had him turned over to Dr Turner’s care. Tracey has always been a difficult patient who is subject to sudden outbreaks of violence and ill temper though at other times he gives every appearance of being perfectly sane. It is our opinion that he constitutes a danger to the lives of other patients. We recommend strongly that he should be confined with other dangerous patients in block “B”, where firmer supervision is possible.’

The report was passed by the Medical Superintendent and acted upon accordingly.

Tracey found himself in a leather padded jacket when he woke up. His hands were strapped inside the lining. His legs were pinioned. He was in a ward of some kind, like an ordinary hospital ward except that there were no beds. He was stretched on a table-like affair that was tilted at a forty-five degree angle. He could not move his head, but from the corner of his eye he could glimpse a number of similar contraptions
spaced at intervals along the ward. There was an observation slit in the frosted glass wall opposite him.

The important thing was to stay sane. The important thing was not to seem upset or surprised.

He saw a pair of eyes gazing at him through the observation slit.

He had come to the help of Berni and Jantz after all. That would count to his favour in their reports.

He was only in for a limited period anyway.
SLIME

by Joseph Payne Brennan

It was a great grey-black hood of horror moving over the floor of the sea. It slid through the soft ooze like a monstrous mantle of slime obscenely animated with questing life. It was by turns viscid and fluid. At times it flattened out and flowed through the carpet of mud like an inky pool; occasionally it paused, seeming to shrink in upon itself, and reared up out of the ooze until it resembled an irregular cone or a gigantic hood. Although it possessed no eyes, it had a marvellously developed sense of touch, and it possessed a sensitivity to minute vibrations which was almost akin to telepathy. It was plastic, essentially shapeless. It could shoot out long tentacles, until it bore a resemblance to a nightmare squid or a huge starfish; it could retract itself into a round flattened disc, or squeeze into an irregular hunched shape so that it looked like a black boulder sunk on the bottom of the sea.

It had prowled the black water endlessly. It had been formed when the earth and the seas were young; it was almost as old as the ocean itself. It moved through a night which had no beginning and no dissolution. The black sea basin where it lurked had been dark since the world began — an environment only a little less inimical than the stupendous gulls of interplanetary space.

It was animated by a single, unceasing, never-satisfied drive: a voracious, insatiable hunger. It could survive for months without food, but minutes after eating it was as ravenous as ever. Its appetite was appalling and incalculable.

On the icy ink-black floor of the sea the battle for survival was savage, hideous — and usually brief. But for the shape of moving slime there was no battle. It ate whatever came its way, regardless of size, shape or disposition. It absorbed microscopic plankton and giant squid with equal assurance. Had its surface been less fluid, it might have retained the circular scars left by the grappling suckers of the wildly threshing deep-water squid, or the jagged toothmarks of the
anachronistic frillshark, but as it was, neither left any evidence of its absorption. When the lifting curtain of living slime swayed out of the mud and closed upon them, their fiercest death throes came to nothing.

The horror did not know fear. There was nothing to be afraid of. It ate whatever moved, or tried not to move, and it had never encountered anything which could in turn eat it. If a squid’s sucker, or a shark’s tooth, tore into the mass of its viscosity, the rent flowed in upon itself and immediately closed. If a segment was detached, it could be retrieved and absorbed back into the whole.

The black mantle reigned supreme in its savage world of slime and silence. It groped greedily and endlessly through the mud, eating and never sleeping, never resting. If it lay still, it was only to trap food which might otherwise be lost. If it rushed with terrifying speed across the slimy bottom, it was never to escape an enemy, but always to flop its hideous fluidity upon its sole and inevitable quarry – food.

It had evolved out of the muck and slime of the primitive sea floor, and it was as alien to ordinary terrestrial life as the weird denizens of some wild planet in a distant galaxy. It was an anachronistic experiment of nature compared to which the sabre-toothed tiger, the woolly mammoth and even Tyrannosaurus, the slashing, murderous king of the great earth reptiles, were as tame, weak entities.

Had it not been for a vast volcanic upheaval on the bottom of the ocean basin, the black horror would have crept out its entire existence on the silent sea ooze without ever manifesting its hideous powers to mankind.

Fate, in the form of a violent subterranean explosion, covering huge areas of the ocean’s floor, hurled it out of its black slime world and sent it spinning towards the surface.

Had it been an ordinary deep-water fish, it never would have survived the experience. The explosion itself, or the drastic lessening of water pressure as it shot towards the surface, would have destroyed it. But it was no ordinary fish. Its viscosity, or plasticity, or whatever it was that constituted its essentially amoeobic structure, permitted it to survive.

It reached the surface slightly stunned and flopped on the surging waters like a great blob of black blubber. Immense waves stirred up by the subterranean explosion swept it swiftly towards shore, and because it was somewhat stunned it did not try to resist the roaring mountains of water.
Along with scattered ash, pumice, and the puffed bodies of dead fish, the black horror was hurled towards a beach. The huge waves carried it more than a mile inland, far beyond the strip of sandy shore, and deposited it in the midst of a deep brackish swamp area.

As luck would have it, the submarine explosion and subsequent tidal wave took place at night, and therefore the slime horror was not immediately subjected to a new and hateful experience – light.

Although the midnight darkness of the storm-lashed swamp did not begin to compare with the stygian blackness of the sea bottom where even violet rays of the spectrum could not penetrate, the marsh darkness was nevertheless deep and intense.

As the water of the great wave receded, sluicing through the thorn jungle and back out to sea, the black horror clung to a mud bank surrounded by a rank growth of cattails. It was aware of the sudden, startling change in its environment, and for some time it lay motionless, concentrating its attention on obscure internal readjustment which the absence of crushing pressure and a surrounding cloak of frigid sea water demanded. Its adaptability was incredible and horrifying. It achieved in a few hours what an ordinary creature could have attained only through a process of gradual evolution. Three hours after the titanic wave flopped it on to the mudbank, it had undergone swift organic changes which left it relatively at ease in its new environment.

In fact, it felt lighter and more mobile than it ever had before in its sea basin existence.

As it flung out feelers and attuned itself to the minutest vibrations and emanations of the swamp area, its pristine hunger drive reasserted itself with overwhelming urgency. And the tale which its sensory apparatus returned to the monstrous something which served it as a brain, excited it tremendously. It sensed at once that the swamp was filled with luscious tidbits of quivering food – more food, and food of a greater variety than it had ever encountered on the cold floor of the sea.

Its savage, incessant hunger seemed unbearable. Its slimy mass was swept by a shuddering wave of anticipation.

Sliding off the mud bank, it slithered over the cattails into an adjacent area consisting of deep black pools interspersed with water-logged tussocks. Weed stalks stuck up out of the
water and the decayed trunks of fallen trees floated half-submerged in the larger pools.

Ravenous with hunger, it sloshed into the bog area, flicking its tentacles about. Within minutes it had snatched up several fat frogs and a number of small fish. These, however, merely titillated its appetite. Its hunger turned into a kind of ecstatic fury. It commenced a systematic hunt, plunging to the bottom of each pool and quickly but carefully exploring every inch of its oozing bottom. The first creature of any size which it encountered was a muskrat. An immense curtain of adhesive slime suddenly swept out of the darkness, closed upon it—and squeezed.

Heartened and whetted by its find, the hood of horror rummaged the rank pools with renewed zeal. When it surfaced, it carefully probed the tussocks for anything that might have escaped it in the water. Once it snatched up a small bird nesting in some swamp grass. Occasionally it slithered up the criss-crossed trunks of fallen trees, bearing them down with its unspeakable slimy bulk, and hung briefly suspended like a great dripping curtain of black marsh mud.

It was approaching a somewhat less swampy and more deeply wooded area when it gradually became aware of a subtle change in its new environment. It paused, hesitating, and remained half in and half out of a small pond near the edge of the nearest trees.

Although it had absorbed twenty-five or thirty pounds of food in the form of frogs, fish, water snakes, the muskrat, and a few smaller creatures, its fierce hunger had not left it. Its monstrous appetite urged it on, and yet something held it anchored in the pond.

What it sensed, but could not literally see, was the rising sun spreading a grey light over the swamp. The horror had never encountered any illumination except that generated by the grotesque phosphorescent appendages of various deep-sea fishes. Natural light was totally unknown to it.

As the dawn light strengthened, breaking through the scattering storm clouds, the black slime monster fresh from the inky floor of the sea sensed that something utterly unknown was flooding in upon it. Light was hateful to it. It cast out quick feelers, hoping to catch and crush the light. But the more frenzied its efforts became, the more intense became the abhorred aura surrounding it.

At length, as the sun rose visibly above the trees, the horror,
in baffled rage rather than in fear, grudgingly slid back into the pond and burrowed into the soft ooze of its bottom. There it remained while the sun shone and the small creatures of the swamp ventured forth on furtive errands.

A few miles away from Wharton’s Swamp, in the small town of Clinton Center, Henry Hossing sleepily crawled out of the improvised alley shack which had afforded him a degree of shelter for the night and stumbled into the street. Passing a hand across his rheumy eyes, he scratched the stubble on his cheek and blinked listlessly at the rising sun. He had not slept well; the storm of the night before had kept him awake. Besides, he had gone to bed hungry, and that never agreed with him.

Glancing furtively along the street, he walked slouched forward, with his head bent down, and most of the time he kept his eyes on the walk or on the gutter in the hopes of spotting a chance coin.

Clinton Center had not been kind to him. The handouts were sparse, and only yesterday he had been warned out of town by one of the local policemen.

Grumbling to himself, he reached the end of the street and started to cross. Suddenly he stooped quickly and snatched up something from the edge of the pavement.

It was a crumpled green bill, and as he frantically unfolded it, a look of stupefied rapture spread across his bristly face. Ten dollars! More money than he had possessed at any one time in months!

Stowing it carefully in the one good pocket of his seedy grey jacket, he crossed the street with a swift stride. Instead of sweeping the sidewalks, his eyes now darted along the rows of stores and restaurants.

He paused at one restaurant, hesitated, and finally went on until he found another less pretentious one a few blocks away.

When he sat down, the counterman shook his head. ‘Get goin’, bud. No free coffee today.’

With a wide grin, the hobo produced his ten-dollar bill and spread it on the counter. ‘That covers a good breakfast here, pardner?’

The counterman seemed irritated. ‘O.K. O.K. What’ll you have?’ He eyed the bill suspiciously.

Henry Hossing ordered orange juice, toast, ham and eggs, oatmeal, melon, and coffee.
When it appeared, he ate every bit of it, ordered three additional cups of coffee, paid the cheque as if two-dollar breakfasts were customary with him, and then sauntered back to the street.

Shortly after noon, after his three-dollar lunch, he saw the liquor store. For a few minutes he stood across the street from it, fingerling his five-dollar bill. Finally he crossed with an abstracted smile, entered and bought a quart of rye.

He hesitated on the sidewalk, debating whether or not he should return to the little shack in the side alley. After a minute or two of indecision, he decided against it and struck out instead for Wharton’s Swamp. The local police were far less likely to disturb him there, and since the skies were clearing and the weather mild, there was little immediate need of shelter.

Angling off the highway which skirted the swamp several miles from town, he crossed a marshy meadow, pushed through a fringe of bush, and sat down under a sweet-gum tree which bordered a deeply wooded area.

By late afternoon he had achieved a quite cheerful glow, and he had little inclination to return to Clinton Center. Rousing himself from reverie, he stumbled about collecting enough wood for a small fire and went back to his sylvan seat under the sweet-gum.

He slept briefly as dusk descended, but finally bestirred himself again to build a fire, as deeper shadows fell over the swamp. Then he returned to his swiftly diminishing bottle. He was suspended in a warm net of inflamed fantasy when something abruptly broke the spell and brought him back to earth.

The flickering flames of his fire had dwindled down until now only a dim eerie glow illuminated the immediate area under the sweet-gum. He saw nothing and at the moment heard nothing, and yet he was filled with a sudden and profound sense of lurking menace.

He stood up, staggering, leaned back against the sweet-gum and peered fearfully into the shadows. In the deep darkness beyond the waning arc of firelight he could distinguish nothing which had any discernible form or colour.

Then he detected the stench and shuddered. In spite of the reek of cheap whisky which clung around him, the smell was overpowering. It was a heavy, fulsome fetid, alien, and utterly repellent. It was vaguely fish-like, but otherwise beyond any
known comparison.

As he stood trembling under the sweet-gum, Henry Hossing thought of something dead which had lain for long ages at the bottom of the sea.

Filled with mounting alarm, he looked around for some wood which he might add to the dying fire. All he could find nearby, however, were a few twigs. He threw these on and the flames licked up briefly and subsided.

He listened and heard – or imagined he heard – an odd sort of slithering sound in the nearby bushes. It seemed to retreat slightly as the flames shot up.

Genuine terror took possession of him. He knew that he was in no condition to flee – and now he came to the horrifying conclusion that whatever unspeakable menace waited in the surrounding darkness was temporarily held at bay only by the failing gleam of his little fire.

Frantically he looked around for more wood. But there was none. None, that is, within the faint glow of firelight. And he dared not venture beyond.

He began to tremble uncontrollably. He tried to scream, but no sound came out of his tightened throat.

The ghastly stench became stronger, and now he was sure that he could hear a strange sliding, slithering sound in the black shadows beyond the remaining spark of firelight.

He stood frozen in absolute helpless panic as the tiny fire smouldered down into darkness.

At the last instant a charred bit of wood broke apart, sending up a few sparks, and in that flicker of final light he glimpsed the horror.

It had already glided out of the bushes, and now it rushed across the small clearing with nightmare speed. It was a final incarnation of all the fears, shuddering apprehensions, and bad dreams which Henry Hossing had ever known in his life. It was a fiend from the pit of Hell come to claim him at last.

A terrible ringing scream burst from his throat, but it was smothered before it was finished as the black shape of slime fastened upon him with irresistible force.

Giles Gowse – 'Old Man' Gowse – got out of bed after eight hours of fitful tossing and intermittent nightmares and grocily brewed coffee in the kitchen of his dilapidated farmhouse on the edge of Wharton's Swamp. Half the night, it seemed, the stench of stale sea-water had permeated the house.
His interrupted sleep had been full of foreboding, full of shadowy and evil portents.

Muttering to himself, he finished breakfast, took a milk pail from the pantry, and started for the barn where he kept his single cow.

As he approached the barn, the strange offensive odour which had plagued him during the night assailed his nostrils anew.

‘Wharton’s Swamp! That’s what it is!’ he told himself. And he shook his fist at it.

When he entered the barn the stench was stronger than ever. Scowling, he strode towards the rickety stall where he kept the cow, Sarey.

Then he stood still and stared. Sarey was gone. The stall was empty.

He re-entered the barnyard. ‘Sarey!’ he called.

Rushing back into the barn, he inspected the stall. The rancid reek of the sea was strong here, and now he noticed a kind of shine on the floor. Bending closer, he saw that it was a slick coat of glistening slime, as if some unspeakable creature covered with ooze had crept in and out of the stall.

This discovery, coupled with the weird disappearance of Sarey, was too much for his jangled nerves. With a wild yell he ran out of the barn and started for Clinton Center, two miles away.

His reception in the town enragèd him. When he tried to tell people about the disappearance of his cow, Sarey, about the reek of sea and ooze in his barn the night before, they laughed at him. The more impolite ones, that is. Most of the others patiently heard him out – and then winked and touched their heads significantly when he was out of sight.

One man, the druggist, Jim Jelinson, seemed mildly interested. He said that as he was coming through his backyard from the garage late the previous evening, he had heard a fearful shriek somewhere in the distant darkness. It might, he averred, have come from the direction of Wharton’s Swamp. But it had not been repeated and eventually he had dismissed it from his mind.

When Old Man Gowse started for home late in the afternoon he was filled with sullen, resentful bitterness. They thought he was crazy, eh? Well, Sarey was gone; they couldn’t explain that away, could they? They explained the smell by saying it was dead fish cast up by the big wave which had
washed into the swamp during the storm. Well – maybe. And the slime on his barn floor they said was snails. *Snails!* As if any he’d ever seen could cause that much slime!

As he was nearing home, he met Rupert Barnaby, his nearest neighbour. Rupert was carrying a rifle and he was accompanied by Jibbe, his hound.

Although there had been an element of bad blood between the two bachelor neighbours for some time, Old Man Gowse, much to Barnaby’s surprise, nodded and stopped.

‘Evenin’ hunt, neighbour?’

Barnaby nodded. ‘Thought Jibbe might start up a coon. Moon later, likely.’

‘My cow’s gone,’ Old Man Gowse said abruptly. ‘If you should see her —’ He paused. ‘But I don’t think you will . . .’

Barnaby, bewildered, stared at him. ‘What you gettin’ at?’

Old Man Gowse repeated what he had been telling all day in Clinton Center.

He shook his head when he finished, adding, ‘I wouldn’t go huntin’ in that swamp tonight fur – ten thousand dollars!’

Rupert Barnaby threw back his head and laughed. He was a big man, muscular, resourceful, and level-headed – little given to even mild flights of the imagination.

‘Gowse,’ he laughed, ‘no use you givin’ me those spook stories! Your cow got loose and wandered off. Why, I ain’t even seen a bobcat in that swamp for over a year!’

Old Man Gowse set his lips in a grim line. ‘Maybe,’ he said, as he turned away, ‘you’ll see suthin’ worse than a wildcat in that swamp tonight!’

Shaking his head, Barnaby took after his impatient hound. Old Man Gowse was getting queer all right. One of these days he’d probably go off altogether and have to be locked up.

Jibbe ran ahead, sniffing, darting from one ditch to another. As twilight closed in, Barnaby angled off the main road on to a twisting path which led into Wharton’s Swamp.

He loved hunting. He would rather tramp through the brush than sit home in an easy chair. And even if an evening’s foray turned up nothing, he didn’t particularly mind. Actually he made out quite well; at least half his meat supply consisted of the rabbits, raccoons, and occasional deer which he brought down in Wharton’s Swamp.

When the moon rose, he was deep in the swamp. Twice Jibbe started off after rabbits, but both times he returned quickly, looking somewhat sheepish.
Something about his actions began to puzzle Barnaby. The dog seemed reluctant to move ahead; he hung directly in front of the hunter. Once Barnaby tripped over him and nearly fell headlong.

The hunter paused finally, frowning, and looked ahead. The swamp appeared no different than usual. True, a rather offensive stench hung over it, but that was merely the result of the big waves which had splashed far inland during the recent storm. Probably an accumulation of seaweed and the decaying bodies of some dead fish lay rotting in the stagnant pools of the swamp.

Barnaby spoke sharply to the dog. 'What ails you, boy? Git, now! You trip me again, you'll get a boot!'

The dog started ahead some distance, but with an air of reluctance. He sniffed the clumps of marsh grass in a perfunctory manner and seemed to have lost interest in the hunt.

Barnaby grew exasperated. Even when they discovered the fresh track of a raccoon in the soft mud near a little pool, Jibbe manifested only slight interest.

He did run on ahead a little further, however, and Barnaby began to hope that, as they closed in, he would regain his customary enthusiasm.

In this he was mistaken. As they approached a thickly wooded area, latticed with tree thorns and covered with a heavy growth of cattails, the dog suddenly crouched in the shadows and refused to budge.

Barnaby was sure that the raccoon had taken refuge in the nearby thickets. The dog's unheard of conduct infuriated him.

After a number of sharp cuffs, Jibbe arose stiffly and moved ahead, the hair on his neck bristled up like a lion's mane.

Swearing to himself, Barnaby pushed into the darkened thickets after him.

It was quite black under the trees, in spite of the moonlight, and he moved cautiously in order to avoid stepping into a pool.

Suddenly, with a frantic yelp of terror, Jibbe literally darted between his legs and shot out of the thickets. He ran on, howling weirdly as he went.

For the first time that evening Barnaby experienced a thrill of fear. In all his previous experience, Jibbe had never turned tail. On one occasion he had even plunged in after a sizeable bear.

Scowling into the deep darkness, Barnaby could see nothing. There were no baleful eyes glaring at him.
As his own eyes tried to penetrate the surrounding blackness, he recalled Old Man Gowse’s warning with a bitter grimace. If the old fool happened to spot Jibbe streaking out of the swamp, Barnaby would never hear the end of it.

The thought of this angered him. He pushed ahead now with a feeling of sullen rage for whatever had terrified the dog. A good rifle shot would solve the mystery.

All at once he stopped and listened. From the darkness immediately ahead, he detected an odd sound, as if a large bulk were being dragged over the cattails.

He hesitated, unable to see anything, stoutly resisting an idiotic impulse to flee. The black darkness and the slimy stench of stagnant pools here in the thickets seemed to be suffocating him.

His heart began to pound as the slithering noise came closer. Every instinct told him to turn and run, but a kind of desperate stubbornness held him rooted to the spot.

The sound grew louder, and suddenly he was positive that something deadly and formidable was rushing towards him through the thickets with accelerated speed.

Throwing up his rifle, he pointed at the direction of the sound and fired.

In the brief flash of the rifle he saw something black and enormous and glistening, like a great flapping hood, break through the final thicket. It seemed to be rolling towards him, and it was moving with nightmare swiftness.

He wanted to scream and run, but even as the horror rushed forward, he understood that flight at this point would be futile. Even though the blood seemed to have congealed in his veins, he held the rifle pointed up and kept on firing.

The shots had no more visible effect than so many pebbles launched from a slingshot. At the last instant his nerve broke and he tried to escape, but the monstrous hood lunged upon him, flapped over him, and squeezed, and his attempt at a scream turned into a tiny gurgle in his throat.

Old Man Gowse got up early, after another uneasy night, and walked out to inspect the barnyard area. Nothing further seemed amiss, but there was still no sign of Sarey. And that detestable odour arose from the direction of Wharton’s Swamp when the wind was right.

After breakfast, Gowse set out for Rupert Barnaby’s place, a mile or so distant along the road. He wasn’t sure himself what he expected to find.
When he reached Barnaby’s small but neat frame house, all was quiet. Too quiet. Usually Barnaby was up and about soon after sunrise.

On a sudden impulse, Gowse walked up the path and rapped on the front door. He waited and there was no reply. He knocked again, and after another pause, stepped off the porch.

Jibbe, Barnaby’s hound, slunk around the side of the house. Ordinarily he would bound about and bark. But today he stood motionless — or nearly so — he was trembling — and stared at Gowse. The dog had a cowed, frightened, guilty air which was entirely alien to him.

‘Where’s Rup?’ Gowse called to him. ‘Go get Rup!’

Instead of starting off, the dog threw back his head and emitted an eerie, long-drawn howl.

Gowse shivered. With a backward glance at the silent house, he started off down the road.

Now maybe they’d listen to him, he thought grimly. The day before they had laughed about the disappearance of Sarey. Maybe they wouldn’t laugh so easily when he told them that Rupert Barnaby had gone into Wharton’s Swamp with his dog — and that the dog had come back alone!

When Police Chief Miles Underbeck saw Old Man Gowse come into headquarters in Clinton Center, he sat back and sighed heavily. He was busy this morning and undoubtedly Old Man Gowse was coming in to inquire about the infernal cow of his that had wandered off.

The old eccentric had a new and startling report, however. He claimed that Rupert Barnaby was missing. He’d gone into the swamp the night before, Gowse insisted, and had not returned.

When Chief Underbeck questioned him closely, Gowse admitted that he wasn’t positive Barnaby hadn’t returned. It was barely possible that he had returned home very early in the morning and then left again before Gowse arrived.

But Gowse fixed his flashing eyes on the Chief and shook his head. ‘He never came out, I tell ye! That dog of his knows! Howled, he did, like a dog howls for the dead! Whatever come took Sarey — got Barnaby in the swamp last night!’

Chief Underbeck was not an excitable man. Gowse’s burst of melodrama irritated him and left him unimpressed.

Somewhat gruffly he promised to look into the matter if
Barnaby had not turned up by evening. Barnaby, he pointed out, knew the swamp better than anyone else in the county. And he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself. Probably, the Chief suggested, he had sent the dog home and gone elsewhere after finishing his hunt the evening before. The chances were he’d be back by supper time.

Old Man Gowse shook his head with a kind of fatalistic scepticism. Vouching that events would soon prove his fears well founded, he shuffled grudgingly out of the station.

The day passed and there was no sign of Rupert Barnaby. At six o’clock, Old Man Gowse grimly marched into the Crown, Clinton Center’s second-rung hotel, and registered for a room. At seven o’clock Chief Underbeck dispatched a prowl car to Barnaby’s place. He waited impatiently for its return, drumming on the desk, disinterestedly shuffling through a sheaf of reports which had accumulated during the day.

The prowl car returned shortly before eight. Sergeant Grimes made his report. ‘Nobody there, sir. Place locked up tight. Search the grounds. All we saw was Barnaby’s dog. Howled and ran off as if the devil were on his tail!’

Chief Underbeck was troubled. If Barnaby was missing, a search should be started at once. But it was already getting dark, and portions of Wharton’s Swamp were very nearly impassable even during the day. Besides, there was no proof that Barnaby had not gone off for a visit, perhaps to nearby Stantonville, for instance, to call on a crony and stay overnight.

By nine o’clock he had decided to postpone any action till morning. A search now would probably be futile in any case. The swamp offered too many obstacles. If Barnaby had not turned up by morning, and there was no report that he had been seen elsewhere, a systematic search of the marsh could begin.

Not long after he had arrived at this decision, and as he was somewhat wearily preparing to leave Headquarters and go home, a new and genuinely alarming interruption took place.

Shortly before nine-thirty, a car braked to a sudden stop outside Headquarters. An elderly man hurried in, supporting by the arm a sobbing, hysterical young girl. Her skirt and stockings were torn and there were a number of scratches on her face.

After assisting her to a chair, the man turned to Chief Underbeck and the other officers who gathered around.
'Picked her up on the highway out near Wharton's Swamp. Screaming at the top of her lungs!' He wiped his forehead. 'She ran right in front of my car. Missed her by a miracle. She was so crazy with fear I couldn't make sense out of what she said. Seems like something grabbed her boy friend in the bushes out there. Anyway, I got her in the car without much trouble and I guess I broke a speed law getting here.'

Chief Underbeck surveyed the man keenly. He was obviously shaken himself, and since he did not appear to be concealing anything, the Chief turned to the girl.

He spoke soothingly, doing his best to reassure her, and at length she composed herself sufficiently to tell her story.

Her name was Dolores Rell and she lived in nearby Stantonville. Earlier in the evening she had gone riding with her fiancé, Jason Bukmeist of Clinton Center. As Jason was driving along the highway adjacent to Wharton's Swamp, she had remarked that the early evening moonlight looked very romantic over the marsh. Jason had stopped the car, and after they had surveyed the scene for some minutes, he suggested that, since the evening was warm, a brief 'stroll in the moonlight' might be fun.

Dolores had been reluctant to leave the car, but at length had been persuaded to take a short walk along the edge of the marsh where the terrain was relatively firm.

As the couple were walking along under the trees, perhaps twenty yards or so from the car, Dolores became aware of an unpleasant odour and wanted to turn back. Jason, however, told her she only imagined it and insisted on going farther. As the trees grew closer together, they walked Indian file, Jason taking the lead.

Suddenly, she said, they both heard something swishing through the brush towards them. Jason told her not to be frightened, that it was probably someone's cow. As it came closer, however, it seemed to be moving with incredible speed. And it didn't seem to be making the kind of noise a cow would make.

At the last second Jason whirled with a cry of fear and told her to run. Before she could move, she saw a monstrous something rushing under the trees in the dim moonlight. For an instant she stood rooted with horror; then she turned and ran. She thought she heard Jason running behind her. She couldn't be sure. But immediately after she heard him scream.

In spite of her terror, she turned and looked behind her.
At this point in her story she became hysterical again, and several minutes passed before she could go on.

She could not describe exactly what she had seen as she looked over her shoulder. The thing which she had glimpsed rushing under the trees had caught up with Jason. It almost completely covered him. All she could see of him was his agonized face and part of one arm, low near the ground, as if the thing were squatting astride him. She could not say what it was. It was black, formless, bestial and yet not bestial. It was the dark gliding kind of indescribable horror which she had shuddered at when she was a little girl alone in the nursery at night.

She shuddered now and covered her eyes as she tried to picture what she had seen. ‘O God – the darkness came alive! The darkness came alive!’

Somehow, she went on presently, she had stumbled through the trees into the road. She was so terrified she hardly noticed the approaching car. There could be no doubt that Dolores Rell was in the grip of genuine terror. Chief Underbeck acted with alacrity. After the white-faced girl had been driven to a nearby hospital for treatment of her scratches and the administration of a sedative, Underbeck rounded up all available men on the force, equipped them with shotguns, rifles, and flashlights, hurried them into four prowl cars, and started off for Wharton’s Swamp.

Jason Bukmeist’s car was found where he had parked it. It had not been disturbed. A search of the nearby swamp area, conducted in the glare of flashlights, proved fruitless. Whatever had attacked Bukmeist had apparently carried him off into the farthest recesses of the sprawling swamp.

After two futile hours of brush breaking and marsh sloshing, Chief Underbeck wearily rounded up his men and called off the hunt until morning.

As the first faint streaks of dawn appeared in the sky over Wharton’s Swamp, the search began again. Reinforcements, including civilian volunteers from Clinton Center, had arrived, and a systematic combing of the entire swamp commenced.

By noon, the search had proved fruitless—or nearly so. One of the searchers brought in a battered hat and a rye whisky bottle which he had discovered on the edge of the marsh under a sweet-gum tree. The shapeless felt hat was old and worn, but it was dry. It had, therefore, apparently been discarded in the swamp since the storm of a few days ago. The
whiskey bottle looked new; in fact, a few drops of rye remained in it. The searcher reported that the remains of a small campfire were also found under the sweet-gum.

In the hope that this evidence might have some bearing on the disappearance of Jason Bukmeist, Chief Underbeck ordered a canvass of every liquor store in Clinton Center in an attempt to learn the names of everyone who had recently purchased a bottle of the particular brand of rye found under the tree.

The search went on, and mid-afternoon brought another, more ominous discovery. A diligent searcher, investigating a trampled area in a large growth of cattails, picked a rifle out of the mud.

After the slime and dirt had been wiped away, two of the searchers vouched that it belonged to Rupert Barnaby. One of them had hunted with him and remembered a bit of scrollwork on the rifle stock.

While Chief Underbeck was weighing this unpalatable bit of evidence, a report of the liquor store canvass in Clinton Center arrived. Every recent purchaser of a quart bottle of the particular brand in question had been investigated. Only one could not be located—a tramp who had hung around the town for several days and had been ordered out.

By evening most of the exhausted searching party were convinced that the tramp, probably in a state of homicidal viciousness brought on by drink, had murdered both Rupert Barnaby and Jason and secreted their bodies in one of the deep pools of the swamp. The chances were the murderer was still sleeping off the effects of drink somewhere in the tangled thickets of the marsh.

Most of the searchers regarded Dolores Rell's melodramatic story with a great deal of scepticism. In the dim moonlight, they pointed out, a frenzied, wild-eyed tramp bent on imminent murder might very well have resembled some kind of monster. And the girl's hysteria had probably magnified what she had seen.

As night closed over the dismal morass, Chief Underbeck reluctantly suspended the hunt. In view of the fact that the murderer probably still lurked in the woods, however, he decided to establish a system of night-long patrols along the highway which paralleled the swamp. If the quarry lay hidden in the treacherous tangle of trees and brush, he would not be able to escape on to the highway without running into one of
the patrols. The only other means of egress from the swamp lay miles across the mire where the open sea washed against a reedy beach. And it was quite unlikely that the fugitive would even attempt escape in that direction.

The patrols were established in three-hour shifts, two men to a patrol, both heavily armed, and both equipped with powerful searchlights. They were ordered to investigate every sound or movement which they detected in the brush bordering the highway. After a single command to halt, they were to shoot to kill. Any curious motorists who stopped to inquire about the hunt were to be swiftly waved on their way, after being warned not to give rides to anyone and to report all hitchhikers.

Fred Storr and Luke Matson, on the midnight to three o’clock patrol, passed an uneventful two hours on their particular stretch of the highway. Matson finally sat down on a fallen tree stump a few yards from the edge of the road.

‘Legs givin’ out,’ he commented wryly, resting his rifle on the stump. ‘Might as well sit a few minutes.’


Luke listened, twisting around on the stump. ‘Well, maybe,’ he said finally, ‘kind of a little scratchy sound like.’

He got up, retrieving his rifle.

‘Let’s take a look,’ Fred suggested in a low voice. He stepped over the stump and Luke followed him towards the tangle of brush which marked the border of the swamp jungle.

Several yards farther along they stopped again. The sound became more audible. It was a kind of slithering, scraping sound, such as might be produced by a heavy body dragging itself over uneven ground.

‘Sounds like — a snake,’ Luke ventured. ‘A damn big snake!’

‘We’ll get a little closer,’ Fred whispered. ‘You be ready with that gun when I switch on my light!’

They moved ahead a few more yards. Then a powerful yellow ray stabbed into the thickets ahead as Fred switched on his flashlight. The ray searched the darkness, probing in one direction and then another.

Luke lowered his rifle a little, frowning. ‘Don’t see a thing,’ he said. ‘Nothing but a big pool of black scum up ahead there.’

Before Fred had time to reply, the pool of black scum reared up into horrible life. In one hideous second it hunched
itself into an unspeakable glistening hood and rolled forward with fearful speed.

Luke Matson screamed and fired simultaneously as the monstrous scarf of slime shot forward. A moment later it swayed above him. He fired again and the thing fell upon him.

In avoiding the initial rush of the horror, Fred Storr lost his footing. He fell headlong – and turned just in time to witness a sight which slowed the blood in his veins.

The monster had pounced upon Luke Matson. Now, as Fred watched, literally paralysed with horror, it spread itself over and around the form of Luke until he was completely enveloped. The faint writhing of his limbs could still be seen. Then the thing squeezed, swelling into a hood and flattening itself again, and the writhing ceased.

As soon as the thing lifted and swung forward in his direction, Fred Storr, goaded by frantic fear, overcame the paralysis of horror which had frozen him.

Grabbing the rifle which had fallen beside him, he aimed it at the shape of living slime and started firing. Pure terror possessed him as he saw that the shots were having no effect. The thing lunged towards him, to all visible appearances entirely oblivious to the rifle slugs tearing into its loathsome viscid mass.

Acting out of some instinct which he himself could not have named, Fred Storr dropped the rifle and seized his flashlight, playing its powerful beam directly upon the onrushing horror.

The thing stopped, scant feet away, and appeared to hesitate. It slid quickly aside at an angle, but he followed it immediately with the cone of light. It backed up finally and flattened out, as if trying by that means to avoid the light, but he trained the beam on it steadily, sensing with every primitive fibre which he possessed that the yellow shaft of light was the one thing which held off hideous death.

Now there were shouts in the nearby darkness and other lights began stabbing the shadows. Members of the adjacent patrols, alarmed by the sound of rifle fire, had come running to investigate.

Suddenly the nameless horror squirmed quickly out of the flashlight’s beam and rushed away in the darkness.

In the leaden light of early dawn Chief Underbeck climbed into a police car waiting on the highway near Wharton’s Swamp and headed back for Clinton Center. He had made a
decision and he was grimly determined to act on it at once.

When he reached Headquarters, he made two telephone calls in quick succession, one to the governor of the state and the other to the commander of the nearby Camp Evans Military Reservation.

The horror in Wharton’s Swamp – he had decided – could not be coped with by the limited men and resources at his command.

Rupert Barnaby, Jason Bukmeist, and Luke Matson had without any doubt perished in the swamp. The anonymous tramp, it now began to appear, far from being the murderer, had been only one more victim. And Fred Storr – well, he hadn’t disappeared. But the other patrol members had found him sitting on the ground near the edge of the swamp in the clutches of a mind-warping fear which had, temporarily at least, reduced him to near idiocy. Hours after he had been taken home and put to bed, he had refused to loosen his grip on a flashlight which he squeezed in one hand. When they switched the flashlight off, he screamed, and they had to switch it on again. His story was so wildly melodramatic it could scarcely be accepted by rational minds. And yet – they had said as much about Dolores Rell’s hysterical account. And Fred Storr was no excitable young girl; he had a reputation for level-headedness, stolidity, and verbal honesty which was touched with understatement rather than exaggeration. As Chief Underbeck arose and walked out to his car in order to start back to Wharton’s Swamp, he noticed Old Man Gowse coming down the block.

With a sudden thrill of horror he remembered the eccentric’s missing cow. Before the old man came abreast, he slammed the car door and issued crisp directions to the waiting driver. As the car sped away, he glanced in the rear-view mirror.

Old Man Gowse stood grimly motionless on the walk in front of Police Headquarters.

‘Old Man Cassandra,’ Chief Underbeck muttered. The driver shot a swift glance at him and stepped on the gas.

Less than two hours after Chief Underbeck arrived back at Wharton’s Swamp, the adjacent highway was crowded with cars – state police patrol cars, cars of the local curious, and Army trucks from Camp Evans.

Promptly at nine o’clock over three hundred soldiers, police, and citizen volunteers, all armed, swung into the swamp to
begin a careful search.

Shortly before dusk most of them had arrived at the sea on the far side of the swamp. Their exhaustive efforts had netted nothing. One soldier, noticing fierce eyes glaring out of a tree, had bagged an owl, and one of the state policemen had flushed a young bobcat. Someone else had stepped on a copperhead and been treated for snakebite. But there was no sign of a monster, a murderous tramp, nor any of the missing men.

In the face of mounting scepticism, Chief Underbeck stood firm. Pointing out that, so far as they knew to date, the murderer prowled only at night, he ordered that after a four-hour rest and meal period the search should continue.

A number of helicopters which had hovered over the area during the afternoon landed on the strip of shore, bringing food and supplies. At Chief Underbeck’s insistence, barriers were set up on the beach. Guards were stationed along the entire length of the highway; powerful searchlights were brought up. Another truck from Camp Evans arrived with a portable machine-gun and several flame-throwers.

By eleven o’clock that night the stage was set. The beach barriers were in place, guards were at station, and huge searchlights, erected near the highway, swept the dismal marsh with probing cones of light.

At eleven-fifteen the night patrols, each consisting of ten strongly-armed men, struck into the swamp again.

Ravenous with hunger, the hood of horror reared out of the mud at the bottom of a rancid pool and rose towards the surface. Flopping ashore in the darkness, it slid quickly away over the clumps of scattered swamp grass. It was impelled, as always, by a savage and enormous hunger.

Although hunting in its new environment had been good, its immense appetite knew no appeasement. The more food it consumed, the more it seemed to require.

As it rushed off, alert to the minute vibrations which indicated food, it became aware of various disturbing emanations. Although it was the time of darkness in this strange world, the darkness at this usual hunting period was oddly pierced by the monster’s hated enemy – light. The food vibrations were stronger than the shape of slime had ever experienced. They were on all sides, powerful, purposeful, moving in many directions all through the lower layers of puzzling, light-riven darkness.
Lifting out of the ooze, the hood of horror flowed up a lattice-work of gnarled swamp snags and hung motionless, while drops of muddy water rolled off its glistening surface and dripped below. The thing's sensory apparatus told it that the maddening streaks of lack of darkness were everywhere.

Even as it hung suspended on the snags like a great filthy carpet coated with slime, a terrible touch of light slashed through the surrounding darkness and burned against it.

It immediately loosened its hold on the snags and fell back into the ooze with a mighty plop. Nearby, the vibrations suddenly increased in intensity. The maddening streamers of light shot through the darkness on all sides.

Baffled and savage, the thing plunged into the ooze and propelled itself in the opposite direction.

But this proved to be only a temporary respite. The vibrations redoubled in intensity. The darkness almost disappeared, riven and pierced by bolts and rivers of light.

For the first time in its incalculable existence, the thing experienced something vaguely akin to fear. The light could not be snatched up and squeezed and smothered to death. It was an alien enemy against which the hood of horror had learned only one defence – flight, hiding.

And now as its world of darkness was torn apart by sudden floods and streamers of light, the monster instinctively sought the refuge afforded by that vast black cradle from which it had climbed.

Flinging itself through the swamp, it headed back for sea.

The guard patrols stationed along the beach, roused by the sound of gunfire and urgent shouts of warning from the interior of the swamp, stood or knelt with ready weapons as the clamour swiftly approached the sea.

The dismal reedy beach lay fully exposed in the harsh glare of searchlights. Waves rolled in towards shore, splashing white crests of foam far up the sands. In the searchlights' illumination the dark waters glistened with an oily iridescence.

The shrill cries increased. The watchers tensed, waiting. And suddenly across the long dreary flats clotted with weed stalks and sunken drifts there burst into view a nightmare shape which froze the shore patrols in their tracks.

A thing of slimy blackness, a thing which had no essential shape, no discernible earthly features, rushed through the thorn thickets and on to the flats. It was a shape of utter darkness, one second a great flapping hood, the next a black viscid
pool of living ooze which flowed upon itself, sliding forward with incredible speed.

Some of the guards remained rooted where they stood, too overcome with horror to pull the triggers of their weapons. Others broke the spell of terror and began firing. Bullets from half a dozen rifles tore into the black monster speeding across the mud flats.

As the thing neared the end of the flats and approached the first sand dunes of the open beach, the patrol guards who had flushed it from the swamp broke into the open.

One of them paused, bellowing at the beach guards. ‘It’s heading for sea! For God’s sake don’t let it escape!’

The beach guards redoubled their firing, suddenly realizing with a kind of sick horror that the monster was apparently unaffected by the rifle slugs. Without a single pause, it rolled through the last fringe of cattails and flopped on to the sands.

As in a hideous nightmare, the guards saw it flap over the nearest sand dune and slide towards the sea. A moment later, however, they remembered the barbed wire beach barrier which Chief Underbeck had stubbornly insisted on their erecting.

Gaining heart, they closed in, running over the dunes towards the spot where the black horror would strike the wire.

Someone in the lead yelled in sudden triumph. ‘It’s caught! It’s stuck on the wire!’

The searchlights concentrated swaths of light on the barrier. The thing had reached the barbed wire fence and apparently flung itself against the twisted strands. Now it appeared to be hopelessly caught; it twisted and flopped and squirmed like some unspeakable giant jellyfish snared in a fisherman’s net.

The guards ran forward, sure of their victory. All at once, however, the guard in the lead screamed a wild warning. ‘It’s squeezing through! It’s getting away!’

In the glare of light they saw with consternation that the monster appeared to be flowing through the wire, like a blob of liqueous ooze.

Ahead lay a few yards of downward slanting beach and, beyond that, rolling breakers of the open sea.

There was a collective gasp of horrified dismay as the monster, with a quick forward lurch, squeezed through the barrier. It tilted there briefly, twisting, as if a few last threads of itself might still be entangled in the wire.

As it moved to disengage itself and rush down the wet
sands into the black sea, one of the guards hurled himself forward until he was almost abreast of the barrier. Sliding to his knees, he aimed at the escaping hood of horror.

A second later a great searing spout of flame shot from his weapon and burst in a smoky red blossom against the thing on the opposite side of the wire.

Black oily smoke billowed into the night. A ghastly stench flowed over the beach. The guards saw a flaming mass of horror grope away from the barrier. The soldier who aimed the flamethrower held it remorselessly steady.

There was a hideous bubbling, hissing sound. Vast gouts of thick, greasy smoke swirled into the night air. The indescribable stench became almost unbearable.

When the soldier finally shut off the flamethrower, there was nothing in sight except the white-hot glowing wires of the barrier and a big patch of blackened sand.

With good reason the mantle of slime had hated light, for its ultimate source was fire – the final unknown enemy which even the black hood could not drag down and devour.
THE OHIO LOVE SCULPTURE

by Adobe James

MY HOBBY — indeed, my very life — is erotica.
I possess 15,000 pieces in my fire- and burglar-proofed library, many of them dating back to before the time of Christ. I’ve travelled over two million miles and spent in excess of $3,500,000 on my library acquisitions.
I’ve spent a like amount of time and money on erotic art!
Fantastic? Oh, no, my friend, not fantastic at all, for erotica is an expensive hobby. An example! Once, I had an entire wall of a Cambodian cave removed, crated, and shipped halfway around the world to me in New York. It is the pride of my collection today. A little cleaning here and there — the proper lighting — brought out hidden details of the figures on the wall. When one enters my darkened museum and the lights rise slowly, the viewer is greeted with an explosion of colour and hundreds of panels showing figures cojoined in every conceivable expression of love. It is so effective that many other connoisseurs, caught in the hypnotic grip of my cave wall panorama, swear the figures become animated if one looks at them long enough.
You may wonder at my preoccupation with erotica. It’s really quite simple, erotica is the one art form that has remained unchanged through all of mankind’s recorded history. Heroes and saviours have come and gone, civilizations, races, and countries have risen and fallen, religions, political beliefs, and fads are born, grow, and die in the dusts of history. Mountains, snow caps, and deserts spring up on the face of the earth, and the seas lick inward with tongues a hundred miles long. Only one thing remains constant — erotica.
You see this constancy in erotic artifacts from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, Phoenicia, Persia, India, China, Japan, Australia, Polynesia, Africa, Greece, Italy, and the Americas. Its immutability is comforting.
Invariably I am asked the difference between pornography and erotica. It is a question that has no answer, for if one has to ask it, he can never understand the answer. At best all I
can say is that pornography is pornography. Erotica is ... erotica. There's as much difference between the two as there is between a rare vintage wine and the sour 'red-eye' that is sold in bulk to the peasants.

It is unfortunate that we have uncultured idiots in our American judicial system who cannot differentiate between the two.

Take, for instance, their actions towards the Ohio Love Sculpture.

I first learned of the Ohio art from Ali S. Reyem, a member of the Turkish legation in New York. How he had gotten wind of the sculpture, I never discovered, but Ali was a collector and we all have our informants.

I well remember that evening. Harold Cabot, Ali, and myself, were dining together at the club. Harold had just finished telling us of his new acquisition, a copy of Shakespeare's *Selected Sonnets for Gentlemen*. Reputedly, there are only seven copies of this book in existence. Modestly, I can report that two of them are in my library. But I digress; Ali had been absent-minded most of the evening. When he failed to respond enthusiastically to the story, Harold, slightly miffed, turned to the Turk and asked tartly, 'And what have you purchased lately?'

Ali sighed, his huge frame quivering with the expulsion of breath. 'Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I tried to buy ... but they were not for sale.'

I felt my nerve ends tingling as my collector's instinct began sniffing the wind. I glanced at Harold; he was sitting as though he were relaxed, but his dilated nostrils gave him away.

Ali continued as if it pained him to recount the experience, 'I suspected it a hoax. After all, what possible thing of worth could be found in a town called Amboy in your agricultural state of Ohio? But I went, nevertheless, because of my informant's reputation. The people of Amboy were almost as backward as the restless tribesmen in our Agri Dagi region. I went to the address given, walked across a barnyard full of indescribably dirty pigs and chickens, and knocked at the door. There was no answer. I knocked again. Then I went into the barn ...' Ali drew deeply on his cigar, his eyes narrowed in thought. '... and there they were!'

'There what were?' Harold interjected impatiently.

Ali's eyebrows shot up, 'Why, the Ohio Love Sculpture, of course.' He ground out his cigar and leaned forward, his voice
lowered. 'They were beautiful. Exquisite! Perfect! Three of them, laid out on a velvet bedspread in anticipatory positions. One with her legs ...' Ali used his hands as he described the statuary. The figures were of three young girls about fifteen or sixteen years of age, sculptured out of some unknown substance that had the same hue as Carrara marble tinted by one of the Manacheilli artisans. The expressions, their full lips tightened in desire and eagerness, their taut stomach muscles, the extended thigh tendons, all gave off an unbelievable aura of sensualism.

'I couldn't move for a minute,' Ali said, perspiring now. 'I've seen the thirtieth cave of Ajanta, the tomb room of the Agina Aphrodite before it collapsed, the Lautrec and Gauguin collections ... and none of them — nothing! — could compare to these Ohio works.' He looked apologetic, and added for emphasis, 'Not even your cave wall, Andrew.'

'Go on,' I said softly, not really believing they could be that good, but nonetheless mentally calculating how long it would take me to get to Ohio. Harold was ominously silent; he would be in the race too.

Ali pursed his lips and grimaced, 'I stepped forward to touch them and I heard a gun click behind me. I whirled around and there was the sculptor, a dirty, wild-eyed genius in bib overalls. He said nothing, but his gun spoke an international language. We stared at each other for a minute and then I said, "My name is Ali Reyem. I am with the Turkish Legation in New York." I pulled my credentials out of my pocket. He never took his eyes from my face. I told him his sculpture was the most beautiful I had ever seen. He did not react to the compliment. Then I asked him how much he wanted for them.

'He spoke for the first time. In a viciously spectral voice he said, "They are not for sale. Go now, or I will kill you."'

'In spite of his threat, I tried to bargain with him. "Not even for a ... ah ... $25,000?"' The man shook his head and raised the gun. I offered him a hundred thousand while backing towards the door. The gun was shoved into my stomach. "A hundred and fifty thousand," I shouted as I moved out of the barn. Again the man answered in that same hollow voice, "They are not for sale!"'

Ali looked at Harold and myself. 'I pride myself in knowing men. This was a mad man ... a genius and possibly one of the greatest sculptors the world has ever known ... but a mad
man! And he will not sell – ever! You should know that I tried again the next morning, offering a certified cheque for $165,000. He shot over my head. I came home. That was a week ago. I have not slept since that time. Those beautiful, beautiful statues ... gathering dust in a chicken barn ...’

Harold, complaining of a sudden blinding headache, excused himself a few moments later, and almost ran in his haste to get out of the room. I fear I was equally impolite to my old friend, leaving a woebegone Ali sitting staring at his dead cigar and a half-finished brandy.

I had no doubt that Harold would attempt to beat me to Ohio. So ... I did the most expedient thing, and chartered a jet. Three and a half hours after I had left Ali, my plane landed at Lebanon, Ohio. Another forty-five minutes passed and I was at the location.

A cold eerie wind was blowing through the stubbles of the corn field when I walked across the dirt road and approached the house. Even though it was long after midnight, one solitary light burned upstairs. The house itself was in a state of disrepair. A broken old chair on the front porch had springs sticking out of it like serpents peering from the hair of Medusa. A storm shutter swung aimlessly to-and-fro on one rusted hinge, and the shredded tar paper on the roof flapped noisily with each dusty gust of wind.

I knocked.

After a long while there were halting steps inside, then the door creaked open and I saw the sculptor just as Ali had described him. Smaller, dirtier, perhaps – with a smell about him – but undoubtedly the same man ... and undoubtedly insane.

I introduced myself and said, ‘I have come to see the sculpture.’

‘Get out of here,’ he snarled. ‘They are not for sale.’ His face had twisted into a grotesque mask of hatred. He brought the shotgun into sight.

I had expected this and had planned accordingly. I held up one hand beseechingly, ‘Of course they aren’t for sale. They are works of art – made by a genius ... and one would not bargain or barter over something as priceless as they.’

The remark was, colloquially speaking, ‘corny’; it was meant to be. It stopped him. The hatred was replaced by another look, one of uncertainty. He cocked his head to one side and questioned, ‘You mean ... you ... you aren’t going to try and take them away from me?’
‘No,’ I lied, ‘I’ve heard of their beauty, their perfection, and have come to pay homage to the man who made them.’ No normal person would have accepted the remark at face value, but – animal like – the old man was listening to my tone of voice, not what I was actually saying.

He looked into my face for a few minutes and then slowly lowered his gun. Tears began running down both sides of his hawk-like nose. ‘Everyone who has seen my lovelies has tried to steal, or buy, or take them away from me.’ He stared at me pathetically, a weary and footsore Diogenes wanting to lay down his lantern.

Disregarding the stench, I put my arm around his shoulders, ‘Are they really as beautiful as I’ve heard?’

The old man was eager for me to see them now. He held the hurricane lamp high as we trotted across the barnyard casting weird shadows behind us. He turned when we reached the barn door. ‘Close your eyes,’ he said. ‘The lights have to be just right at night, you know.’

Ah, here was a true connoisseur, I thought, one who knows exactly what has to be done to show the art work off to its best advantage. I heard him moving around for a second, and then almost bashfully, he said, ‘Come in.’

The light fell upon the sculpture. Involuntarily, my breath left my body. The sensual power of the figures was a tangible thing that gripped me with a steel fist in the abdomen. In all my years of collecting there had never been anything like this. Surely, I thought, my acquisitions had led me to this moment – and these would be the climax to my collection. There had never been anything so powerfully beautiful, so sexually realistic before – and there would never be anything to compare with these again.

You must understand my feelings in this matter. Not since I was a very young man and susceptible to the more sensual aspects of erotica has anything influenced me the way the statues did. My throat was dry with desire, and my heart hammered inside its cavity like a wild frightened beast lunging against the bars of an insufferable cage. I cannot say how long I stood there revelling in the beauty, but finally my self-control regained command of my itinerant mind.

I would sell my soul – give millions – to have these statues. And I felt sorrow for their creator, for I knew I would not hesitate to kill for them either.

I began talking to him again. I made thrust after thrust into
that shadowy, fearful desert of his paranoid mind. I kept hammering away for almost an hour — always on the same theme, that there were those people plotting to take the statues away from him. Finally he was weeping futilely in the corner, looking like a wide-eyed frightened child. It was time for the coup d'état. I bit my lips and said, haltingly, 'Of course . . . if you weren't here . . . and the statues weren't here. If they were put in some secret hiding place . . . and you guarded them . . .'

He jumped up. 'Yes. Yes! That's it. I'll hide them.'

I shook my head, 'No . . . they'll follow you. But . . . if I helped you find a place — a long way from here — maybe in New York . . . ?'

The sculptor fell on his knees and clutched my pants beseechingly, 'Please . . . please help me. Tell me where to go.'

'All right,' I said, as if reaching some noble conclusion, 'I'll make arrangements for you to hide them in a secret museum.' His eyes narrowed slightly, and I added, 'Of course, you'll have to watch them day and night because they'll be your responsibility.' The remark quashed any feelings of doubt the old man may have had.

Our arrangements were completed just as dawn was breaking. We carefully loaded the sculpture in the farm's dilapidated old pick-up truck. He would bring them to New York, arriving at my place within seventy-two hours. The next three days would seem an eternity to me, but my only other alternative would be to take them myself and this would arouse the old man's suspicions.

As the sculptor blew out the lantern, I took my last look at the three figures in the back of the truck. In the soft light of the new day the expressions on the girls' faces had taken on a look of happy satiation. Then we covered them with blankets and an old tarp.

I left the old man a few minutes later and returned to New York. The next three days were spent in feverish anticipation. I purchased red velvet Roman couches for the figures and rearranged the museum to make room for them. They would be in the corner about twenty-five feet from the wall paintings — would serve as a grand soul-sucking climax for my guests.

When the telephone rang that evening of the third day, I felt a fleeting moment of panic as I thought it might be the sculptor.

It was Harold Cabot. His voice sounded odd, 'I've been
meaning to call you and offer congratulations.

‘Ah, you heard?’ It was impossible to keep the happiness, and the pride, out of my voice.

‘No, but when the sculpture wasn’t there when I arrived, I surmised you had beaten me again.’

I smiled and felt pity for poor Harold. I also felt relief to know the old man had gotten away safely.

The horrible foreboding struck me when Harold next spoke, ‘I just wanted to say that I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry? Sorry, for what?’

‘Well,’ he seemed very uncertain over the telephone, ‘haven’t you seen the newspapers this afternoon?’

‘No!’ The strangled shout was forced out of my suddenly aching throat, ‘What have they to do with me?’

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone; I could hear him breathing. Then Harold’s voice was indescribably sad when he said, ‘It’s all there. On the front page. About the old man and the Ohio sculpture. He was involved in a minor accident and the police discovered the statues.’ I heard him swallow, ‘Andrew . . . they – the police – are going to destroy the sculpture.’

‘Destroy? Oh, God, no! No! No! No! Why should they do something idiotic like that. It isn’t pornography. What police? I’ll call them . . . I’ll have the governor . . .’

‘No, Andrew. It wouldn’t do any good.’

‘Why not, you fool. Those statues are art! Do you hear me,’ I was almost screaming. ‘They’re art. They can’t destroy them. They belong to me . . . and the sculptor.’

Harold’s voice seemed to come from a long way off, and my mind backed away into some dark corner, screaming impotent exorcisms at his words. And when I said nothing, he repeated the statement again, ‘Sculptor? Oh, no, Andrew. The old man wasn’t a sculptor; he was a taxidermist!’
THE HORSEHAIR TRUNK

by Davis Grubb

To Marius the fever was like a cloud of warm river fog around him. Or like the blissful vacuum that he had always imagined death would be. He had lain for nearly a week like this in the big corner room while the typhoid raged and boiled inside him. Mary Ann was a dutiful wife. She came and fed him his medicine and stood at the foot of the brass bed when the doctor was there, clasping and unclasping her thin hands; and sometimes from between hot, heavy lids Marius could glimpse her face, dimly pale and working slowly in prayer. Such a fool she was, a praying, stupid fool that he had married five years ago. He could remember thinking that even in the deep, troubled delirium of the fever.

‘You want me to die,’ he said to her one morning when she came with his medicine. ‘You want me to die, don’t you?’

‘Marius! Don’t say such a thing! Don’t ever —’

‘It’s true, though,’ he went on, hearing his voice miles above him at the edge of the quilt. ‘You want me to die. But I’m not going to. I’m going to get well, Mary Ann. I’m not going to die. Aren’t you disappointed?’

‘No! No! It’s not true! It’s not!’

Now, though he could not see her face through the hot blur of fever, he could hear her crying; sobbing and shaking with her fist pressed tight against her teeth. Such a fool.

On the eighth morning Marius woke full of a strange, fiery brilliance as if all his flesh were glass not yet cool from the furnace. He knew the fever was worse, close to its crisis, and yet it no longer had the quality of darkness and mists. Everything was sharp and clear. The red of his necktie hanging in the corner of the bureau mirror was a flame. And he could hear the minutest stirrings down in the kitchen, the breaking of a match stick in Mary Ann’s fingers as clear as pistol shots outside his bedroom window. It was a joy.

Marius wondered for a moment if he might have died. But if it was death it was certainly more pleasant than he had
ever imagined death would be. He could rise from the bed without any sense of weakness and he could stretch his arms and he could even walk out through the solid door into the upstairs hall. He thought it might be fun to tiptoe downstairs and give Mary Ann a fright, but when he was in the parlour he remembered suddenly that she would be unable to see him. Then when he heard her coming from the kitchen with his medicine he thought of an even better joke. With the speed of thought Marius was back in his body under the quilt again, and Mary Ann was coming into the bedroom with her large eyes wide and worried.

‘Marius,’ she whispered, leaning over him and stroking his hot forehead with her cold, thin fingers. ‘Marius, are you better?’

He opened his eyes as if he had been asleep.

‘I see,’ he said, ‘that you’ve moved the pianola over to the north end of the parlour.’

Mary Ann’s eyes widened and the glass of amber liquid rattled against the dish.

‘Marius!’ she whispered. ‘You haven’t been out of bed! You’ll kill yourself! With a fever like —’

‘No,’ said Marius faintly, listening to his own voice as if it were in another room. ‘I haven’t been out of bed, Mary Ann.’

His eyelids flickered weakly up at her face, round and ghost-like, incredulous. She quickly set the tinkling glass of medicine on the little table.

‘Then how —?’ she said. ‘Marius, how could you know?’

Marius smiled weakly up at her and closed his eyes, saying nothing, leaving the terrible question unanswered, leaving her to tremble and ponder over it for ever if need be. She was such a fool.

It had begun that way, and it had been so easy he wondered why he had never discovered it before. Within a few hours the fever broke in great rivers of sweat, and by Wednesday, Marius was able to sit up in the chair by the window and watch the starlings hopping on the front lawn. By the end of the month he was back at work as editor of the Daily Argus. But even those who knew him least were able to detect in the manner of Marius Lindsay that he was a changed man – and a worse one. And those who knew him best wondered how so malignant a citizen, such a confirmed and studied misanthrope as Marius, could possibly change into anything worse than he was. Some said that typhoid always burned the temper from
the toughest steel and that Marius’s mind had been left a dark and twisted thing. At prayer meeting on Wednesday nights the wives used to watch Marius’s young wife and wonder how she endured her cross. She was such a pretty thing.

One afternoon in September, as he dozed on the bulging leather couch of his office, Marius decided to try it again. The secret, he knew, lay somewhere on the brink of sleep. If a man knew that – any man – he would know what Marius did. It wasn’t more than a minute later that Marius knew that all he would have to do to leave his body was to get up from the couch. Presently he was standing there, staring down at his heavy, middle-aged figure sunk deep into the cracked leather of the couch, the jowls of the face under the close-cropped moustache sagging deep in sleep, the heart above his heavy gold watch chain beating solidly in its breast.

I’m not dead, he thought, delighted. But here is my soul – my damned, immortal soul standing looking at its body!

It was as simple as shedding a shoe. Marius smiled to himself, remembering his old partner Charlie Cunningham and how they had used to spend long hours in the office, in this very room, arguing about death and atheism and the whither of the soul. If Charlie were still alive, Marius thought, I would win from him a quart of the best Kentucky bourbon in the county. As it was, no one would ever know. He would keep his secret even from Mary Ann, especially from Mary Ann, who would go to her grave with the superstitious belief that Marius had died for a moment, that for an instant fate had favoured her; that she had been so close to happiness, to freedom from him for ever. She would never know. Still, it would be fun to use as a trick, a practical joke to set fools like his wife at their wits’ edge. If only he could move things. If only the filmy substance of his soul could grasp a tumbler and send it shattering at Mary Ann’s feet on the kitchen floor some morning. Or tweak a copy boy’s nose. Or snatch a cigar from the teeth of Judge John Robert Gants as he strolled home some quiet evening from the fall session of the district court.

Well, it was, after all, a matter of will, Marius decided. It was his own powerful and indomitable will that had made the trick possible in the first place. He walked to the edge of his desk and grasped at the letter opener on the dirty, ancient blotter. His fingers were like wisps of fog that blew through a
screen door. He tried again, willing it with all his power, grasping again and again at the small brass dagger until at last it moved a fraction of an inch. A little more. On the next try it lifted four inches in the air and hung for a second on its point before it dropped. Marius spent the rest of the afternoon practising until at last he could lift the letter opener in his fist, fingers tight around the haft, the thumb pressing the cold blade tightly, and drive it through the blotter so deeply that it bit into the wood of the desk beneath.

Marius giggled in spite of himself and hurried around the office picking things up like a pleased child. He lifted a tumbler off the dusty water cooler and stared laughing at it, hanging there in the middle of nothing. At that moment he heard the copy boy coming for the proofs of the morning editorials and Marius flitted quickly back into the cloak of his flesh. Nor was he a moment too soon. Just as he opened his eyes, the door opened and he heard the glass shatter on the floor.

‘I’m going to take a nap before supper, Mary Ann,’ Marius said that evening, hanging his black hat carefully on the elk-horn hatrack.

‘Very well,’ said Mary Ann. He watched her young, unhappy figure disappearing into the gloom of the kitchen and he smiled to himself again, thinking what a fool she was, his wife. He could scarcely wait to get to the davenport and stretch out in the cool, dark parlour with his head on the beaded pillow.

Now, thought Marius. Now.

And in a moment he had risen from his body and hurried out into the hallway, struggling to suppress the laughter that would tell her he was coming. He could already anticipate her white, stricken face when the pepper pot pulled firmly from between her fingers cut a clean figure eight in the air before it crashed against the ceiling.

He heard her voice and was puzzled.

‘You must go,’ she was murmuring. ‘You musn’t ever come here when he’s home. I’ve told you that before, Jim. What would you do if he woke up and found you here?’

Then Marius, as he rushed into the kitchen, saw her bending through the doorway into the dusk with the saucepan of greens clutched in her white knuckles.

‘What would you do? You must go!’

Marius rushed to her side; careful not to touch her, careful
not to let either of them know he was there, listening, looking, flaming hatred growing slowly inside him.

The man was young and dark and well built and clean-looking. He leaned against the half-open screen door, holding Mary Ann's free hand between his own. His round, dark face bent to hers, and she smiled with a tenderness and passion that Marius had never seen before.

'I know,' the man said. 'I know all that. But I just can't stand it no more, Mary Ann. I just can't stand it thinking about him beating you up that time. He might do it again, Mary Ann. He might! He's worse, they say, since he had the fever. Crazy, I think. I've heard them say he's crazy.'

'Yes, yes. You must go away now, though,' she was whispering frantically, looking back over her shoulder through Marius's dark face. 'We'll have time to talk it all over again, Jim. I — I know I'm going to leave him but — Don't rush me into things, Jim dear. Don't make me do it till I'm clear with myself.'

'Why not now?' came the whisper. 'Why not tonight? We can take a steamboat to Lou'ville and you'll never have to put up with him again. You'll be shed of him for ever, honey. Look! I've got two tickets for Lou'ville right here in my pocket on the Nancy B. Turner. My God, Mary Ann, don't make me suffer like this — lyin' abed nights dreaming about him comin' at you with his cane and beatin' you — maybe killin' you!'

The woman grew silent and her face softened as she watched the fireflies dart their zigzags of cold light under the low trees along the street. She opened her mouth, closed it, and stood biting her lip hard. Then she reached up and pulled his face down to hers, seeking his mouth.

'All right,' she whispered then. 'All right. I'll do it! Now go! Quick!'

'Meet me at the wharf at nine,' he said. 'Tell him that you're going to prayer meeting. He'll never suspicion anything. Then we can be together without all this sneakin' around. Oh, honey, if you ever knew how much I —'

The words were smeared in her kiss as he pulled her down through the half-open door and held her.

'All right. All right,' she gasped. 'Now go! Please!'

And he walked away, his heels ringing boldly on the bricks, lighting a cigarette, the match arching like a shooting star into
the darkness of the shrubs. Mary Ann stood stiff for a moment in the shadow of the porch vines, her large eyes full of tears, and the saucepan of greens grown cold in her hands. Marius drew back to let her pass. He stood then and watched her for a moment before he hurried back into the parlour and lay down again within his flesh and bone in time to be called for supper.

Captain Joe Alexander of the Nancy B. Turner was not curious that Marius should want a ticket for Louisville. He remembered years later that he had thought nothing strange about it at the time. It was less than two months till the elections and there was a big Democratic convention there.

Everyone had heard of Marius Lindsay and the power he and his Daily Argus held over the choices of the people. But Captain Alexander did remember thinking it strange that Marius should insist on seeing the passenger list of the Nancy B. that night and that he should ask particularly after a man named Jim. Smith, Marius had said, but there was no Smith. There was a Jim though, a furniture salesman from Wheeling: Jim O'Toole, who had reserved two staterooms, No. 3 and No. 4.

'What do you think of the Presidential chances this term, Mr Lindsay?' Captain Alexander had said. And Marius had looked absent for a moment (the captain had never failed to recount that detail) and then said that it would be Cleveland, that the Republicans were done for ever.

Captain Alexander had remembered that conversation and the manner of its delivery years later and it had become part of the tale that rivermen told in wharf boats and water-street saloons from Pittsburgh to Cairo long after that night had woven itself into legend.

Then Marius had asked for Stateroom No. 5, and that had been part of the legend, too, for it was next to the room that was to be occupied by Jim O'Toole, the furniture salesman from Wheeling.

'Say nothing,' said Marius, before he disappeared down the stairway from the captain's cabin, 'to anyone about my being aboard this boat tonight. My trip to Louisville is connected with the approaching election and is, of necessity, confidential.'

'Certainly, sir,' said the captain, and he listened as Marius made his way awkwardly down the gilded staircase, lugging his small horsehair trunk under his arm. Presently the door to
Marius's stateroom snapped shut and the bolt fell to.
At nine o'clock sharp, two rockaway buggies rattled down the brick pavement of Water Street and met at the wharf. A man jumped from one, and a woman from the other.
"You say he wasn't home when you left," the man was whispering as he helped the woman down the rocky cobbles, the two carpetbags tucked under his arms.
"No. But it's all right," Mary Ann said. "He always goes down to the office this time of night to help set up the morning edition."
"You reckon he suspicions anything?"
The woman laughed, a low, sad laugh.
"He always suspicions everybody," she said. "Marius has the kind of a mind that always suspicions; and the kind of life he leads, I guess he has to. But I don't think he knows about us - tonight. I don't think he ever knew about us - ever."
They hurried up the gangplank together. The water lapped and gurgled against the wharf, and off over the river, lightning scratched the dark rim of mountains like the sudden flare of a kitchen match.
"I'm Jim O'Toole," Jim said to Captain Alexander, handing him the tickets. "This is my wife -"
Mary Ann bit her lip and clutched the strap of her carpet-bag till her knuckles showed through the flesh.
"- she has the stateroom next to mine. Is everything in order?"
"Right, sir," said Captain Alexander, wondering in what strange ways the destinies of this furniture salesman and his wife were meshed with the life of Marius Lindsay.
They tiptoed down the worn carpet of the narrow, white hallway, counting the numbers on the long, monotonous row of doors to either side.
"Good night, dear," said Jim, glancing unhappily at the Negro porter dozing on the split-bottom chair under the swinging oil lantern by the door. "Good night, Mary Ann. Tomorrow we'll be on our way. Tomorrow you'll be shed of Marius for ever."

Marius lay in his bunk, listening as the deep-throated whistle shook the quiet valley three times. Then he lay smiling and relaxed as the great drive shafts tensed and plunged once forward and backward, gathering into their dark, heavy rhythm as the paddles bit the black water. The Nancy B.
Turner moved heavily away into the thick current and headed downstream for the Devil's elbow and the open river. Marius was stiff. He had lain for nearly four hours waiting to hear the voices. Every sound had been as clear to him as the tick of his heavy watch in his vest pocket. He had heard the dry, rasping racket of the green frogs along the shore and the low, occasional words of boys fishing in their skiffs down the shore under the willows.

Then he had stiffened as he heard Mary Ann's excited murmur suddenly just outside his stateroom door and the voice of the man answering her, comforting her. Lightning flashed and flickered out again over the Ohio hills and lit the river for one clear moment. Marius saw all of his stateroom etched suddenly in silver from the open porthole. The mirror, washstand, bowl, and pitcher. The horsehair trunk beside him on the floor. Thunder rumbled in the dark and Marius smiled to himself, secure again in the secret darkness, thinking how easy it would be, wondering why no one had thought of such a thing before. Except for the heavy pounding rhythm of the drive shafts and the chatter of the drinking glass against the washbowl as the boat shuddered through the water, everything was still. The Negro porter dozed in his chair under the lantern by the stateroom door. Once Marius thought he heard the lovers' voices in the next room, but he knew then that it was the laughter of the cooks down in the galley.

Softly he rose and slipped past the sleeping porter, making his way for the white-painted handrail at the head of the stairway. Once Marius laughed aloud to himself as he realized that there was no need to tiptoe with no earthly substance there to make a sound. He crept down the narrow stairway to the galley. The Negro cooks bent around the long wooden table eating their supper. Marius slid his long shadow along the wall towards the row of kitchen knives lying, freshly washed and honed, on the zinc table by the pump. For a moment, he hovered over them, dallying, with his finger in his mouth, like a child before an assortment of equally tempting sweets, before he chose the longest of them all, and the sharpest, a knife that would shear the ham clean from a hog with one quick upward sweep. There was, he realized suddenly, the problem of getting the knife past human eyes even if he himself was invisible. The cooks laughed then at some joke one of them had made and all of them bent forward, their heads in a dark circle of merriment over their plates.
In that instant Marius swept the knife soundlessly from the zinc table and darted into the gloomy companionway. The Negro porter was asleep still, and Marius laughed to himself to imagine the man’s horror at seeing the butcher knife, its razor edge flashing bright in the dull light, inching itself along the wall. But it was a joke he could not afford. He bent at last and slipped the knife cautiously along the threadbare rug under the little ventilation space beneath the stateroom door; and then, rising, so full of hate that he was half afraid he might shine forth in the darkness, Marius passed through the door and picked the knife up quickly again in his hand.

Off down the Ohio the thunder throbbed again. Marius stepped carefully across the worn rug towards the sleeping body on the bunk. He felt so gay and light he almost laughed aloud. In a moment it would be over and there would be one full-throated cry, and Mary Ann would come beating on the locked door. And when she saw her lover . . .

With an impatient gesture, Marius lifted the knife and felt quickly for the sleeping, pulsing throat. The flesh was warm and living under his fingers as he held it taut for the one quick stroke. His arm flashed. It was done. Marius, fainting with excitement, leaned in the darkness to brace himself. His hand came to rest on the harsh, rough surface of the horsehair trunk.

‘My God!’ screamed Marius. ‘My God!’

And at his cry the laughing murmur in the galley grew still and there was a sharp scrape of a chair outside the stateroom door.

‘The wrong room!’ screamed Marius. ‘The wrong room!’ And he clawed with fingers of smoke at the jetting fountain of his own blood.
THE ATTIC EXPRESS

by Alex Hamilton

In the evenings they climbed the steep narrow stairway to the big room under the roof. Hector Coley went up eagerly and alertly. The boy followed his father draggingly. In the family it had always been called ‘Brian’s room’, but to Brian it seemed that his father’s presence filled it.

It was a long room, with low sidewalls and a ceiling like the lower half of an A. There was a large water-tank at one end: the rest of the space was ‘Brian’s’.

Coley ran the trains. The boy looked on.

Sometimes, when his father was absorbed, attending to midget couplings, rearranging a length of track, wiring up a tiny house so that it could be lit from inside, he looked away, and merely watched the single square of attic window gently darken.

Coley hated Brian to lose interest. He would say irritably: ‘I can’t understand you, Brian, beggared if I can! You know something? Some boys would give an arm to have the run of a playroom like this one I’ve built for you.’

The boy would shift his gaze and rub his hands together nervously. He would stoop forward hastily and peer at all parts of the track. ‘Make it go through the crossing,’ he would say, to appease his father. But even before the magnificent little Fleischmann engine challenged the gradient to the crossing – which would involve the delicious manoeuvre of braking two or three small cars – his eye would be away again, after a moth on the wall, or a cloud veiling the moon.

‘It defeats me,’ Coley would say later to his wife, ‘he shows no interest in anything. Sometimes I don’t get a word out of him all evening unless I drag it out of him.’

‘Perhaps he’s not old enough yet,’ she would reply diffidently, ‘you know I think I’d find it a little difficult to manage myself – all those signals and control switches and lights going on and off and trains going this way and that way. I’m glad I’m never asked to work out anything more complicated than a Fair Isle knitting pattern.’

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‘You miss the point,’ said Coley impatiently, ‘I’m not expecting him to synchronize the running times of ten trains, and keep them all safely on the move, but I would like a spark of enthusiasm to show now and again. I mean, I give up hours of my time, not to speak of money running into thousands, to give him a lay-out which I’m willing to wager a couple of bob can’t be matched in any home in Britain, and he can’t even do me the courtesy of listening to me when I explain something. It’s not good enough.’

‘I know, dear, how you feel, but at ten I do feel it’s a little…’

‘Oh, rubbish,’ exclaimed Coley, ‘ten’s a helluvan age. At ten I could dismantle a good watch and put it together again better than new.’

‘You are exceptional, dear. Not everyone has your mechanical bent. I expect Brian’s will show itself in time.’

‘There again, will it? His reports all read the same: “Could do much better if he applied himself more… doesn’t get his teeth into it…” and so on till I could give him a jolly good hiding. No, Meg, say what you like, it’s plain to me that the boy simply won’t try.’

‘In some subjects he’s probably a little better than in others.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Coley energetically, ‘anybody can do anything, if they want to enough.’

One evening, after listening to his complaints meekly for a while, she suddenly interrupted him:

‘Where is he now?’

‘Where I left him. I’ve given him the new express in its box. I want to see whether he’s got enough gumption to set it out on the track with the right load. If I find it’s still in the box when I get back…’

‘Yes, dear,’ she said, surprising him with her vehemence, ‘why don’t you bring the matter to a head? It’s getting on my nerves a bit, you know, sitting down here reading and watching television, and imagining you struggling. If he’s not really interested, then could we have an end to all this? I know the railways are your pride, but honestly I’d rather see them scrapped than listen to any more of this.’

He was astonished. He went back upstairs without a word.

The boy was squatting, with his face cupped in one hand, elbow on knee. His straight brown hair fell forward and half obscured his face. The other arm dangled loosely, and the forefinger of his hand moved an empty light truck to and fro
a few inches on the floor.

The express was on the rails. Brian had it at the head of an extraordinarily miscellaneous collection of waggons: Pullmans, goods trucks, restaurant cars, breakdown waggons, timber trucks, oil canisters – anything, obviously, which had come to hand.

‘Sit down at the control panel, Brian,’ snapped Coley.

The boy did not reply, but he did what he was told.

‘I want you to run this express tonight,’ said Coley, ‘and I’m not going to lift a finger to help. But I’ll be fair, too, I won’t criticize. I’ll stay right out of it. In fact for all you know I might as well be on the train itself. Think of me being on it, that’s it, and run it accordingly…’

He was trying to keep the anger and disappointment out of his voice. The boy half turned a moment, and looked at him steadily, then he resumed his scrutiny of the control panel.

‘…take your time… think it all out… don’t do anything hastily… keep your wits about you… remember all I’ve taught you… that’s a gorgeous little model I’ve got there for you… I’m on board… up on the footplate if you like… we’ll have a gala and just have it lit with the illuminations of the set itself… give me time to get aboard… I’m in your hands, son…’

Coley stood on the railway line. The giant express faced him, quiet, just off the main line. He started to walk along the track towards it.

He felt no astonishment at finding himself in scale with the models. Anyone can do anything, if they want to enough. He’d wished to drive a model, from the footplate, and here he was walking towards it.

But at the first step he took, he sank almost up to his knees in the ballast below the track. It was, after all, only foam rubber. He grinned. ‘I’ll have to remember things like that,’ he told himself.

He stopped by the engine and looked up at the boiler. He whistled softly between his teeth, excited by so much beauty. What a lovely job these Germans made of anything they tackled. Not a plate out of line. A really sumptuous, genuine, top of the form job! He wished the maker a ton of good dinners. The thing was real, not a doubt.

He stepped on through tiny, incisive pebbles of sand, treading cautiously. One or two had threatened to cut into his shoes. Looking down, he noticed a right-angled bar of
metal, gleaming at his feet. He realized in a moment that it must be one of the staples which had held the engine’s box together. Chuckling over his own drollness at playing the game to the full, he picked up the bar and with an effort almost succeeded in straightening it right out. Then he advanced on the wheel and tapped it. The wheel was, of course, sound. He ran his hand over the virgin wheel. He lifted his arm and placed his hand against the smooth gloss of the boiler. He could do that because it was quite cold. He smiled again: that took away a bit of the realism, to think of a steam engine run on electricity. When you were down to scale, it seemed you noticed these things.

Then he frowned as he noticed something else. The coupling of the first carriage, a Pullman, could not have been properly made up by Brian. The first wheels were well clear of the rails. He ran past the tender to have a look. Sure enough. Damn careless of him! He was about to call out to Brian, when he remembered his promise to say nothing, and thought he’d make the correction himself. It was just a matter of sliding the arm across until the spoke fell into the slot in the rear of the tender. The remainder of the fastening was simple. He jabbed the lever in under the arm and strained to shift the carriage.

After a minute, during which the carriage swayed a bit but did not move, he stopped and took off his coat. He was still in his office suit. He wished he were in his old flannels and lumberjack shirt, but at least he hadn’t changed into slippers. Sweat trickled down his back. He hadn’t had much time for exercise lately, though his usual practice was conditioning on the links, alternate fifteen yards running and walking, for eighteen holes. Without clubs, of course.

He hurled himself at it again, bracing his full weight against the lever. Suddenly the arm shifted, and skidded over the new surface on which it rested. The spoke found the slot, and the whole carriage crashed into position on the rails. The lever flicked off with rending force, and one spinning end struck him under the arm, just near the shoulder.

He thought he would be sick with the pain. All feeling went out of his arm, except at the point of impact. There was plenty of feeling, all vividly unpleasant. Almost mechanically he leant down and picked up his jacket. Trailing it, he tottered back to the engine, and slowly hoisted himself into the cab. There he leant over one of the immobile levers until he had
partially recovered.

He was still palpating his startled flesh, and establishing
that no bone was broken, when, without any preliminary warn-
ing, the train suddenly jerked into motion. Wheeling round,
he managed to save himself from falling by hooking himself
into the window of the cab. He looked for his son, to signal
that he was not quite ready yet. Even without the blow he
had just sustained he would have liked a few more minutes to
adjust himself to the idea of being part of a model world,
before the journey began.

But he couldn’t at first see where he was. In this fantastic
landscape, lit but not warmed by three suns, all the familiar
features had undergone a change. The sensation resembled
in some way that which comes to a man who visits a district
he knows well by daylight, for the first time after dark.

In the direct light of those three suns, an overhead monster
and two wall brackets, everything glittered. Plain to Coley, but
less noticeable to the boy at the table on which was spread the
control panel, were separate shadows of differing intensity
radiating from every upright object. But the objects themselves
sparkled. Light came flashing and twinkling and glancing
from the walls and roofs of the houses, from the foliage of
the trees, from the heaps of coal by the sidings, from the
clothes and faces of the men and women. The lines of the
railway themselves shone, twisting and turning a hundred
times amongst windmills and farms and garages and fields and
stations, all throwing back this aggressive, stupefying brilliance
of light. Coley screwed up his eyes and tried to work it out.
The train slipped forward smoothly, gaining momentum.
The boy hadn’t made a bad job of the start, anyway. Perhaps
he took in more than I imagined, said Coley to himself.

He fixed his eye on a vast grey expanse, stretching away
parallel to the course they were on, and appearing like a long
rectangular field of some kind of close undergrowth with curl-
ing tops. What the devil could that be? He didn’t remember
putting down anything like that. Whatever it was, it didn’t
look anything like the real thing, now that he was down to
scale. A breeze stirred small clumps which seemed to ride
clear of the rest, and it came to him that, of course, this was
the strip of carpet he’d laid down on one side of the room,
always insisting that people should walk only on this if
possible, to prevent breakages.

If that was the carpet ... he rushed across to the other
window, just in time before the engine started to take a corner, to see the top of his son’s head, bent over the controls.

It was miles away! So huge! So... dare he admit it to himself... grotesque! The line of his parting, running white across his scalp, showed to the man in the cab like a streak in a forest, a blaze consequent upon roadmaking. A house could have been hidden behind the hair falling across his forehead. The shadow of his son on the burning white sky behind was like a storm cloud.

Brian disappeared from his view as the track curled, and Coley shook his head, as if he could clear away these images as a dog rattles away drops of water from its fur. 'It's not like me to imagine things,' said Coley fiercely. All the same, drops of moisture stood out on the back of the hand which clutched a lever.

He sensed a slight acceleration. The telegraph poles were coming by now at more than one a second. He felt the use of his injured arm returning, and with it a return of self-confidence. 'I wonder if, when I return to my normal size, the bruise will be to scale or be only, quite literally, a scratch?'

He was about to resume his jacket, since the wind was now considerable, when the train turned again and he lost his balance. In falling, the jacket fell from his hand, and was whipped away out of the cab.

Unhurt by his fall, but irritated by the loss of the jacket, Coley pulled himself to his feet and swore: 'Hell of a lot of bends on this railway,' as if he were perceiving it for the first time, 'anyway, that doesn't matter so much, I can put up with a fresh wind for a while if he'd only think what all this bloody light is doing to my eyes. Tone down the ruddy glare, can't you?'

As if in answer, the suns were extinguished.

For an instant the succeeding blackness was complete.

The express forged almost noiselessly through the dark. Coley fumbled for handholds. 'That's a bit inefficient,' he muttered. But the totality of darkness was not for long. Simultaneously, and Coley imagined Brian studying the switches, all the lights in the houses and stations and farms and windmills, and so forth, were flipped on.

'That's really rather nice to look at!' said Coley, appreciatively. 'I always knew I'd done a good job there, but it's only now that I can see just how good. I don't think they can complain there,' he went on. 'I think they'd admit I've looked
after that little creature comfort.' He was referring to the little people with whom he had populated the world in which the attic express was running.

He also thought, as the walls of the attic vanished altogether: 'If he hasn't noticed that the old man's no longer sitting in the armchair behind him, he's not likely to now. It would be rather good to slip back into the chair before the lights go up again. I'll have to watch my moment as soon as he's had enough and stops the express.'

They sped through a crossing. Coley, looking down on it, and at the figures massed by the gate, observed a solitary figure in a patch of light, waving. Whimsically, he waved back. The expression on the face of the waving man was one of jubilation. His smile reached, literally, from ear to ear. 'A cheery chappie,' remarked Coley. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

At a comfortable pace the express swung into the long straight which led into the area described on the posters and signboards as Coleyville. It was the largest and best equipped of the five stations. Coley thought that Brian must see it as an inevitable stop. Interesting to see whether he could bring it in to a nice easy check. The passengers might be assumed to be taking down their suitcases, and dragging on their coats, and would be resentful at being overbalanced.

Far up ahead Coley could see the platform approaching. He could make out the long line of people waiting to climb aboard. A representative body of folk, thought Coley, I got in a good cross-section of the travelling public for Coleyville. Then, flashing down the hill, on the road which would cross the track just this side of the station in a scissors intersection, Coley saw an open sports car. It was coming down at a frightening speed, and should reach the junction just as the express went through.

'The young monkey!' breathed Coley, 'he must be getting into the swing of it.' For a moment he tensed, until he remembered that on this crossing there was a synchronization which would automatically brake the car. A high, whining metallic noise filled his ears from the single rail of the roadster, which abruptly cut off as the car was stopped.

'From eighty to rest in a split second,' thought Coley, 'that's not too realistic. Not the boy's fault, but I'll have to see if I can't improve on that.' He also noticed, as the express moved slowly through the crossing, that there were no features on the
face of the roadster’s driver. Not even eyes! ‘No use telling you to look where you’re going!’ shouted Coley. The square-shouldered driver sat upright and motionless, waiting for the express to be out of his way.

The express stopped at Coleyville.

‘Perfect!’ exclaimed Coley, ‘just perfect!’ He wished he could shake Brian’s hand. The boy must care after all, to be able to handle the stuff in this way. His heart swelled. He thought for a moment of stepping off at Coleyville and watching from the outside for a while, and then pick her up again next time she stopped. But he couldn’t be sure the boy would bring her round again on the same line. And this was far too exhilarating an adventure to duck out of now. He stayed.

He leant out of the cab and looked down the platform at the people waiting. It was a mild surprise to him that no one moved. There they stood, their baggage in their hands or at their feet, waiting for trains, and doing nothing about it when one came. He saw the guard, staring at him. The guard’s face was a violent maroon colour, and the front part of one foot was missing. He had doubtless good reasons for drinking heavily. Immediately behind him was a lovely blonde, about seven feet high, and with one breast considerably larger than the other, but otherwise delicious to look at. At her side was a small boy in suit and school cap. He had the face of a middle-aged man. Farther on down a toothless mastiff gambolled, at the end of a leash held by a gentleman in city suit and homburg. He was flawless, but for the fact that he had omitted to put on collar and tie.

Coley rubbed the side of his nose with his index finger. ‘I never expected to discover that you had such curious characters,’ he said ruefully. The guard stared at him balefully, the blonde proudly. The express moved out of the station. Coley took his shoe off and hammered the glass out of the right-hand foreport. It was too opaque for proper vision. He smiled as he thought of the faces of the makers if he should write to them criticizing. Being Germans, they’d take it seriously, and put the matter right in future.

Beyond Coleyville the track wound through low hills. Coleyville was a dormitory town, but on the outskirts were some prosperous farms whose flocks could be seen all about the hills. A well-appointed country club lay at the foot of the high land which bordered the east wall, which was continued in illusion by a massive photograph of the Pennines which
Coley had had blown up to extend most of the length of the wall. It was, in Coley’s view, one of the most agreeable and meticulously arranged districts in his entire lay-out.

By the fences of the farms stood children, waving. Yokels waved. Lambs and dogs frisked. A water-mill turned slowly. It ran on a battery, but looked very real. Plump milkmaids meandered to and fro. ‘Lovely spot for a holiday,’ thought urban Coley, sentimentally. He leant far out of the cab window to have a better view of the whole wide perspective, and almost had his head taken off by a passing goods train.

It came up very softly, passing on the outside of a curve. Coley withdrew his head only because he happened to catch a slight shadow approach.

He leant his face against the cold metal by his window.

‘Idiot!’ he said to himself in fright and anger.

The goods train went by at a smart clip. There were only about five trucks on it, all empty.

‘Steady, old chap!’ he apostrophized his son, under his breath, ‘don’t take on too much all at once.’

For the first time it occurred to him that it might be a good thing to be ready to skip clear in the event of danger. Brian was operating very sensibly at present, but a lapse in concentration. ... A vague chill passed down Coley’s spine.

He looked back at the train on which he was travelling. It might be better to pick his way to the rear coaches.

He took three strides and launched himself on to the tender. Landing, he tore his trousers on the rough surface which represented coal nuts. It was very slippery and he almost slid right over it altogether, but he contrived to dig toes and hands into the depressions and check himself.

The express was moving along an embankment. Below him he could see the figures of young women in bathing suits disporting themselves about a glass swimming pool. Uniformed waiters stood obsequiously about, handing drinks to shirt-sleeved gentlemen under beach umbrellas. In the context of night-time the scene appeared macabre and hinting of recondite pleasures, particularly when the white legs of one of the beauties, protruding from under a glistening, russet bush, were taken into account. She could have been a corpse, and none of the high-lifers caring.

Coley wriggled forward cautiously over the hard black lumps. He wished now he’d stayed where he was, since the strong wind was more than he had allowed for.
He scrambled to a sitting position on the hard, pointed surface of the tender. Beyond the country club, looking ahead, were the mountains. He sought about for the secure footholds he’d need before making his leap off the tender into the gaping doorway of the Pullman behind, but decided to postpone the effort until the express had passed through the long tunnel. There was a long gentle declivity on the far side, a gradient of 1/248 he’d posted it, and he’d have a more stable vehicle to jump to. Besides, in the tunnel it would be dark.

He remembered himself one Sunday morning, making the mountain secure above the tunnel. The trouble he’d had with that material, nailing it in firmly without damaging any of the features of the landscape built on to it.

Those nails!

Some must protrude into the tunnel itself! He’d never troubled himself about them. There had always been plenty of clearance for the trains themselves. But, for him, perched on top of the tender? He looked round desperately to see if he might still have time to make his leap.

But he had remembered too late. The tunnel sucked them in like a mouth. He rolled flat on his face and prayed.

It was not completely dark, though very nearly so. A vague glow came through at one section where a tricky bit of building had been finally effected with painted canvas, and in it he was lucky to spot one of the nails and wriggle clear. The other he never saw. The point, aimed perpendicularly downwards, just caught his collar, as it arched upward over his straining neck.

He was jerked up bodily. It was very swift. He had no time to do anything about it. For a second he seemed to be suspended on the very tip of the nail, then the shirt tore and he was delivered back on the train.

He landed with a vicious thump on some part of a wagon some distance below roof-level. Something drove like the tip of a boot into his knee and he doubled over against what might be a rail. He clung to it. He couldn’t tell where he was, but he could hear a wheel clicking furiously beneath him. Gasiing from the pain of his knee, and a dull throb between the shoulder blades, he hung on and waited for the end of the tunnel and light.

It came suddenly.

His first feeling was relief that he had been thrown almost on the very spot he had chosen to jump to before the train
entered the tunnel. But this was succeeded by a stab of anguish from his back as he raised himself to his feet in the doorway of the Pullman. He put his hand behind his back and found first that his shirt had split all the way to his trousers. He allowed it to flow down his arms, and held it in one hand while he probed his back with the other.

'Ye Gods,' he murmured shakily as he examined his hand after feeling his wound, 'I must be bleeding like a stuck pig!'

Slowly he converted his shirt into a great bandage, wrapping it around his chest, under his armpits and tying it below his chin, like a bra in reverse. While he was doing this, grunting as much from astonishment at his predicament as from pain, the express accelerated, and as it thundered along the decline his horror at this was added to the confusion of his feelings.

'I must stop this,' he said thickly, 'I must signal the boy to cut the power off.' He reeled into the Pullman. On the far side he seemed to remember there was a flat truck with nothing on it but a couple of logs. Perhaps if he got astride one of them, he could make himself be seen.

From nowhere appeared the colossal torso of a man. It was white coated, but the face was mottled, a sort of piebald, with only one deeply sunken eye, and the other the faintest smear at the point of the normal cheekbone.

'Get away! Get away!' screamed Coley, striking out at it wildly. One of his blows landed high on the man's chest. He teetered a moment, and then, without bending, went over on his back. The material from which he was made was very light. He was no more than amalgam of plastics and painted hat.

Coley looked down at the prostrate dummy and rubbed his bloodied hand over his forehead. 'No sense in getting hysterical,' he warned himself. He stepped over the prostrate figure, twisting to avoid the outstretched arm. He observed with revulsion that the fingers on the hand were webbed, a glittering duck-egg blue. Coley ran his tongue over his lips, tasting blood. 'Take a brace,' he admonished himself, reverting to the slang of his schooldays, 'don't let your imagination run away with you.'

He staggered amongst the conclaves of seated gentlemen, for ever impassive and at their ease in armchairs, content with the society in which they found themselves, unimpressed by the increasing momentum of the express, welded to their very chairs. Coley shot a glance over the gleaming carapace of one
stern hock-drinker and out through the window. The variety of the landscape was flickering by with alarming speed, becoming a gale of altering colours. The coach was beginning to sway.

Coley broke into a run. The roar below him apprised him that the express was travelling over the suspension bridge. The bridge had been his pride, a labour of months, not bought whole, but built from wire and plywood in his leisure hours. He had no time now for gloating.

‘I must get him to see me, or I’m done for.’

But beyond the Pullman, he found another waggon, a restaurant car. In his haste he had forgotten that one. He dashed down the aisle, grabbing tables to steady himself against the rocking of the train as he went. They must be up to seventy now, or rather about four miles an hour, he realized with bitterness.

Leaning a moment over one of the tables, he saw that the lamps in the centre were bulky, heavy-looking objects. He heaved tentatively at one of them, and it snapped off at the base. The diners, with their hands in their laps, stared on across the table at each other, untroubled by the onslaught of this wild-eyed Englishman. The Englishman, naked to the waist, his shirt sleeves dangling red and filthy down his chest, his body flaming now with a dozen bruises, stood over them a second clutching the lamp to him, panting heavily, then turned away and reeled on down the aisle. Down his retreating back the blood was flowing now freely. The shirt was inadequate to check it as it escaped from the savage wound he had sustained in the tunnel.

This time when he emerged at the doorway of the carriage he found himself looking at the open truck on which were chained four logs. He flung the lampstand ahead of him and it landed satisfyingly between two of the logs. He gathered his ebbing strength for the jump.

He was just able to make it. He caught his foot in one of the chains in mid-flight and crashed down on his face, but he saved himself from disaster by flinging one arm round a log. He sat up immediately and looked about him.

For a moment his vision was partly blocked as yet another train flashed by in the opposite direction. ‘Oh, God, what’s he playing at?’ whispered Coley, ‘he can’t handle so many trains at once!’

The express was almost at the end of the long straight. It
slowed for the curve right, at the bottom. For a brief time after that it would be running directly under the control panel at which Brian was sitting. That would be his chance to make an impression. He hauled himself astride the top log and waited.

The express took the curve at a reduced pace, but squealing slightly nevertheless. Coley could sense most of the load concentrate on the inner wheels. Then he could see his son above him.

He waved frantically.

Brian seemed to rise slightly from his chair. His shadow leapt gigantically ahead of him, stretching forward and up on the slanting ceiling. Behind his head the glare of the Anglepoise lamp was almost unbearable. Coley was unable to make out the features of his son at all: there was only the silhouette. He couldn’t tell if he had noticed anything.

With almost despairing violence he flung the lamp. He saw it speed in a low parabola out over the road which ran parallel to the track, bounce on the white space of Brian’s shin exposed above his sock, and vanish in the darkness beyond. The enormous figure rose farther, towering now above the speeding express. Coley was sure now that he had been seen. He made desperate motions with his hands, indicating that he would like a total shut-down of power. The boy waved. Coley turned sick. He stared down at his hands, pathetic little signals of distress. The probability was that the boy couldn’t even see them.

But he should have been aware that something was wrong. Surely he must see that.

They tore through another station. They were taking the curves now at speed. They flashed across the scores of intersecting rails of the marshalling yard. The noise was like machine-gun fire. He saw another unit come into play: a two-car diesel slipped away south in a coquettish twinkle of chromium.

‘He’s showing off,’ thought Coley grimly, ‘he’s going to try to bring every bloody train we’ve got into motion.’

He knew now that the only way he could save himself would be somehow to get off the train. If only he didn’t feel so hellishly bushed!

Coley was never tired. Other people seemed to be tired for him. In every project which he had ever undertaken his adherents had flaked away at some stage, forgotten, like the
jettisoned elements in a rocket flight. Hector Coley himself drove on to arrive at his object in perfect condition. But now he was tired, and he felt himself nearing exhaustion with his loss of blood and the battering he had taken.

There was just a chance, he thought, of a stop at Coleyville. The boy had evidently taken in the importance of that one. He’d postpone the final effort to get clear until Coleyville was reached.

He leant over the cold metal of which the log was made, and embraced it like a lover. The metal was cold and refreshing against the skin of face and chest. Through his blurring vision he saw again the great grey plain, and the approaching scissors intersection before Coleyville. Once again the smart little roadster ground to a peremptory halt at the crossing. Other cars halted behind it.

But the express did not this time slacken speed. It went through Coleyville at sixty. For a fleeting instant he saw again the maroon face of the guard, the giant blonde, the malevolence of the middle-aged schoolboy. Those waiting waited still. Those who had been waving waved on. Then Coleyville was gone, and the man on the log recognized that he would have to jump for it. He thought ahead.

Wistfully his mind passed over the swimming pool of the country club. If only that had been water! He winced at the appalling idea of crashing through glass.

But where else could he make it? Spring on to the roof of the tunnel, as they entered? But no, the mountain above was too sheer: it would be like flinging himself against a brick wall. Then he remembered the trees which overhung the long straight beyond. He’d been in the Pullman last time they’d gone under those. But he might be able to grab one and hang from it long enough to let the express pass beneath him.

He fainted away.

When he came to he found that the express was emerging from the tunnel. He wondered how many times he had made the circuit. Several times probably. Looking across the countryside from this high vantage point he could see on almost every track trains and cars travelling, east, west, south, north.

He felt a cold wind blowing now powerfully across the track. It was horridous, roaring. It threatened to drag his very hair out by the roots. The shirt sleeves were flapping like mad, trapped seagulls. He twisted his head to face the blast
and looked on at the final horror.

His son had quitted the control panel. He was now squatting, setting a fan on the long grey meadow of carpet. In the whirlwind everything light in the landscape was going over, the waving figures of the yokels and children, the flimsier structures of paper cottages. The station at Coleyville was collapsing, while the people on the platform waited patiently.

Brian smiled. Coley saw him smile.

Then, as he thought that he must be obliged to relinquish his hold and be blown away to destruction, the boy picked the fan up again, and placed it where it always was.

But he did not return to his seat at the control panel. He went out through the door, and shut it behind him. The noise as it slammed was like a shell exploding.

The express went down the long straight through the suspension bridge and towards the curve at the bottom and reached a hundred miles an hour. Coley watched the overhanging branches of the trees sweep towards him. He climbed on to the logs and steadied himself with his feet braced against a knot to make this last leap. He realized that he would have to make it good the first time, and hoist himself well clear of the onrushing roofs of following coaches.

Red, yellow, brown, green, the trees suddenly showed.

He made his effort.

He felt the spines run through his hands. Then the branch broke, and he was jammed in the doorway of the next carriage. He pulled a spine which had remained in his flesh clear, then lay there. He was broken. He waited for the express to derail.

But it did not derail. It swooped on the curve and screamed round it. Almost exuberantly it hurled itself at the next stretch running below the now abandoned control panel. Behind him he heard but did not see the last light trucks and petrol waggons go somersaulting off the track. For a moment there was a grinding check on the express: the wheels raced, then a link must have snapped and the wheels bit again. They surged forward.

The clatter as they started across the marshalling yard began again.

Coley got up quickly. The will which had devastated board rooms, concentrated now in his tiny figure, was the only part of him which had not been reduced to a scale of one in three hundred. He remembered that before getting on to the
express at the outset of this misconceived adventure he had sunk almost to his knees in the foam rubber ballast on which the track was laid. In the marshalling yard there was acres of it! He stepped back on the log-bearing truck and looked quickly about him.

‘Foam-rubber,’ he said to himself, ‘not ballast.’

He flung himself out, as if into a feather bed.

He lay for a moment luxuriously. He watched the express disappear in the direction of shattered Coleyville. He sighed. What a close thing!

Downstairs, Brian was buckling on his raincoat. His mother watched him anxiously.

‘I think your father would prefer it if just this once more you helped him with his trains. It’s a bit late to go out.’

‘No, he sent me away.’

His mother sighed. She looked forward to an uncomfortable scene with Hector when he should deign to reappear. He probably wouldn’t even eat his dinner and then be even more bad tempered because he was hungry.

‘Don’t be out long, then.’

‘I’m only going out to Billy’s. We’re going to watch for a hedgehog he says comes out at night in his garden.’

‘All right then, but be sure to wrap up well.’

Coley hauled himself to his feet. He stood alone, a figure of flesh and blood in a world of fakes.

‘I shall never play with them again, not after this,’ he said, quietly.

It was a decision, but it was accurate also as a prophecy. A sibilant hiss was all he heard of the diesel before it struck him. It was travelling at only three miles an hour, or call it sixty.

It killed him.

Before he died, he thought, ‘How wretched to die here like this, tiny, probably not even found! They’ll wonder whatever became of me.’

He wished he might have been out altogether of the tiny world which had proved to be too big for him. It was his dying wish.

No one doubted that it had been murder when Hector Coley was found stretched out across the toy world which had been his great hobby and pride. But so battered and bloodied and broken a figure could only have resulted from the attack of a maniac of prodigious, overwhelming strength.
‘He was still playing with the models when he was surprised,’ reported the Inspector, ‘the current was on, and about ten of them had come to rest against his body. To be frank, though, he looked as if about ten real ones had hit him.’
THE HAUNTED TELEPHONE

by Elliott O'Donnell

Dr Mike Byrne did not take No. — Barnfield Terrace, Bexhill, without being warned.

‘It’s not a pleasant house,’ his friend Ross remarked, when he told him he contemplated taking it. ‘Some years ago a doctor named Oldfield, who lived in it, disappeared very mysteriously, and ever since then people have declared the place is haunted.’

‘Moonshine!’ Byrne ejaculated. ‘There aren’t such things as ghosts.’

‘Possibly,’ his friend continued, ‘but still, for all that, there is something decidedly queer about the house, and I advise you not to take it.’

That settled Byrne. When given advice, he always acted in exact opposition to it, and in this instance he went off at once to the estate agent’s office and took No. — Barnfield Terrace on a three years’ lease. Ten days later his brass plate shone conspicuously on the front door; he had settled in. Shortly afterwards, at about 9 p.m. on October 31st, he was sitting in front of his study fire smoking, whilst Bob, a wire-haired Irish terrier, his sole companion, lay on the floor by his side. The night was stormy. Every now and then a gust of wind beat the rain against the window-panes, howled dismaly in the chimney, and set the door of the room jarring. Otherwise the house was very still. Suddenly, during a lull in the elements, Bob gave a low and ominous growl, and moved nearer Byrne. The next moment the telephone bell in the far corner of the room started ringing.

‘Yes,’ Byrne remarked, ‘who’s that?’

‘Mrs Delacourte,’ was the reply, in an agitated voice – the voice of a woman. ‘Is that the doctor?’

‘Yes,’ Byrne responded, ‘what can I do for you?’

‘Come at once,’ Mrs Delacourte said, ‘something dreadful has happened.’

‘What is your address?’ Byrne asked.

‘Oh, you know,’ Mrs Delacourte said impatiently, ‘The
Bluestones, just before you get to Sedley. Do be — ’ an abrupt silence, and Byrne realized he had been cut off. She did not ring again, but Byrne had already made up his mind he would go to The Bluestones, without delay.

Sedley was a little village about four miles to the north-west of Bexhill, and as there were very few big houses in its immediate vicinity, he felt he could not fail to find the house to which he had been summoned. (It was not in the telephone book, which was rather queer, as he had got the impression that Mrs Delacourte was phoning from The Bluestones, the scene of the trouble.) It did not take him long to thrust a stethoscope and a few surgical implements into his pockets, so that in a very few minutes from the time he received the summons he was on his motor-bicycle, speeding along the wet and storm-swept streets, the wind buffeting and the rain almost blinding him. Fortunately, however, there was little traffic about, and he was soon well on the road to Sedley. When he was about a mile or so from the village, he slackened speed and looked on either side of him for The Bluestones. The rain had now ceased, and the moon, emerging from behind dense masses of scurrying clouds, shone everywhere with a cold white light. Presently he espied, through the trees, on one side of the road, a dimly lighted house, and a few yards farther on a carriage drive leading to it. The Bluestones in black lettering was plainly visible on the white wooden gate that opened on to the drive, and joyfully Byrne dismounted. His joy, however, was short lived. As he opened the gate and began to wend his way along the drive, he became conscious of an extraordinary sense of loneliness and depression, and he felt it growing more and more pronounced the farther he advanced. The house looked dismal enough, being in total darkness, save for the hall and one room on the ground floor. Now, Byrne was not naturally inquisitive, and he had never purposely played the part of an eavesdropper or spy, but something, some strange influence he was utterly at loss to account for or explain, suddenly made him approach the window of the lighted room on tiptoe, and cautiously peer in. What he saw thrilled him to the core. In the centre of the room, which was apparently a study, for the walls of it were lined with bookshelves, and there was a large bureau in one corner, stood an ottoman, and on it lay an elderly man in evening dress. He appeared to be asleep. A woman, also in evening dress, was bending over him, with one hand resting on his head. She
stood with her back to the window, and seemed to be looking at the man's head very intently. She remained in this attitude for some moments, as if debating some very weighty problem, and then suddenly began to smooth and arrange the man's hair. The action puzzled Byrne because it did not seem to be dictated by affection; indeed, there was something in the woman's attitude and bearing that made him think that she regarded the man on the sofa merely as an object of curiosity. Judging by her figure, he had not yet seen her face, she seemed very young.

Wondering what the relationship between the two was, and if she were the Mrs Delacourte who had rung him up, Byrne walked to the front door and rapped. After the lapse of some seconds he heard the tapping of heels upon bare boards, and on the front door being opened he found himself confronted by the woman he had seen through the window. He knew her at once by her dress and figure. She was tall and slight, with yellow hair, bobbed, and eyebrows à la Greta Garbo. Twenty-two or -three at the most, she had small, delicate features and lovely teeth; and eyes set just far enough apart to render them peculiarly attractive. It was a very pretty face, and would have been perfect but for the thinness of the lips and a hardness about the eyes that was not, however, always apparent. She was dressed in blue, to enhance, of course, the colour of her eyes, and her hands were beautiful, the fingers long and tapering, the nails almond-shaped and perfectly manicured. Byrne always looked at people's hands, not only because they indicate health or the reverse, but because he believed they indicate good or bad character, and this woman's hands instantly arrested his attention. They seemed healthy enough, but the nails were too curved, too reminiscent of the talons of some bird or beast of prey. They suggested cruelty, and in this respect harmonized unpleasantly with the thinness of the lips, and the occasional metallic-like glitter of the china-blue eyes.

'Oh, do come in, doctor,' she said, in a trembling voice. 'I'm beside myself with trouble. When I came home from golf about an hour ago I found my husband lying on the ottoman in the study in what seemed to me to be a fit, and he has not recovered.'

'Do you mean to say he is dead?' Byrne asked.

'Yes,' she sobbed, holding her handkerchief to her eyes. 'He died just before I phoned you. It was terrible. The servants
are all out, and I am all alone in the house. Please come in and see him.'

Crossing the hall as she spoke, she led Byrne into the room he had already seen through the window.

'There he is,' she whispered, catching Byrne by the arm and pointing to the sofa. 'Tell me right away – it was apoplexy, wasn't it?'

Byrne went up to the sofa and examined the man. As Mrs Delacourte had surmised, he was dead, and the flushed and swollen face and neck and protruding eyes, which were wide open and staring, were certainly consistent with the symptoms of apoplexy. Moreover, the man had the short, thick neck that is so general among middle-aged apoplectics.

'How old was your husband, Mrs Delacourte?' Bryne asked.

'Fifty,' Mrs Delacourte replied. 'His father died of apoplexy when he was just about the same age. I was always afraid lest Alfred should share a similar fate. Apoplexy is hereditary, isn't it?'

'It very often does run in families,' Byrne replied. 'Was your husband abstemious?'

'Not very,' Mrs Delacourte said. 'I wouldn't say a word against him, because he was the kindest and best husband possible.' Here she broke off, and once again applied a tiny lace handkerchief to her eyes. A delicious whiff of some very subtle perfume came from it.

'There will be no need for a post-mortem or inquest, will there?' she went on, after a brief pause. 'Will you make all the arrangements for the funeral and tell me when it will be? I want it to be as quiet as possible.'

Byrne looked at her curiously. She had apparently been weeping, but there was no moisture in her eyes and no grief in her voice. Anxiety, only, was apparent, and once again he got the impression, this time more poignantly than before, that she had not cared one iota for the dead man. Bending down, he examined the body more closely, and peered into the blue, sightless eyes.

'You will, of course, certify that he died a natural death,' Mrs Delacourte observed; and Byrne was about to reply in the affirmative, when something he saw, quite by chance, in the mirror on the wall opposite him, made him pause. It was a reflection of Mrs Delacourte's face; she was staring at the dead man's head with an expression of intense fear and anxiety.

In an instant Byrne's mind reverted to the scene he had
witnessed from the garden, and yielding to a sudden impulse, he bent over the dead man’s head and brushed the hair apart with his hand.

On the top of the skull was a bald patch, and in the centre of it was a small purple mark about the size and shape of a pin’s head. He examined it closely. Then, this time purposefully, he glanced at the mirror, and what he saw in it almost startled him. Mrs Delacourte’s eyes, fixed on him, were dilated with terror, whilst her lips and cheeks were absolutely white. He swung round and confronted her.

‘What were you looking at?’ she faltered.

‘Only this,’ Byrne said quietly, pointing at the purple spot on the dead man’s head. ‘I should like to examine it more carefully by daylight.’

‘What is it?’ Mrs Delacourte asked, without, however, approaching any nearer to the body. ‘He always had a spot there.’

‘Perhaps,’ Byrne replied. ‘Anyhow, I will call tomorrow morning.’

‘You will give the necessary certificate then?’

‘That depends,’ Byrne responded. ‘If I am satisfied your husband died from natural causes, of course I will.’

‘You surely don’t think there is any doubt about that, do you?’ was the quick retort.

‘There shouldn’t be,’ Byrne replied evasively, ‘but I can express no opinion till tomorrow.’

As he moved towards the door Mrs Delacourte approached him, and, placing a hand lightly on his arm, looked up into his face appealingly from under her long, dark lashes.

‘Doctor,’ she said, ‘must you go? I am terrified at being left all alone with this body. I keep fancying I hear noises, footsteps in the hall and on the staircase, and the surreptitious opening and shutting of doors. Do please stay till the servants come in. They won’t be long.’

Byrne glanced at his watch. It was half-past ten.

‘I will stay till eleven,’ he said, ‘but I can’t stay longer, as one of my patients is in a very bad way, and I may have to go to him at any moment.’

‘I won’t ask you to stay after eleven,’ Mrs Delacourte said. ‘The maids are sure to be back by then. Come into the dining-room and have a whisky and soda.’

Byrne was nothing loth. After a hard day’s work he was feeling somewhat exhausted, and a drink before setting out
on the return journey would doubtless buck him up for the renewal of his battle with the elements, which, just then, seemed very boisterous. Indeed, as he followed Mrs Delacourte into the hall, the wind wailed dismally round the house and set all the windows rattling.

A feeling of intense eeriness now came over him. There was something in the atmosphere of the whole place, something in the gloom of the old oak staircase, that struck him as intensely ghostly. It was all so still, and there were so many strange shadows on the floor and walls that, sceptic as he was with regard to the so-called supernatural, he felt that here he might imagine anything. He was not at all surprised now that Mrs Delacourte did not like being in the house alone. He studied her minutely, as she tripped across the hall in front of him. How slight she was, and yet how perfectly proportioned. What small, daintily shod feet, that somehow seemed to make no noise, and what lovely arms and hands. She wouldn’t long remain a widow, of that he was sure.

‘This is the dining-room,’ she said, opening a door and turning towards him with an arch smile. ‘Go in and make yourself at home, while I fetch the siphon and whisky.’

She stepped back as she spoke, and Byrne strode into the room. To his amazement, however, the door slammed to after him, and he heard the key turn in the lock.

‘Dr Byrne,’ Mrs Delacourte called out, from the hall, ‘will you write me that certificate? There’s a pen and ink on the table, and directly it is written I will let you out.’

‘What?’ Byrne cried, almost too dumbfounded to speak. ‘You would coerce me into signing a death certificate! I never heard of such a thing. It is outrageous, mad!’

‘You will stay there till you do it,’ Mrs Delacourte said.

‘I won’t,’ Byrne shouted, ‘I’ll burst open the door.’

‘Try,’ Mrs Delacourte laughed. ‘It’s solid oak, and there’s nothing in the room to help you.’

She had lied to him – the room was no dining-room. It was either a boot or lumber-room. There was no furniture whatsoever in it, but a bamboo table and wicker-chair. No grate, no chimney. And only one small window, which was barred. He was, indeed, nicely fooled.

‘Well!’ Mrs Delacourte called out. ‘Are you satisfied and have you changed your mind? The moment you write me a certificate saying my husband died of apoplexy, you go free. Otherwise you stay where you are.’

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'A certificate obtained under such conditions would have no value,' Byrne fumed.

'And why not, pray?' Mrs Delacourte asked.

'Because,' Byrne retorted, 'the police would soon be on your track.'

'Meaning you would tell them?' Mrs Delacourte laughed. 'Oh no, you wouldn't, Dr Byrne. You wouldn't be such a fool. Besides, I might have a tale to tell. I might say, for instance, that you are in love with me, that you killed my husband hoping to marry me, and that when I found out what you had done and threatened to expose you, you tried to throw the guilt on me. My story would carry just as much weight as yours. Come, be sensible, let us be friends. Write me that certificate, and I will not only set you free at once, but I will write you out a cheque.'

'I'm not open to bribery, you devil,' Byrne shouted. 'I know now you murdered your husband, and I'll have you arrested the moment I get free.'

To this there was no reply, only a laugh. Byrne looked round for something to hammer the door with. There was absolutely nothing. He threw himself with all his might against it, but he might just as well have hurled himself against a stone wall. As Mrs Delacourte had intimated, it was of solid oak; besides, the lock was inset, and it opened on the inside. He tested the window-bars, pulling at them with all his might, but they remained firmly fixed in their sockets. Baffled in his attempts to get out, he threw himself in the wicker-chair and swore.

A mocking laugh from the hall told him he was overheard. Presently, Mrs Delacourte spoke, 'Once again, Dr Byrne, will you give me that certificate?'

'No,' Byrne said angrily, 'I will not.'

'Remember, it's your last chance.'

Byrne made no response and she did not speak again. Some minutes later he heard sounds outside, as if heavy articles were being dragged across the hall and piled against the door. Then came a smell of burning. At first he took little notice of it, but it soon became so pronounced that he got up and went to the door.

Listening there he could plainly hear the crackling of faggots, while the smell of burning became stronger every moment.

He shouted, 'Mrs Delacourte,' but there was no reply, just
silence, broken only by the sound of the burning wood and
the fitful moaning and wailing of the wind.

'The devil,' he ejaculated, 'she's set fire to the house.'

Mad with terror, he hurled himself again and again at the
door, but all to no purpose; he made no impression on it.
Meanwhile, the flames hissed and roared, and the smell of
burning became insufferable. At last the door itself caught
fire. Byrne, screaming for help, retreated to the window. The
flames slowly but persistently followed him.

Several times he tried to pass by them, but failed, the blind-
ing heat invariably driving him back. Finally, as a last re-
source, he again sought the window. He seized the bars and
shook them till all his strength went. The heat was now hellish
– he couldn't breathe, his very lungs seemed on fire.

He tried to scream, but his throat was dried up. The flames
were now on him, licking his legs. His clothes caught on fire,
and a frightful pain shot through his limbs. He put up his hands
to screen his scorching eyeballs and then, suddenly, all be-
came dark and he knew no more.

When he recovered, to his unmitigated surprise he was sit-
ting in front of the fire in his own study, with Bob lying
placidly by his side.

'A dream!' he said aloud, 'and yet – damn it – it couldn't
have been a dream, it was all so deuced realistic. What do you
think, Bob?'

Bob raised his head, and, glancing in the direction of the
telephone, snarled.

The following day, quite by chance, Byrne ran into Ross.
He told him his experience, and Ross, far from treating the
matter lightly, regarded the whole thing very seriously.

'It was not a dream. I wish to goodness it was. Listen! Last
night was the anniversary both of the disappearance of Dr
Oldfield and the burning of The Bluestones. The Dela-
courtes, who were then living at The Bluestones, were in
the house when the fire occurred, and Mr Delacourte was
believed to have perished in it. At all events, Mrs Delacourte,
who escaped, declared certain charred remains found in the
ruins were his.

'No one, of course, connected Dr Oldfield's disappearance
in any way with the fire, but your experience last night throws
an altogether different light on both events. You are quite sure
you never heard of the Delacourtes before last night?'

'Positive,' Byrne said emphatically, 'and I agree with you
now it was no dream, at least no dream in the ordinary sense. By some strange ordination of the powers behind the scenes, I was for the time being Oldfield. I acted as he acted and suffered his fate. It could not have been otherwise. Have you any idea what subsequently became of that devil incarnate, Mrs Delacourte?'

'Yes,' Ross replied slowly, and with pallid face, 'she married my boy Ralph, last year. They are living at Nice.'
To the many readers of earlier volumes in this series, as well as to new readers, the Editor apologizes in case they should feel this remarkable true story is not what they have come to expect from stories in these collections. But he hopes all the same that they will read it because it is a story they will never forget.

That it does contain horror — overwhelming horror — is the justification for its inclusion. But the Elephant Man is also a story of hope and happiness after degradation, above all an inspiration in its portrayal of the inherent sympathy of decent men for a fellow being in distress.

THE ELEPHANT MAN

From The Elephant Man and other Reminiscences

by Sir Frederick Treves Bart

In the Mile End Road, opposite to the London Hospital, there was (and possibly still is) a line of small shops. Among them was a vacant greengrocer's which was to let. The whole of the front of the shop, with the exception of the door, was hidden by a hanging sheet of canvas on which was the announcement that the Elephant Man was to be seen within and that the price of admission was twopence. Painted on the canvas in primitive colours was a life-size portrait of the Elephant Man. This very crude production depicted a frightful creature that could only have been possible in a nightmare. It was the figure of a man with the characteristics of an elephant. The transfiguration was not far advanced. There was still more of the man than of the beast. This fact — that it was still human — was the most repellent attribute of the creature. There was nothing about it of the pitiableness of the misshapen or the deformed, nothing of the grotesqueness of the freak, but merely the loathsome insinuation of a man being changed into an animal. Some palms trees in the background of the picture suggested a jungle and might have led the imaginative to assume that it was in this wild that the per-
verted object had roamed.

When I first became aware of this phenomenon the exhibition was closed, but a well-informed boy sought the proprietor in a public house and I was granted a private view on payment of a shilling. The shop was empty and grey with dust. Some old tins and a few shrivelled potatoes occupied a shelf and some vague vegetable refuse the window. The light in the place was dim, being obscured by the painted placard outside. The far end of the shop — where I expect the late proprietor sat at a desk — was cut off by a curtain or rather by a red tablecloth suspended from a cord by a few rings. The room was cold and dank, for it was the month of November. The year, I might say, was 1884.

The showman pulled back the curtain and revealed a bent figure crouching on a stool and covered by a brown blanket. In front of it, on a tripod, was a large brick heated by a Bunsen burner. Over this the creature was huddled to warm itself. It never moved when the curtain was drawn back. Locked up in an empty shop and lit by the faint blue light of the gas jet, this hunched-up figure was the embodiment of loneliness. It might have been a captive in a cavern or a wizard watching for unholy manifestations in the ghostly flame. Outside the sun was shining and one could hear the footsteps of the passers-by, a tune whistled by a boy, and the companionable hum of traffic in the road.

The showman — speaking as if to a dog — called out harshly: "Stand up!" The thing arose slowly and let the blanket that covered its head and back fall to the ground. There stood revealed the most disgusting specimen of humanity that I have ever seen. In the course of my profession I had come upon lamentable deformities of the face due to injury or disease, as well as mutilations and contortions of the body depending upon like causes; but at no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this lone figure displayed. He was naked to the waist, his feet were bare, he wore a pair of threadbare trousers that had once belonged to some fat gentleman’s dress suit.

From the intensified painting in the street I had imagined the Elephant Man to be of gigantic size. This, however, was a little man below the average height and made to look shorter by the bowing of his back. The most striking feature about him was his enormous and misshapen head. From the brow there projected a huge bony mass like a loaf, while from the
back of the head hung a bag of spongy, fungous-looking skin, the surface of which was comparable to brown cauliflower. On the top of the skull were a few long lank hairs. The osseous growth on the forehead almost occluded one eye. The circumference of the head was no less than that of the man’s waist. From the upper jaw there projected another mass of bone. It protruded from the mouth like a pink stump, turning the upper lip inside out and making of the mouth a mere slobbering aperture. This growth from the jaw had been so exaggerated in the painting as to appear to be a rudimentary trunk or tusk. The nose was merely a lump of flesh, only recognizable as a nose from its position. The face was no more capable of expression than a block of gnarled wood. The back was horrible, because from it hung, as far down as the middle of the thigh, huge, sack-like masses of flesh covered by the same loathsome cauliflower skin.

The right arm was of enormous size, and shapeless: It suggested the limb of the subject of elephantiasis. It was overgrown also with pendent masses of the same cauliflower-like skin. The hand was large and clumsy – a fin or paddle rather than a hand. There was no distinction between the palm and the back. The thumb had the appearance of a radish, while the fingers might have been thick, tuberous roots. As a limb it was almost useless. The other arm was remarkable by contrast. It was not only normal but was, moreover, a delicately shaped limb covered with fine skin and provided with a beautiful hand which any woman might have envied. From the chest hung a bag of the same repulsive flesh. It was like a dewlap suspended from the neck of a lizard. The lower limbs had the characters of the deformed arm. They were unwieldy, dropsical looking, and grossly misshapen.

To add a further burden to his trouble the wretched man, when a boy, developed hip disease, which had left him permanently lame, so that he could only walk with a stick. He was thus denied all means of escape from his tormentors. As he told me later, he could never run away. One other feature must be mentioned to emphasize his isolation from his kind. Although he was already repellent enough, there arose from the fungous skin-growth with which he was almost covered a very sickening stench which was hard to tolerate. From the showman I learnt nothing about the Elephant Man, except that he was English, that his name was John Merrick, and that he was twenty-one years of age.
As at the time of my discovery of the Elephant Man I was the Lecturer on Anatomy at the Medical College opposite, I was anxious to examine him in detail and to prepare an account of his abnormalities. I therefore arranged with the showman that I should interview his strange exhibit in my room at the college. I became at once conscious of a difficulty. The Elephant Man could not show himself in the streets. He would have been mobbed by the crowd and seized by the police. He was, in fact, as secluded from the world as the Man with the Iron Mask. He had, however, a disguise, although it was almost as startling as he was himself. It consisted of a long black cloak which reached to the ground. Whence the cloak had been obtained I cannot imagine. I had only seen such a garment on the stage wrapped about the figure of a Venetian bravo. The recluse was provided with a pair of bag-like slippers in which to hide his deformed feet. On his head was a cap of a kind that never before was seen. It was black like the cloak, had a wide peak, and the general outline of a yachting cap. As the circumference of Merrick’s head was that of a man’s waist, the size of this headgear may be imagined. From the attachment of the peak, a grey flannel curtain hung in front of the face. In this mask was cut a wide horizontal slit through which the wearer could look out. This costume, worn by a bent man hobbling along with a stick, is probably the most remarkable and the most uncanny that has as yet been designed. I arranged that Merrick should cross the road in a cab, and to ensure his immediate admission to the college I gave him my card. This card was destined to play a critical part in Merrick’s life.

I made a careful examination of my visitor, the result of which I embodied in a paper.* I made little of the man himself. He was shy, confused, not a little frightened, and evidently much cowed. Moreover, his speech was almost unintelligible. The great bony mass that projected from his mouth blurred his utterance and made the articulation of certain words impossible. He returned in a cab to the place of exhibition, and I assumed that I had seen the last of him, especially as I found next day that the show had been forbidden by the police and that the shop was empty.

I supposed that Merrick was imbecile and had been imbecile from birth. The fact that his face was incapable of expression, that his speech was a mere spluttering, and his

* British Medical Journal, December 1886, and April 1890.
attitude that of one whose mind was void of all emotions and concerns, gave grounds for this belief. The conviction was no doubt encouraged by the hope that his intellect was the blank I imagined it to be. That he could appreciate his position was unthinkable. Here was a man in the heyday of youth who was so vilely deformed that everyone he met confronted him with a look of horror and disgust. He was taken about the country to be exhibited as a monstrosity and an object of loathing. He was shunned like a leper, housed like a wild beast, and got his only view of the world from a peep hole in a showman’s cart. He was, moreover, lame, had but one available arm, and could hardly make his utterances understood. It was not until I came to know that Merrick was highly intelligent, that he possessed an acute sensibility and – worse than all – a romantic imagination, that I realized the overwhelming tragedy of his life.

The episode of the Elephant Man was, I imagined, closed; but I was fated to meet him again – two years later – under more dramatic conditions. In England the showman and Merrick had been moved on from place to place by the police, who considered the exhibition degrading and among the things that could not be allowed. It was hoped that in the un-critical retreats of Mile End a more abiding peace would be found. But it was not to be. The official mind there, as elsewhere, very properly decreed that the public exposure of Merrick and his deformities transgressed the limits of decency. The show must close.

The showman, in despair, fled with his charge to the Continent. Whither he roamed at first I do not know; but he came finally to Brussels. His reception was discouraging. Brussels was firm; the exhibition was banned; it was brutal, indecent, and immoral, and could not be permitted within the confines of Belgium. Merrick was thus no longer of value. He was no longer a source of profitable entertainment. He was a burden. He must be got rid of. The elimination of Merrick was a simple matter. He could offer no resistance. He was as docile as a sick sheep. The impresario, having robbed Merrick of his paltry savings, gave him a ticket to London, saw him into the train and no doubt in parting condemned him to perdition.

His destination was Liverpool Street. The journey may be imagined. Merrick was in his alarming outdoor garb. He would be harried by an eager mob as he hobbled along the quay. They would run ahead to get a look at him. They would lift
the hem of his cloak to peep at his body. He would try to hide
in the train or in some dark corner of the boat, but never could
he be free from that ring of curious eyes or from those whis-
pers of fright and aversion. He had but a few shillings in his
pocket and nothing either to eat or drink on the way. A panic-
dazed dog with a label on his collar would have received some
sympathy and possibly some kindness. Merrick received none.

What was he to do when he reached London? He had not
a friend in the world. He knew no more of London than he
knew of Pekin. How could he find a lodging, or what lodging-
house keeper would dream of taking him in? All he wanted
was to hide. What most he dreaded were the open street and
the gaze of his fellow-men. If even he crept into a cellar the
horrid eyes and the still more dreaded whispers would follow
him to its depths. Was there ever such a homecoming!

At Liverpool Street he was rescued from the crowd by the
police and taken into the third-class waiting-room. Here he
sank on the floor in the darkest corner. The police were at a
loss what to do with him. They had dealt with strange and
mouldy tramps, but never with such an object as this. He
could not explain himself. His speech was so maimed that he
might as well have spoken in Arabic. He had, however, some-
thing with him which he produced with a ray of hope. It was
my card.

The card simplified matters. It made it evident that this
curious creature had an acquaintance and that the individual
must be sent for. A messenger was dispatched to the London
Hospital, which is comparatively near at hand. Fortunately I
was in the building and returned at once with the messenger
to the station. In the waiting-room I had some difficulty in
making a way through the crowd, but there, on the floor in
the corner, was Merrick. He looked a mere heap. It seemed
as if he had been thrown there like a bundle. He was so
huddled up and so helpless looking that he might have had
both his arms and his legs broken. He seemed pleased to see
me, but he was nearly done. The journey and want of food
had reduced him to the last stage of exhaustion. The police
kindly helped him into a cab, and I drove him at once to the
hospital. He appeared to be content, for he fell asleep almost
as soon as he was seated and slept to the journey’s end. He
never said a word, but seemed to be satisfied that all was well.

In the attics of the hospital was an isolation ward with a
single bed. It was used for emergency purposes – for a case
of delirium tremens, for a man who had become suddenly insane, or for a patient with an undetermined fever. Here the Elephant Man was deposited on a bed, was made comfortable, and was supplied with food. I had been guilty of an irregularity in admitting such a case, for the hospital was neither a refuge nor a home for incurables. Chronic cases were not accepted, but only those requiring active treatment, and Merrick was not in need of such treatment. I applied to the sympathetic chairman of the committee, Mr Carr Gomm, who not only was good enough to approve my action, but who agreed with me that Merrick must not again be turned out into the world.

Mr Carr Gomm wrote a letter to The Times detailing the circumstances of the refugee and asking for money for his support. So generous is the English public that in a few days— I think in a week— enough money was forthcoming to maintain Merrick for life without any charge upon the hospital funds. There chanced to be two empty rooms at the back of the hospital which were little used. They were on the ground floor, were out of the way, and opened upon a large courtyard called Bedstead Square, because here the iron beds were marshalled for cleaning and painting. The front room was converted into a bed-sitting room and the smaller chamber into a bathroom. The condition of Merrick’s skin rendered a bath at least once a day a necessity, and I might here mention that with the use of the bath the unpleasant odour to which I have referred ceased to be noticeable. Merrick took up his abode in the hospital in December 1886.

Merrick had now something he had never dreamed of, never supposed to be possible—a home of his own for life. I at once began to make myself acquainted with him and to endeavour to understand his mentality. It was a study of much interest. I very soon learnt his speech so that I could talk freely with him. This afforded him great satisfaction, for, curiously enough, he had a passion for conversation, yet all his life had had no one to talk to. I—having then much leisure—saw him almost every day, and made a point of spending some two hours with him every Sunday morning when he would chatter almost without ceasing. It was unreasonable to expect one nurse to attend him continuously, but there was no lack of temporary volunteers. As they did not all acquire his speech it came about that I had occasionally to act as an interpreter.

I found Merrick, as I have said, remarkably intelligent. He had learnt to read and had become a most voracious reader.
I think he had been taught when he was in hospital with his diseased hip. His range of books was limited. The Bible and Prayer Book he knew intimately, but he had subsisted for the most part upon newspapers, or rather upon such fragments of old journals as he had chanced to pick up. He had read a few stories and some elementary lesson books, but the delight of his life was a romance, especially a love romance. These tales were very real to him, as real as any narrative in the Bible, so that he would tell them to me as incidents in the lives of people who had lived. In his outlook upon the world he was a child, yet a child with some of the tempestuous feelings of a man. He was an elemental being, so primitive that he might have spent the twenty-three years of his life immured in a cave.

Of his early days I could learn but little. He was very loath to talk about the past. It was a nightmare, the shudder of which was still upon him. He was born, he believed, in or about Leicester. Of his father he knew absolutely nothing. Of his mother he had some memory. It was very faint and had, I think, been elaborated in his mind into something definite. Mothers figured in the tales he had read, and he wanted his mother to be one of those comfortable lullaby-singing persons who are so lovable. In his subconscious mind there was apparently a germ of recollection in which someone figured who had been kind to him. He clung to this conception and made it more real by invention, for since the day when he could toddle no one had been kind to him. As an infant he must have been repellent, although his deformities did not become gross until he had attained his full stature.

It was a favourite belief of his that his mother was beautiful. The fiction was, I am aware, one of his own making, but it was a great joy to him. His mother, lovely as she may have been, basely deserted him when he was very small, so small that his earliest clear memories were of the workhouse to which he had been taken. Worthless and inhuman as this mother was, he spoke of her with pride and even with reverence. Once, when referring to his own appearance, he said: ‘It is very strange, for, you see, Mother was so beautiful.’

The rest of Merrick’s life up to the time that I met him at Liverpool Street Station was one dull record of degradation and squalor. He was dragged from town to town and from fair to fair as if he were a strange beast in a cage. A dozen times a day he would have to expose his nakedness and his piteous deformities before a gaping crowd who greeted him with such
mutterings as 'Oh! what a horror! What a beast!' He had had no childhood. He had had no boyhood. He had never experienced pleasure. He knew nothing of the joy of living nor of the fun of things. His sole idea of happiness was to creep in to the dark and hide. Shut up alone in a booth, awaiting the next exhibition, how mocking must have sounded the laughter and merriment of the boys and girls outside who were enjoying the 'fun of the fair'! He had no past to look back upon and no future to look forward to. At the age of twenty he was a creature without hope. There was nothing in front of him but a vista of caravans creeping along a road, of rows of glaring show tents and of circles of staring eyes with, at the end, the spectacle of a broken man in a poor law infirmary.

Those who are interested in the evolution of character might speculate as to the effect of this brutish life upon a sensitive and intelligent man. It would be reasonable to surmise that he would become a spiteful and malignant misanthrope, swollen with venom and filled with hatred of his fellow-men, or, on the other hand, that he would degenerate into a despairing melancholic on the verge of idiocy. Merrick, however, was no such being. He had passed through the fire and had come out unscathed. His troubles had ennobled him. He showed himself to be a gentle, affectionate, and lovable creature, as amiable as a happy woman, free from any trace of cynicism or resentment, without a grievance and without an unkind word for anyone. I have never heard him complain. I have never heard him deplore his ruined life or resent the treatment he had received at the hands of callous keepers. His journey through life had been indeed along a via dolorosa, the road had been uphill all the way, and now, when the night was at its blackest and the way most steep, he had suddenly found himself, as it were, in a friendly inn, bright with light and warm with welcome. His gratitude to those about him was pathetic in its sincerity and eloquent in the childlike simplicity with which it was expressed.

As I learnt more of this primitive creature I found that there were two anxieties which were prominent in his mind and which he revealed to me with diffidence. He was in the occupation of the rooms assigned to him and had been assured that he would be cared for to the end of his days. This, however, he found hard to realize, for he often asked me timidly to what place he would next be moved. To understand his attitude it is necessary to remember that he had been moving
on and moving on all his life. He knew no other state of existence. To him it was normal. He had passed from the workhouse to the hospital, from the hospital back to the workhouse, then from this town to that town, or from one showman’s caravan to another. He had never known a home nor any semblance of one. He had no possessions. His sole belongings, besides his clothes and some books, were the monstrous cap and the cloak. He was a wanderer, a pariah and an outcast. That his quarters at the hospital were his for life he could not understand. He could not rid his mind of the anxiety which had pursued him for so many years — where am I to be taken next?

Another trouble was his dread of his fellow-men, his fear of people’s eyes, the dread of being always stared at, the lash of the cruel mutterings of the crowd. In his home in Bedstead Square he was secluded; but now and then a thoughtless porter or a wardmaid would open his door to let curious friends have a peep at the Elephant Man. It therefore seemed to him as if the gaze of the world followed him still.

Influenced by these two obsessions he became, during his first few weeks at the hospital, curiously uneasy. At last, with much hesitation, he said to me one day: ‘When I am next moved can I go to a blind asylum or to a lighthouse?’ He had read about blind asylums in the newspapers and was attracted by the thought of being among people who could not see. The lighthouse had another charm. It meant seclusion from the curious. There at least no one could open a door and peep in at him. There he would forget that he had once been the Elephant Man. There he would escape the vampire showman. He had never seen a lighthouse, but he had come upon a picture of the Eddystone, and it appeared to him that this lonely column of stone in the waste of the sea was such a home as he had longed for.

I had no great difficulty in ridding Merrick’s mind of these ideas. I wanted him to get accustomed to his fellow-men, to become a human being himself, and to be admitted to the communion of his kind. He appeared day by day less frightened, less haunted looking, less anxious to hide, less alarmed when he saw his door being opened. He got to know most of the people about the place, to be accustomed to their comings and goings, and to realize that they took no more than a friendly notice of him. He could only go out after dark, and on fine nights ventured to take a walk in Bedstead Square
clad in his black cloak and his cap. His greatest adventure was on one moonless evening when he walked alone as far as the hospital garden and back again.

To secure Merrick’s recovery and to bring him, as it were, to life once more, it was necessary that he should make the acquaintance of men and women who would treat him as a normal and intelligent young man and not as a monster of deformity. Women I felt to be more important than men in bringing about his transformation. Women were the more frightened of him, the more disgusted at his appearance, and the more apt to give way to irrepressible expressions of aversion when they came into his presence. Moreover, Merrick had an admiration of women of such a kind that it attained almost to adoration. This was not the outcome of his personal experience. They were not real women, but the products of his imagination. Among them was the beautiful mother surrounded, at a respectful distance, by heroines from the many romances he had read.

His first entry to the hospital was attended by a regrettable incident. He had been placed on the bed in the little attic, and a nurse had been instructed to bring him some food. Unfortunately, she had not been fully informed of Merrick’s unusual appearance. As she entered the room she saw on the bed, propped up by white pillows, a monstrous figure as hideous as an Indian idol. She at once dropped the tray she was carrying and fled, with a shriek, through the door. Merrick was too weak to notice much, but the experience, I am afraid, was not new to him.

He was looked after by volunteer nurses whose ministrations were somewhat formal and constrained. Merrick, no doubt, was conscious that their service was purely official, that they were merely doing what they were told to do, and that they were acting rather as automata than as women. They did not help him to feel that he was of their kind. On the contrary, they, without knowing it, made him aware that the gulf of separation was immeasurable.

Feeling this, I asked a friend of mine, a young and pretty widow, if she thought she could enter Merrick’s room with a smile, wish him good morning, and shake him by the hand. She said she could, and she did. The effect upon poor Merrick was not quite what I had expected. As he let go her hand he bent his head on his knees and sobbed until I thought he would never cease. The interview was over. He told me afterwards
that this was the first woman who had ever smiled at him, and the first woman, in the whole of his life, who had shaken hands with him. From this day the transformation of Merrick commenced and he began to change, little by little, from a hunted thing into a man. It was a wonderful change to witness and one that never ceased to fascinate me.

Merrick's case attracted much attention in the papers, with the result that he had a constant succession of visitors. Everybody wanted to see him. He must have been visited by almost every lady of note in the social world. They were all good enough to welcome him with a smile and to shake hands with him. The Merrick whom I had found shivering behind a rag of a curtain in an empty shop was now conversant with duchesses and countesses and other ladies of high degree. They brought him presents, made his room bright with ornaments and pictures, and, what pleased him more than all, supplied him with books. He soon had a large library, and most of his day was spend in reading. He was not the least spoiled; not the least puffed up; he never asked for anything; never presumed upon the kindness meted out to him, and was always humbly and profoundly grateful. Above all, he lost his shyness. He liked to see his door pushed open and people to look in. He became acquainted with most of the frequenters of Bedstead Square, would chat with them at his window, and show them some of his choicest presents. He improved in his speech, although to the end his utterances were not easy for strangers to understand. He was beginning, moreover, to be less conscious of his unsightliness, a little disposed to think it was, after all, not so very extreme. Possibly this was aided by the circumstance that I would not allow a mirror of any kind in his room.

The height of his social development was reached on an eventful day when Queen Alexandra—then Princess of Wales—came to the hospital to pay him a special visit. With that kindness which has marked every act of her life, the Queen entered Merrick's room smiling and shook him warmly by the hand. Merrick was transported with delight. This was beyond even his most extravagant dream. The Queen has made many people happy, but I think no gracious act of hers has ever caused such happiness as she brought into Merrick's room when she sat by his chair and talked to him as to a person she was glad to see.

Merrick, I may say, was now one of the most contented
creatures I have chanced to meet. More than once he said to me: 'I am happy every hour of the day.' This was good to think upon when I recalled the half-dead heap of miserable humanity I had seen in the corner of the waiting-room at Liverpool Street. Most men of Merrick's age would have expressed their joy and sense of contentment by singing or whistling when they were alone. Unfortunately, poor Merrick's mouth was so deformed that he could neither whistle nor sing. He was satisfied to express himself by beating time upon the pillow to some tune that was ringing in his head. I have many times found him so occupied when I have entered his room unexpectedly. One thing that always struck me as sad about Merrick was the fact that he could not smile. Whatever his delight might be, his face remained expressionless. He could weep but he could not smile.

The Queen paid Merrick many visits and sent him every year a Christmas card with a message in her own handwriting. On one occasion she sent him a signed photograph of herself. Merrick, quite overcome, regarded it as a sacred object and would hardly allow me to touch it. He cried over it, and after it was framed, had it put up in his room as a kind of ikon. I told him that he must write to Her Royal Highness to thank her for her goodness. This he was pleased to do, as he was very fond of writing letters, never before in his life having had anyone to write to. I allowed the letter to be dispatched unedited. It began, 'My dear Princess', and ended, 'Yours very sincerely'. Unorthodox as it was, it was expressed in terms any courtier would have envied.

Other ladies followed the Queen's gracious example and sent their photographs to this delighted creature who had been all his life despised and rejected of men. His mantelpiece and table became so covered with photographs of handsome ladies, with dainty knicknacks and pretty trifles, that they may almost have befitted the apartment of an Adonis-like actor or of a famous tenor.

Through all these bewildering incidents, and through the glamour of this great change, Merrick still remained in many ways a mere child. He had all the invention of an imaginative boy or girl, the same love of 'make-believe,' the same instinct of 'dressing up', and of personating heroic and impressive characters. This attitude of mind was illustrated by the following incident. Benevolent visitors had given me, from time to time, sums of money to be expended for the comfort of the
ci-devant Elephant Man. When one Christmas was approaching I asked Merrick what he would like me to purchase as a Christmas present. He rather startled me by saying shyly that he would like a dressing-bag with silver fittings. He had seen a picture of such an article in an advertisement which he had furtively preserved.

The association of a silver-fitted dressing-bag with the poor wretch wrapped up in a dirty blanket in an empty shop was hard to comprehend. I fathomed the mystery in time, for Merrick made little secret of the fancies that haunted his boyish brain. Just as a small girl with a tinsel coronet and a window curtain for a train will realize the conception of a countess on her way to court, so Merrick loved to imagine himself a dandy and a young man about town. Mentally, no doubt, he had frequently ‘dressed up’ for the part. He could ‘make-believe’ with great effect, but he wanted something to render his fancied character more realistic. Hence the jaunty bag which was to assume the function of the toy coronet and the window curtain that could transform a mite with a pigtail into a countess.

As a theatrical ‘property’ the dressing-bag was ingenious, since there was little else to give substance to the transformation. Merrick could not wear the silk hat of the dandy, nor, indeed, any kind of hat. He could not adapt his body to the trimly cut coat. His deformity was such that he could wear neither collar nor tie, while in association with his bulbous feet, the young blood’s patent-leather shoe was unthinkable. What was there left to make up the character? A lady had given him a ring to wear on his undeformed hand, and a noble lord had presented him with a very stylish walking-stick. But these things, helpful as they were, were hardly sufficient.

The dressing-bag, however, was distinctive, was explanatory, and entirely characteristic. So the bag was obtained, and Merrick the Elephant Man became, in the seclusion of his chamber, the Piccadilly exquisite, the young spark, the gallant, the ‘nut’. When I purchased the article I realized that, as Merrick could never travel, he could hardly want a dressing-bag. He could not use the silver-backed brushes and the comb because he had no hair to brush. The ivory-handled razors were useless because he could not shave. The deformity of his mouth rendered an ordinary toothbrush of no avail, and as his monstrous lips could not hold a cigarette, the cigarette-case was a mockery. The silver shoe-horn would be of no service in
the putting on of his ungainly slippers, while the hat-brush was quite unsuited to the peaked cap with its visor.

Still, the bag was an emblem of the real swell and of the knockabout Don Juan of whom he had read. So every day Merrick laid out upon his table, with proud precision, the silver brushes, the razors, the shoe-horn, and the silver cigarette-case, which I had taken care to fill with cigarettes. The contemplation of these gave him great pleasure, and such is the power of self-deception that they convinced him he was the ‘real thing’.

I think there was just one shadow in Merrick’s life. As I have already said, he had a lively imagination; he was romantic; he cherished an emotional regard for women, and his favourite pursuit was the reading of love stories. He fell in love – in a humble and devotional way – with, I think, every attractive lady he saw. He, no doubt, pictured himself the hero of many a passionate incident. His bodily deformity had left unmarred the instincts and feelings of his years. He was amorous. He would like to have been a lover, to have walked with the beloved object in the languorous shades of some beautiful garden, and to have poured into her ear all the glowing utterances that he had rehearsed in his heart. And yet – the pity of it! – imagine the feelings of such a youth when he saw nothing but a look of horror creep over the face of every girl whose eyes met his. I fancy when he talked of life among the blind there was a half-formed idea in his mind that he might be able to win the affection of a woman if only she were without eyes to see.

As Merrick developed he began to display certain modest ambitions in the direction of improving his mind and enlarging his knowledge of the world. He was as curious as a child and as eager to learn. There were so many things he wanted to know and to see. In the first place, he was anxious to view the interior of what he called ‘a real house’, such a house as figured in many of the tales he knew, a house with a hall, a drawing-room where guests were received, and a dining-room with plate on the sideboard and with easy chairs into which the hero could ‘fling himself’. The workhouse, the common lodging-house, and a variety of mean garrets were all the residences he knew. To satisfy this wish I drove him up to my small house in Wimpole Street. He was absurdly interested, and examined everything in detail and with untiring curiosity. I could not show him the pampered menials and
the powdered footmen of whom he had read, nor could I produce the white marble staircase of the mansion of romance nor the gilded mirrors and the brocaded divans which belong to that style of residence. I explained that the house was a modest dwelling of the Jane Austen type, and as he had read *Emma* he was content.

A more burning ambition of his was to go to the theatre. It was a project very difficult to satisfy. A popular pantomime was then in progress at Drury Lane Theatre, but the problem was how so conspicuous a being as the Elephant Man could be got there, and how he was to see the performance without attracting the notice of the audience and causing a panic or, at least, an unpleasant diversion. The whole matter was most ingeniously carried through by that kindest of women and most able of actresses – Mrs Kendal. She made the necessary arrangements with the lessee of the theatre. A box was obtained. Merrick was brought up in a carriage with drawn blinds and was allowed to make use of the royal entrance so as to reach the box by a private stair. I had begged three of the hospital sisters to don evening dress and to sit in the front row in order to ‘dress’ the box, on the one hand, and to form a screen for Merrick on the other. Merrick and I occupied the back of the box, which was kept in shadow. All went well, and no one saw a figure, more monstrous than any on the stage, mount the staircase or cross the corridor.

One has often witnessed the unconstrained delight of a child at its first pantomime, but Merrick’s rapture was much more intense as well as much more solemn. Here was a being with the brain of a man, the fancies of a youth, and the imagination of a child. His attitude was not so much that of delight as of wonder and amazement. He was awed. He was enthralled. The spectacle left him speechless, so that if he were spoken to he took no heed. He often seemed to be panting for breath. I could not help comparing him with a man of his own age in the stalls. This satiated individual was bored to distraction, would look wearily at the stage from time to time, and then yawn as if he had not slept for nights; while at the same time Merrick was thrilled by a vision that was almost beyond his comprehension. Merrick talked of this pantomime for weeks and weeks. To him, as to a child with the faculty of make-believe, everything was real; the palace was the home of kings, the princess was of royal blood, the fairies were as undoubted as the children in the street, while

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the dishes at the banquet were of unquestionable gold. He did not like to discuss it as a play but rather as a vision of some actual world. When this mood possessed him, he would say: ‘I wonder what the prince did after we left’, or ‘Do you think that poor man is still in the dungeon?’ and so on and so on.

The splendour and display impressed him, but, I think, the ladies of the ballet took a still greater hold upon his fancy. He did not like the ogres and the giants, while the funny men impressed him as irreverent. Having no experience as a boy of romping and ragging, of practical jokes or of ‘larks’, he had little sympathy with the doings of the clown, but, I think (moved by some mischievous instinct in his subconscious mind), he was pleased when the policeman was smacked in the face, knocked down, and generally rendered undignified.

Later on another longing stirred the depths of Merrick’s mind. It was a desire to see the country, a desire to live in some green secluded spot and there learn something about flowers and the ways of animals and birds. The country as viewed from a wagon on a dusty high road was all the country he knew. He had never wandered among the fields nor followed the windings of a wood. He had never climbed to the brow of a breezy down. He had never gathered flowers in a meadow. Since so much of his reading dealt with country life he was possessed by the wish to see the wonders of that life himself.

This involved a difficulty greater than that presented by a visit to the theatre. The project was, however, made possible on this occasion also by the kindness and generosity of a lady — Lady Knightley — who offered Merrick a holiday home in a cottage on her estate. Merrick was conveyed to the railway station in the usual way, but as he could hardly venture to appear on the platform the railway authorities were good enough to run a second-class carriage into a distant siding. To this point Merrick was driven and was placed in the carriage unobserved. The carriage, with the curtains drawn, was then attached to the mainline train.

He duly arrived at the cottage, but the housewife (like the nurse at the hospital) had not been made clearly aware of the unfortunate man’s appearance. Thus it happened that when Merrick presented himself, his hostess, throwing her apron over her head, fled, gasping, to the fields. She affirmed that such a guest was beyond her powers of endurance, for, when she saw him, she was ‘that took’ as to be in danger of being
permanently 'all of a tremble'.

Merrick was then conveyed to a gamekeeper's cottage which was hidden from view and was close to the margin of a wood. The man and his wife were able to tolerate his presence. They treated him with the greatest kindness, and with them he spent the one supreme holiday of his life. He could roam where he pleased. He met no one on his wanderings, for the wood was preserved and denied to all but the gamekeeper and the forester.

There is no doubt that Merrick passed in this retreat the happiest time he had as yet experienced. He was alone in a land of wonders. The breath of the country passed over him like a healing wind. Into the silence of the wood the fearsome voice of the showman could never penetrate. No cruel eyes could peep at him through the friendly undergrowth. It seemed as if in this place of peace all stain had been wiped away from his sullied past. The Merrick who had once crouched terrified in the filthy shadows of a Mile End shop was now sitting in the sun, in a clearing among the trees, arranging a bunch of violets he had gathered.

His letters to me were the letters of a delighted and enthusiastic child. He gave an account of his trivial adventures, of the amazing things he had seen, and of the beautiful sounds he had heard. He had met with strange birds, had startled a hare from her form, had made friends with a fierce dog, and had watched the trout darting in a stream. He sent me some of the wild flowers he had picked. They were of the commonest and most familiar kind, but they were evidently regarded by him as rare and precious specimens.

He came back to London, to his quarters in Bedstead Square, much improved in health, pleased to be 'home' again, and to be once more among his books, his treasures, and his many friends.

Some six months after Merrick's return from the country he was found dead in bed. This was in April 1890. He was lying on his back as if asleep, and had evidently died suddenly and without a struggle, since not even the coverlet of the bed was disturbed. The method of his death was peculiar. So large and so heavy was his head that he could not sleep lying down. When he assumed the recumbent position the massive skull was inclined to drop backwards, with the result that he experienced no little distress. The attitude he was compelled to assume when he slept was very strange. He sat up in
bed with his back supported by pillows, his knees were drawn up, and his arms clasped round his legs, while his head rested on the points of his bent knees.

He often said to me that he wished he could lie down to sleep ‘Like other people’. I think on this last night he must, with some determination, have made the experiment. The pillow was soft, and the head, when placed on it, must have fallen backwards and caused a dislocation of the neck. Thus it came about that his death was due to the desire that had dominated his life – the pathetic but hopeless desire to be ‘like other people’.

As a specimen of humanity, Merrick was ignoble and repulsive; but the spirit of Merrick, if it could be seen in the form of the living, would assume the figure of an upstanding and heroic man, smooth browed and clean of limb, and with eyes that flashed undaunted courage.

His tortured journey had come to an end. All the way he, like another, had borne on his back a burden almost too grievous to bear. He had been plunged into the Slough of Despond, but with manly steps had gained the farther shore. He had been made ‘a spectacle to all men’ in the heartless streets of Vanity Fair. He had been ill-treated and reviled and bespattered with the mud of Disdain. He had escaped the clutches of the Giant Despair, and at last had reached the ‘Place of Deliverance’, where ‘his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from off his back, so that he saw it no more’.
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