

**THE EIGHTH PAN BOOK OF**

# **HORROR STORIES**

**Selected by  
Herbert van Thal**



THE EIGHTH PAN BOOK  
OF HORROR STORIES

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# THE EIGHTH PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

*selected by*  
HERBERT VAN THAL



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## THE ASSASSIN

*By Raymond Williams*

RUFUS FLAMBARD left the cover of a large bush and scurried as inconspicuously as he could to the next one. Here he rested on his knees for a while, gasping gulps of the cold night air into his lungs. The moon was partly covered by a flock of dark clouds, but there was enough light for him to study his objective through a small gap in the bush. The building looked very impressive even at night. It was a large Norman mansion, but not one of the fortified type that were so common now in England in the year 1079. Things had changed a great deal in the thirteen years since Duke William of Normandy had crowned himself king of England. All over the countryside the Norman lords had set themselves up as gods in their strong stone dwellings. But he had studied this mansion on many occasions and he knew if his luck held he could sneak his way in and plunge his dagger into the black heart of Sir Hubert Marshal. He pulled some of his straggly black hair clear of his wet forehead and wiped the sweat away with the back of his hairy arm. An assassin's life was very precarious; if you failed in the attempt it was certain death, usually a slow painful one, and sometimes even if you succeeded the law would ensure that your reward was also death. But Rufus was no ordinary assassin. In fact, this was going to be his first attempt, but he was no fool either. He had made sure that if he succeeded in killing Sir Hubert he would become the new Lord of the estate.

His greedy brown eyes flashed as he thought of the guarantees his master William de Burgh had given him. 'Rufus,' he had said. 'Slay that swine Marshal and all his will be yours, even his wife Matilda.' Rufus' heart had pounded with joy at this, for Matilda was a rare beauty. 'Come, come, lad,' his master had continued, 'don't think I don't know all about it.

Have you forgotten Matilda is my own sister? She's told me all about your secret meetings.'

Rufus' large chipped teeth glinted in the moonlight as he remembered how he had bent his head and blushed foolishly at these remarks. His hand closed tightly around the soft leather handle of the dagger in his belt. Matilda and all this land and wealth would be his, all his, just by killing one man. His broken teeth clicked together as he set his pointed jaw in determination. The prize was so great that he wished it was time to plunge his dagger home this instant. He tore his dagger suddenly from his belt and pounded the blade time and time again deep into the wet earth until the silver blade was thick with mud. Exhausted he rolled on to his back and dragged the quivering blade with his trembling hand across the front of his dark blue tunic, leaving two long brown muddy streaks.

As he lay panting he thought of Matilda, and of the way her grey eyes flashed when she told him of the brutal way her husband treated her. How those pale red lips puckered when she purred and begged him to rid her life of this man. 'Rufus, my love,' she would whisper, 'you know, once you have killed Hubert, my brother will protect you and see that you become the new Lord of the manor. So lay aside your fears, my love, just think of the joys in store when the deed is done.' Then, as if to indicate these pleasures, she had ended by pressing her warm body against his and smothered his lips with moist passionate kisses. Their bodies had stayed locked together, their lips caressing feverishly until Rufus, overcome with emotion had curved his fingers around Matilda's heaving breast. It was at this point that she had thrust him sharply away, saying, 'Only when you have killed him will I yield myself to you completely.'

Rufus held up his mud-smeared knife and looked at it intently. This is not a dagger, he thought, this is a key, a key that will unlock all that I desire in life. He bent eagerly to his knees again and peered through the bush. He was anxious to get on and do the deed. The sooner Hubert's death was accomplished the sooner he could take his place beside Matilda. But patience, he thought, I must time my attack carefully. I must

wait until Hubert is alone, unguarded and unsuspecting. When that time comes I will strike and strike true.

The yellow flames of the many candles swayed gently to and fro, casting the shifting light over the large stone banquet-hall. The long oak table in the centre of the room sagged with the weight of the food upon it. Huge legs of ham nestled on large platters, while brown overcooked fowls lay scattered in wild array between gleaming goblets of twinkling red wine. Over the flaring fire a kitchen boy slowly turned the spit, watching the browning carcass drip globules of fat into the spitting flames.

But all was not well in the room tonight. The servants cast anxious glances at their master at the head of the table as they carried out their various duties. At the opposite end of the table Matilda sat patiently awaiting permission to start the meal. Hubert was glaring at the small thin creature who was the only other person seated at the table with him and his wife. This pathetic person had a most unhappy expression on his heavily lined face. He was doing his utmost to slice a segment from each tempting plate as quickly as he could. He would then drop the slice on to his own plate and sniff at it cautiously. Picking the meat up in his thin greasy fingers he would nibble at a corner, than take his head back sharply and gaze at the ceiling as he rolled the juicy meat around his tongue. Then after a few timid chews he would swallow, closing his eyes as he did so as if he were swallowing a piece of jagged steel. He would maintain this pose for some time, as if deep in silent prayer. Then slowly his head would lower, his eyes would open again and with a sigh of relief he would nod to his master to indicate that that particular food was not poisoned.

But Hubert was extremely hungry and having to wait for his food taster to try everything on the table in this laborious manner was wearing his usually thin patience to a mere thread.

'Get on, man, get on,' he barked out suddenly, his bushy black eyebrows already locked together. His large nostrils quivered visibly as his breathing quickened. 'At this rate the food will be cold before I start eating.'

The thin high-pitched voice of the taster stammered back, 'I ... I think all is ready now, sire.'

'And about time too,' growled Hubert, sinking his short thick fingers into the nearest fowl. Matilda watched with disgust as he tore the legs away and sank his brown teeth deep into the flesh. Then tearing away a thick patch by a backward flick of the head, munched and sucked the meat into his mouth, leaving his black moustache and beard glistening with grease and white specks of meat.

'Woine – tesht the woine,' he gurgled through a mouthful of half-chewed food. The taster jumped to his master's command and sipped the deep red liquid in his usual manner.

'All this bother at every meal,' grumbled Matilda.

'Bother, is it?' stormed Hubert, pointing the remains of a chicken leg in her direction. 'I know of far too many people who would do their utmost to see me dead.' His face flushed red with his anger as he cleared the remains of the chicken leg into his bulging mouth. Then casting the bone aside and stabbing a knife into some ham near by, he added as an afterthought: 'And for another thing, I don't trust that brother of yours, either.'

Matilda's lips tightened, but apart from that her round pale face held her normal expression. She was not going to be dragged into another bitter argument again. She contented herself with eating, trying to blot out the loud squelching noises from her husband's mouth. After all, tonight was the night. In a few hours Hubert would be dead at her feet and she would be free from him. She glanced over at his hungry, sweating face and thought – Eat well, Hubert, this is your last meal on earth.

As the evening wore on, all the servants were dismissed from the room one after the other until just Matilda and Hubert were left. Matilda had had quite enough, while Hubert still seemed capable of continuing his gorging.

'I have some things to attend to Hubert,' she said, rising from the table.

'Yes, yes, carry on, my dear, I'll join you presently,' he

answered, not bothering to look up from the carcass on his plate.

She walked past him with a look of disgust on her face and left through the large oak door behind him. All seemed quiet outside in the corridor, so she tiptoed towards the main door and saw with satisfaction that it had not been barred for the night. She returned as quietly as she could along the corridor, taking great care as she passed the banqueting-room door, and then scurried up the stone steps to her room. Once inside, she closed the door and pressed herself against it, straining her ears to pick up any sounds from below. How long would it be now before she heard Hubert's dying scream of agony as Rufus did his work? She closed her eyes in the dark and listened to her own excited breathing. All she could do now was wait.

Rufus paused for a moment outside the main door. Then with his dagger clenched tightly in his hand he opened the large door gently. Nothing moved in the corridor and not a sound came to his searching ears. He slid quietly along the uneven stones in the passage and stopped outside the door of the banqueting room. He rested his ear against the door half expecting to hear the chatter of voices from inside, but all was quiet. Struggling to breathe as quietly as he could, he opened the door. Slowly he inched his head into the room to see if the time was ripe for the kill and at the same time being ready to dash back down the corridor and out into the safety of the night if he happened to see any of Hubert's guards in the room. To his relief all he could see was the back of Hubert's head above his chair, bobbing to and fro as he munched at something. His lips curled away to reveal his broken teeth set in a smile of pleasure as he gazed at the unsuspecting head. Gripping his dagger he moved in for the kill. But as he moved he pushed the door open even farther. The old hinges grumbled at their treatment by emitting a sharp squeal.

Hubert, disturbed from his pleasures by the sudden noise, turned his head to investigate. He was just in time to see a figure in dark blue bearing down upon him with an ugly-looking knife poised ready in his right hand. With a piercing shriek

of terror he shot out of his chair, pushing it away in the direction of his attacker. Rufus was not hurt at all by the chair as it toppled against him, but he was sufficiently off balance to enable Hubert to scuttle away from him round the table.

'Guards, murder, murder! Guards!' Hubert retreated around the table, throwing anything he could lay his hands on at his assailant.

Rufus' courage was already rapidly being replaced by panic as a shower of pewter plates, goblets and apples rained against him as he pursued his screaming quarry around this vast table. He had now chased him all the way around the table and was practically back where he started without getting any nearer Hubert. He was just preparing himself to spring on to the table and then dive on to Hubert in a last attempt when he heard the clatter of running feet along the corridor.

It was now too late to get his victim, he had bungled his chance. He must think of escape to save his own life now. He turned and ran to the door just as one of the guards rushed in, his sword at the ready. With a desperate thrust he buried his dagger to the hilt in the guard's throat. With a strangled scream the guard dropped his weapon and clutching his gashed throat fell instantly on his knees as if preparing to pray. Then coughing spouts of dark red blood from his gaping mouth the guard toppled forward on to his face, his body writhing as a widening pool of blood gurgled out over the floor. In a flash Rufus had seized the fallen sword and was about to jump over the body to make his getaway when a further three guards flooded through the doorway with their swords flashing. The clanging of steel upon steel shrilled through the room as Rufus slashed desperately against the heavy odds. But through all the clashing noise came Hubert's excited screaming: 'Don't kill him! Don't kill him! I want him alive, do you hear? *Alive.*'

Although he fought like a man possessed, Rufus soon found himself cornered. Then his sword was smashed from his hand and he was forced to press himself against the wall with three gleaming sword-tips poised at his throat. His hands were bound tightly behind his back and he was dragged roughly to his intended victim, Sir Hubert.

'Well, my fine fellow,' said Hubert, showing his brown teeth as he gloated. 'Tell me who sent you here to kill me? Give me the truthful answer and I'll set you free, lie to me and your head will rot outside on a stake.'

Rufus stared back defiantly at the bearded face. Then without answering, suddenly spat with all his might into the face. Hubert bellowed with rage and snatching up one of the swords, swung it in the air above Rufus' head. Rufus jammed his eyes shut and flinched as he waited for the blow that would end his life. But the blow did not come. Cautiously he opened his eyes and saw that Hubert had lowered the sword. The spittle was trickling down his cheek into his black moustache as he spoke again.

'Now that's just what you wanted me to do, isn't it? You want a quick death so that I'll be unable to find out who sent you, eh?'

'You won't get anything from me,' boasted Rufus bravely.

'Oh, I won't, won't I? We'll see about that.' Hubert purred his confident reply. Then in a calculating voice spoke to his guards: 'Take him to the dungeon and bind him securely to the low bench and see that the coals in the brazier are well heated.' Then turning to Rufus, he added: 'I'll soon loosen your tongue, never fear.' As he was hustled out of the room towards the dungeons Rufus caught a glimpse of Matilda's white, drawn face watching him anxiously.

Hubert did not go down to the dungeons immediately. Instead he supervised the removing of the dead guard and the cleaning up of the room. It was when the room had been restored and the servants dismissed that Matilda came to his side. 'Hubert, my love, I was so worried about you,' she said gently, taking his hand in hers.

But Hubert just laughed. 'Come, come, my dear, don't look so distressed, I'm perfectly all right, he didn't get near enough to do me any harm.' He grasped her shoulders and pulled her to him to kiss her. Instinctively she closed her eyes and held her breath to avoid breathing in the foul, reeking smell that oozed out from the rotting food between his brown teeth, as he slobbered his wet lips against hers.



'What will you do to him?' she asked, fighting to keep the anxious note from her voice when he had finished kissing her.

'Why, find out who sent him, my dear.'

'How will you do that?' – again she was aware of the slight tremor in her speech.

'Why, by torturing the fool until he tells me, of course,' he answered.

'I see,' she said. Then added quickly: 'Will you let me come down later and see how you are progressing?'

'Why, certainly, Matilda. I'm pleased to see you're as interested as I am to find out who is behind this plot.' The stench of his breath engulfed her suddenly as he gave her a parting kiss before leaving the room. She rubbed her moist palms together, as she paced to and fro in front of the fire. She knew all about her husband's skill in torturing people and realized it was only a matter of time before Rufus, brave as he may be, would break down. The question was, would Rufus name her brother or her, or both of them?

When Hubert entered the dungeon he was staggered by the stifling air. A metal brazier glowed red in the right-hand corner, sending clouds of thick blue smoke swirling in the air. In the centre of the stone room, securely bound, was the spreadeagled body of Rufus resting on a low wooden stand. He was naked to the waist and his feet were bare. Hubert grinned mockingly down at the glistening face which was just level with his own knees. 'Good, I see you've got everything ready,' he said, satisfaction ebbing in his voice. 'Now you may all leave. I think I have all that I need.' The guards trooped out respectfully, leaving the two men eyeing each other. 'I don't suppose you've changed your mind yet,' said Hubert when the door closed.

'Go to hell,' spat out Rufus, wishing that he really felt as brave as he sounded.

Hubert merely chuckled to himself, then picking a thick patch of leather from a shelf, walked eagerly over to the glowing brazier. Protruding from the red-hot coals were two long metal handles. Hubert wrapped the leather carefully around one and drew the long poker from the fire. Rufus tried to lift

his head to see what was happening, but it was firmly held in a wooden vice. Hubert strolled across to where he lay, then deliberately pressed the bright red end of the poker against the bare underside of Rufus' right foot. The scream shattered the calm as his body arched upwards from the table, his limbs and head desperately struggling to free themselves from their gripping bonds. The glowing iron sizzled its way through the layers of skin as a continuous stream of frantic shrieks ripped through the air. When Hubert saw that his victim was on the point of fainting, he took the poker away from the black-grooved sole and returned it to the fire. Then going to a large bucket he threw a ladleful of cold water into Rufus' face. 'Well?' he said, as he returned the ladle. 'Does any name spring to your mind now?'

Rufus was sweating profusely from the pain, but was still in control of his mind. 'You fat ugly pig,' he gasped out weakly. 'I'll tell you nothing.'

Hubert's face darkened. Up till now he had been enjoying this, but that last insult had cut him deeply. This clumsy assassin was going to be taught a severe lesson, fat ugly pig indeed. In a few minutes from now he would be begging Hubert for mercy and forgiveness, but it would be of no avail. Hubert strode briskly to the brazier again, then taking the other iron in the leather he walked back to Rufus and stood above his head. Rufus looked up and watched in terror as the smoking red point descended slowly towards his right eye. He shook his head violently to try and release it from the clamp, but all in vain. He jammed his right eyelid shut, but he could still see the bright red glow approaching his eye. He was already screaming in anticipation. Suddenly the red tip flashed through his eyelid and as the pain cut deep into his eye, with his left eye he watched fascinated as the bright orange and red bubbles frothed in the air above his nose. Hubert pressed hard on the poker until the point grated against the bone at the back of the eye socket. He watched the eye bubbling madly out of the socket and trickle down the wet cheek like a stream of molten lava. Rufus was screaming hysterically: 'I'll talk, I'll talk, just stop, stop, stop. I'll talk, do you hear me?' But

Hubert was a determined man and he was still smarting from being called an ugly fat pig. He withdrew the still glowing red tip from the empty charred socket and steadily moved it down on to the remaining staring eye. 'God, no, not both, no, no, no,' screamed Rufus, but to no avail. The red poker point was the last thing he saw before total darkness. Again the biting pain thrust its way deep into his eye. This time he was unable to see the bright frothing bubbles, but he felt the large burning tear slide slowly down his left cheek. This final weight of pain proved too much for him and he slipped away into unconsciousness.

It was while he was unconscious that Matilda came into the dungeon. The sight that met her drained what little colour there was from her face. 'Has he told you yet, Hubert?' she asked as soon as she could find the strength.

'Not yet, my dear,' said her husband, resting against the wall. 'But he will now as soon as he comes round.'

'You look hot and tired, dear,' she said tenderly. 'I've brought you some wine.'

'Bless you, my love,' he said, kissing her gratefully. 'I must admit this is thirsty work. How kind of you to think of me.' He gulped down the wine thankfully, then looked over at the still body. 'Well, as you're here, my dear, I'll bring him to, so that your curiosity will be satisfied as well as mine.'

'Oh no, there's no hurry,' she said with a start, 'let him be until he comes to on his own accord.'

'Nonsense,' replied her husband, 'the sooner we know the sooner we can kill him, and then you and I can go to bed.' He grinned, and pulling her to him and crushing her against his chest he smothered her lips with kisses. Repugnant as the experience was, Matilda suffered the ordeal gladly, to waste a little more time. But all too soon he had moved away from her and was now splashing cold water over Rufus. But as Rufus began to groan, Hubert refilled the ladle and drank the water, then refilled it yet again and drank it.

'Have mercy, please have mercy,' croaked the blind Rufus.

'Names, give me names,' said Hubert.

'Very well, but promise you'll stop if I do,' Rufus begged.

'Yes, yes, I promise,' said Hubert, having no intention of keeping his promise, instead he was intent on drinking yet another quantity of water.

'It was Matilda your wife and her brother William de Burgh,' the voice bleated weakly from the bound figure.

'What?' Hubert's voice hissed out. Then as he turned, Matilda cowered against the wall. His large eyes stared at her in disbelief. 'You,' he said. She made no answer but merely waited there, her back pressed against the wall. 'Why, I'll k . . . k . . . k . . . k . . .' But the word 'kill' eluded him. He had one hand clutching his burning throat while the other clung to the tunic covering his stomach. Matilda watched as the poison she had put in his wine took its effect. He collapsed, gasping and writhing, to the ground. His legs jerked violently as he rolled over and over. He looked as if a sword had been driven through his stomach and then suddenly without saying anything else he lay still and she knew he was dead.

'At last, at last,' Matilda muttered to herself. Then she looked at the pathetic figure tied down in the centre of the room. She gazed at the empty black sockets and tried to imagine life with this instead of her husband. She shook her head slowly, then picking up a short chain she hooked it round the base of the brazier and slowly dragged it into the centre of the room.

'No more, you promised no more,' Rufus cried out in alarm. Matilda said nothing, but dragged the brazier until it was level with his head. Then taking the leather from the side she wrapped it around one of the pokers. After taking it from the fire she pressed the point against the metal side of the brazier. 'You've got the poker again,' the voice cried out in terror. 'You promised, you promised.' Matilda said nothing, but with all her strength pushed the brazier. Slowly it tilted over, then suddenly it crashed sideways spilling out its glowing contents in a heap on top of Rufus' face. Then she dropped the poker and walked away a free woman as the bound limbs twitched and thrashed, but not a sound came from the heap of glowing coals.



## THE MOST PRECIOUS

*By John D. Keefauver*

I HAVE ESCAPED, it is true. I am alive – if the condition I am in can be called living. My mouth still bleeds, and I am so weak. Dried blood covers my chin, is splattered down the front of my suit. I cannot speak. No matter; I am alive; I know the secret – worth millions if I can get back to the States.

I have broken from the cords with which Abushalbak the Syrian bound me. I can find a doctor, here in Damascus. And, unlike the girl, Silent One, I can write. She can neither write nor speak. Perhaps never again able to speak, I must write it down – the secret. I must hurry.

Silent One, her father, Abushalbak, called her. Little did I know the reason for such a name that first evening I saw her. The wildest imagination would not have guessed it; certainly not mine. I saw her first as she stood beside her father's sidewalk toothpaste stand on Al Malek Faysal Street near Al Chouada Square in the Syrian capital. A young dentist just out of school in Baltimore, taking a much-needed vacation through the Middle East before plunging into practice, I was attracted and amused by Abushalbak and his toothpaste-selling stand. I had stumbled across his sidewalk business while returning to my hotel on Al Chouada Square from a late afternoon stroll through the nearby bazaar.

The man, dressed in what appeared to be a dirty nightgown, a rainbow-coloured towel around his head, was selling the paste by simply rubbing it over an aid's teeth with one rag, then polishing the incisors with another. During the whole process, Abushalbak kept up an almost unceasing flow of sales chatter, disrupting the polishing and *spiel* only long enough to sell an occasional tube of paste from a row of it on top his

stand. At intervals, he would also take something from the boy's mouth – I couldn't make out what it was – and put it in a small jar on the stand. Aside from the comic aspects of the situation, what amazed me was that the aid, a boy, had the most brilliantly white teeth I, as a dentist, had ever seen. They shone like the Taj Mahal in moonlight. If I could make my future patients' teeth shine like this boy's, I knew I'd soon be rich. I edged into the smiling, laughing, dirty-faced crowd around the stand in order to get a better look.

That was when I saw Silent One for the first time.

Silently aloof, she made her way through the crowd and took up a position next to her salesman father, although at the time I didn't know they were father and daughter, nor did I know her name or his. What attracted me about her from the very beginning was her height and carriage, the regal-like tilt of her chin, the strong, clean, sharp features of her face, her dignity, her silence. She was a fantastic contrast to the boisterous, grinning group. She wore a veil as part of her free-hanging, Moslem dress, but whereas the faces of most veiled women in Damascus were completely covered, her veil started below her eyes.

Her eyes. I fell into them immediately. They were great, acorn-coloured puddles of warmth; large, luminous, soft lights. The sun was going down; it seemed to set her eyes on fire. I stared too long; she lowered her gaze – not rapidly, though, but slowly, with dignity – and listened as her father spoke a few words to her in quiet, rapid Arabic, his blunt, beard-stubbed chin jumping with the words. He handed her the small jar as he talked. While in the service, I had learned some Arabic at the Defence Language School in California (my ability to speak the language was one reason I was holidaying in the Middle East), but Abushalbak spoke too rapidly for me to understand.

Wordless, dignified, the girl moved – glided – out of the group, carrying the jar, and disappeared into the dusk and maze of the narrow, shop-jammed streets of the bazaar area. I almost followed her that first night.

I went back to Abushalbak's stand the next morning, hoping to see Silent One again, but she was not there. I stayed at the stand a while, again admiring the aid's brilliant teeth. And again I was unable to see what it was that the man took from the boy's mouth and put in the jar on the stand.

That evening, when I returned once more, I found the girl, veiled, of course, beside her father's side. Our eyes joined as she listened to his words. As I think back, I realize that Abushalbak must have become conscious of our mutual stare. He looked up quickly at me with a strange, penetrating, unfriendly gaze, then went on talking to his daughter. He gave her the jar from his hand, apparently the same one, now covered and refilled with something from his aid's mouth, that he had given her the day before. I sensed, even then, that I should not try to speak to her in her father's presence.

When Silent One moved out of the group, I followed her, conscious that Abushalbak was watching me. I kept her in sight for a short while, debating whether I should try to stop her. I suppose I was conscious of the danger then, but I pushed it away and tried to catch her without breaking into a run. She went into the bazaar, walking rapidly, merging into the swirling, moving throng, picking her way through the crowd and the narrow, dirty, shop-littered alleyways as if they were her home. Unaccustomed to slivering through the throng, I fell behind and finally lost her in the vicinity of Omayad Mosque. A few minutes before she disappeared, she turned and looked at me, her expression, so far as I could make out in the dusk, set in a sort of haughty neutrality. She knew I had been following her all the time.

Of course, I went back to Abushalbak's stand the next day at the same time. Both Silent One and I arrived together, she from one direction, I from another – almost as if she, as I, had planned the meeting. I soon realized, however, that she did not want to see me. As soon as those powerful eyes of hers fell on me from the top of her veil, she went quickly up to her father, he spoke a few rapid words to her, gave her the covered jar and she left him, taking the same route as the day before. This time I did not lose her. I followed her through the maze of



dirty streets and passageways, and caught up with her in a matter of minutes, brashly putting my hand on her shoulder. She was nearly as tall as I, and when she spun on me, sweeping me with her eyes, I quickly dropped my hand. Pointing back over the route we had just covered, she indicated that I was to return and let her go on alone. She said nothing, and kept the jar behind her, hidden.

I told her in my creaky Arabic that I did not wish to return, that I would be most happy if she would accompany me to dinner.

Although she still said not a word, I could tell by her expression that she was surprised that I could speak the language. She continued to point out my return route, however. Smiling, I repeated my wishes. A flicker of friendliness, of acquiescence, brushed across her face, then abruptly disappeared and she moved on, stopping at intervals to indicate, wordless, that I should not follow her. I smiled, told her I understood – and kept after her.

Near the Omayyad Mosque she began to walk extremely rapidly. I, too, increased my pace, and had little trouble keeping her in view: although it was almost dark, the streets became less crowded and her height and carriage easily stood out against others in the narrow passageways. Just outside a wall of Azem Palace, she stopped and glanced back in my direction. Surrounded by a group of people, I was fairly well hidden at that moment; she did not see me. I saw her quickly duck into a doorway opposite the place. When I reached the spot, I hesitated: beyond the doorway I could see nothing, I could hear nothing. But foolishly I stepped inside the door. Of course, I did not know then that Abushalbak, watching me, was standing in approximately the same spot where I had stood as I watched Silent One enter the doorway. I should have realized that he would follow me from his stand. After all, he had seen me start after his daughter twice.

Inside the doorway, I stood still for a moment. At first I heard nothing except sounds from the street outside. Then, yes, I heard quiet footsteps ahead of me. Just a few, then silence. Then, again, more footsteps and, a second later, the

sound of a door being unlocked and cautiously opened and closed. Again, silence. I could see nothing.

I slowly moved forward, groping my way, keeping a hand on one wall of the passageway. The floor was earthen. By reaching up, I could touch the stone roof. I shivered. Warmth must never have penetrated the corridor. I rounded a corner slowly. And saw a sliver of light a few yards ahead of me. As I watched, someone – Silent One? – blocked out the light for a moment, from within a room. I increased my pace, cautiously, and went directly to the sliver of light which, I learned, came out from below a rag-shaded window in a lamp-lighted room.

I looked under the shade into the room – and felt, first, an exhilarating joy, then, second, cold horror at what I saw.

Silent One stood in an earthen-floor room containing a few nondescript chairs, a small table, two raggedy beds. She had taken off her veil and was pouring the contents of the jar her father had given her into a great metal pot that reached almost to her hips and sat in the centre of the room.

Out of the jar came a gleaming, yellow liquid – not gold. The sight of the liquid left me trembling with exhilaration. There was not a dentist in the world who would not give a fortune for what was in that metal pot.

Then, the pouring completed, Silent One turned from the pot, her veil-less face towards the window outside of which I stood. She had a glass straw between her lips; one end was stuck in a bowl she carried in her free hand. She was eating. At the sight of her face, I felt a horror that froze my very marrow.

I must have recoiled from the sight, actually stepped back, for I bumped into Abushalbak just before he clubbed me.

When I regained consciousness I was lying on the cold floor of the room. My ankles and wrists were tightly bound. A knife and additional cord were on a chair. My lips were not taped, however, and when I saw Abushalbak kneel down beside me, saw what was in his hands and felt Silent One prop my head up with a pillow, I realized why.

‘No, for God’s sake,’ I mumbled, first in English, then, my mind catching up with my terror, in Arabic. ‘Please.’

'God watches out for those who watch out for themselves,' Abushalbak said in Arabic, or words to that effect. 'You have been most unwise in coming here.' He bent down over me and brushed his fingers across my lips, feeling their texture.

'Who are you?' I asked. God knows why. The terrorized mind resorts to habit, to routine, I suppose.

The man shrugged. 'I am called Abushalbak. I am the keeper of The Most Precious.' He nodded towards the metal pot filled with the yellow liquid, then towards the girl. 'This is my daughter, Silent One. She also watches The Most Precious.' He shrugged again, his great black brows rising and forming almost a straight, continuous line above his eyes. 'She has failed me before also. She talked then. Hence, her lips are as you see them. As yours will be, too. As others have become when they see The Most Precious, or when they see Silent One, unveiled.'

He put one knee on my chest and one on my forehead. Silent One sat on my feet and pushed my bound hands into my groin. Thank God, her father blocked my view of her face.

'But I can *write* it!' I screamed. 'I can write, even if the others can't! I don't have to be able to talk!'

'You Americans, you think education means everything.' He shrugged once more. 'You cannot talk when you are dead.'

With that, I felt the needle go into my lip. I lost consciousness.

I do not know how long I was unconscious. Hours, I suppose. When I awoke, Silent One and her father had gone. I was the only one in the room, still lit by the lamp. I was still bound. My mouth was filled with blood; the front of my clothes was stained by it. Without thinking, impulsively, I tried to open my mouth to yell for help. I couldn't of course. And the pain was horrible.

I must have passed out again, from pain, from the shock of realizing what had happened to my mouth. When I awoke the second time nothing had changed in the room. The only difference was that now the blood on my clothes had dried.

I lay there for I don't know how long before, looking wildly about. I noticed that the knife, apparently forgotten, was still

on the chair. With much pain – any movement sent spasms of agony shooting through my mouth – I inched myself over to the chair and managed to pick up the knife between both hands. Fortunately my hands were tied in front of me, rather than behind. The knife was sharp too. By sitting up and holding the handle between my palms, I was able to saw the cord around my ankles. My feet free, I wedged the handle between the sides of my insteps and was able to cut the cord on my wrists. The whole operation must have taken me more than an hour. I had to stop often because of the pain and weakness – I think I fainted once for a short period – and only fear that Silent One or Abushalbak might return kept me going.

Before I left the room, I found a cup and hastily dipped it into the pot containing The Most Precious. I would need physical evidence of the yellow liquid; otherwise, no one would believe my story. Then, weakly, stumbling a number of times, falling at least once, trying to fix the location of the room in my mind, I made my way back through the bazaar to my hotel. I kept a handkerchief over my mouth, of course. Even in the old section of Damascus, the sight of my lips would have caused alarm, perhaps have brought the police. I didn't want the police; an investigation would perhaps ruin my chances of getting back to the States with my yellow evidence. I wanted only a doctor – and to write the secret down.

I am in my hotel now; a doctor is on his way. I gaze into a mirror. I smile, even though it hurts terribly to do so. Even if terrible scars remain in my lips, I would go through the same thing again to discover the location of The Most Precious.

Joy surges in me. I am king: after all these years of searching, by dental scientists, by the cream of the dental world, I, just out of school, led on by a boy's brilliant teeth and, ironically, by a woman whose teeth were covered, whose lips had been sewn together, as mine are now, have discovered the greatest secret in the world of dentistry.

*I now know where the yellow went.*



## THE CHILDREN

*By W. Baker-Evans*

MR GILLESPIE despised travel agencies. When he travelled abroad (which was frequently, since he was rich and loved wandering) he made out his itineraries himself, with the aid of the timetables, railway guides and steamer schedules through which he loved to browse.

Sometimes his plans went astray. The sort of predicament he found himself in now was by no means new to him. Stuck on a lonely by-road somewhere in Southern Europe; his taxi – if you could call it that – wheels up on the grassy verge, the engine in pieces in the dust and the driver scratching a greasy forehead in token of bewilderment.

Mr Gillespie sighed and looked at his watch. It was just past noon. He must be in Munczek by six if he was to catch the connection to Zagreb . . .

He climbed out of the ancient vehicle, perspiring a little in the hot sun (he was fifty-ish and plump) and approached the driver. He knew nothing of the language, but by pointing at the dismembered engine and the dial of his watch he got the man to understand what he wanted to know. In similar manner he got the answer – it would be two hours at least before they were able to move.

Mr Gillespie sighed again and looked about him. There was little to see. The white road was hedged close by dense green woodland, rising gently on one side, falling away on the other. The shade of the trees looked cool and inviting. Mr Gillespie got the satchel containing his sketching gear out of the back of the cab, slung it over his shoulder and set out for a stroll.

To his surprise, the driver made an attempt to stop him. An oily hand gripped his wrist, urgent words were hissed at him, anxious eyes gazed into his. Mr Gillespie was impatient. He

shook off the hand, said uselessly in English, 'Don't be a fool, man, I'll be back in an hour at most,' and moved with determination towards the wood. The driver shouted after him, but he paid no attention; and soon road, car and driver were hidden by the trees.

There are woods and woods. Some are mysterious, some threatening, some friendly, some aloof. This one Mr Gillespie summed up after a few minutes as benevolent. True, it was very silent. No birds sang. But the silence was peaceful, not menacing. There was no undergrowth to impede his progress, no weeds, or brambles; just soft mossy grass and the smooth trunks of the trees, evenly spaced and rising sheer, to branch out in greenery far overhead. What they were Mr Gillespie did not know—he was no botanist—but their shade was soothing, and here and there they let through little shafts and bars of sunlight to paint the forest floor with patches of gold. It was all very pleasant.

Presently he came to a clearing; and there was a fallen log to sit on, and a convenient tree to lean against; and the sunshine, brighter here, made fascinating shadow-play with branches and leaves across the clearing's grassy floor. Mr Gillespie sat down and drew out his sketch-pad and pastels.

He worked happily, head on one side, fingers busy. What the scene lacked, he decided after a few minutes, was human interest. Ideally there should be a small boy in a red jumper sitting at the foot of that tree . . . Mr Gillespie looked up from his labours and nearly jumped out of his skin. A small boy sat at the foot of the tree, solemnly regarding him.

Certainly he had no red jumper — he wore a curious sack-like garment which covered him from shoulders to brown scratched knees. But a warm solid flesh-and-blood ten-year-old boy he certainly was.

The boy grinned, showing white teeth. Then he got to his feet and advanced confidently, until he stood looking down at Mr Gillespie from a couple of feet away. Mr Gillespie observed with distaste that he carried in one hand the bloodied remains of some small furry animal mangled by a trap or beast of prey. Following his glance, the child smiled and tossed the

offending object away. Then he pursed his lips, threw back his head and gave a long clear whistle. At once three more children materialized before Mr Gillespie's astonished eyes, moving out from the shadow of the trees as silently as Red Indians; two boys and a girl, all about the same age, all dressed in sacking shifts, all brown-skinned, bright-eyed and flaxen-haired.

Calmly they regarded him. Then the girl stepped forward, stretched out her arm and squeezed Mr Gillespie's leg gently, just above the knee. Satisfied, apparently, by this physical contact, she stepped back and spoke a brief and unintelligible sentence to the other three. Immediately they were all convulsed with laughter, open-mouthed and shrieking, tears in their eyes.

Their laughter died as suddenly as it had begun, as suddenly as children's laughter will; and they sat round Mr Gillespie in a half circle, watchful and solemn once more.

Mr Gillespie was not entirely at ease. In the first place he found the concentrated gaze of four pairs of eyes discomforting; and secondly, there was the annoyance of his total inability to communicate. He smiled. Their faces didn't alter. He held up his unfinished sketch so that they could see it. They showed no comprehension. Suddenly inspired, he reached into his satchel and pulled out a bar of chocolate. He broke off a piece and put it into his mouth – perhaps they had never seen chocolate before – and offered the rest to the girl.

What happened next was so disconcerting that it was several moments before Mr Gillespie could take any effective action. The girl took the chocolate, smelt it, bit and munched. Instantly the boy next to her shot out an arm and tore the chocolate away. The girl screamed and flung herself on him; and in a second the two small bodies were locked in deadly struggle – clawing, biting, tearing, throttling, rolling over and over on the grass.

'Stop it!' cried Mr Gillespie, recovering himself and jumping up – 'Stop it at once!'

This had no effect whatever. The boy's fingers were at the girl's throat; her nails ripped at his cheeks. Desperately Mr



Gillespie seized the boy and dragged him to his feet – to be astounded at the strength with which he wrenched himself free.

Then, in a second, it was all over. The boy relaxed. The girl scrambled up, laughing. And suddenly Mr Gillespie found himself caught up in a sort of whirlwind dance . . . a child gripped each hand and round they rushed in a circle, a mad ring-o'-roses, the children shouting with glee, leaning outwards, heads back, bare feet pounding the turf.

Mr Gillespie was soon giddy. He huffed and puffed and tripped and stumbled and tried vainly to release himself from the clutching fingers. He succeeded at last and sat down abruptly, mopping his moist brow and waiting for his thumping heart to quieten. Again the children formed their silent semicircle – they were hardly even breathing heavily, Mr Gillespie noted, let alone panting as he was. Once more he felt a gentle squeeze above his knee; it was a boy this time, and again came unintelligible words. But no laughter; just solemn watchfulness.

It was time to get back to the car. Mr Gillespie rose to his feet, annoyed to find his legs weak and wobbly after his exertions. The children stood their ground, intent and still. Then the little girl moved forward, pursing her lips and raised her arms, to be lifted up and kissed.

Mr Gillespie was touched. He picked her up. Her arms slid round his neck. And from between those rosy lips, shockingly, came breath as fetid as an animal's. The green eyes stared into his. And suddenly terror – wild, unreasoning terror – flooded Mr Gillespie's very soul. He screamed and tore at the encircling arms. They were immovable. He screamed again; and even as he did so the fair head dipped forward and the white teeth closed on his throat. Avid hands wrenched at his ankles and he fell, all four on top of him. For a little while he threshed and struggled, and screamed once more, chokingly. But soon there was no more movement or sound – except, presently, the scrape of strong young teeth on bone.

*If you would sleep soft, unwary reader, or after a page or two, drift into sleep, this is not the tale for you. Turn on, we beg, for here is no bedtime story, but a sombre witching tale, to haunt the uneasy pillow and conjure spirits from every shadowed corner.*

## THE ILLUSTRATED MAN

*By Ray Bradbury*

‘HEY, the illustrated Man!’

A steam whistle screamed, and Mr William Philippus Phelps stood, arms folded, high on the summer night platform, a crowd unto himself.

He was an entire civilization. In the North Country, his chest, the Vasties lived – nipple-eyed dragons swirling over his fleshy breasts. His navel was the mouth of a slit-eyed monster – an obscene, insucked mouth, toothless as a witch. And there were secret caves where Darklings lurked, his armpits adrip with slow subterranean liquors, where the Darklings, eyes jealously ablaze, peered out through rank creeper and hanging vine.

Mr William Philippus Phelps leered down from his freak platform with a thousand peacock eyes. Across the sawdust-covered meadow he saw his wife, Lisabeth, far away, ripping tickets in half, staring at the silver belt buckles of passing men.

Mr William Philippus Phelps’ hands were tattooed roses. Now the roses shrivelled, as with the passing of sunlight.

A year before, when he had led Lisabeth to the register office to watch her write her name in ink, slowly, on the form, his skin had been white and clean. He glanced down at himself in sudden horror. Now he was like a great painted canvas, shaken in the night wind! How had it happened? Where had it all begun?

It had started with the arguments, and then his fatness, and then the pictures. They had fought deep into the summer nights, she like a brass trumpet for ever blaring at him. And he had gone out to eat five thousand steaming hot sausages, ten million rissoles and a forest of fried onions, and to drink vast red seas of orange juice. Peppermints formed his bronto-saurean bones, the rissoles shaped his balloon flesh and strawberryade pumped in and out of his heart valves sickeningly, until he weighed nearly twenty-one stone.

'William Philippus Phelps,' Lisabeth said to him in the eleventh month of their marriage, 'you're dumb and fat.'

That was the day the boss of the fair handed him a month's wages. 'Sorry, Phelps. You're no good to me with all that fat on you.'

'Wasn't I always your best tent man, boss?'

'Once. Not any more. Now you sit, you don't get the work done.'

'Let me be your Fat Man.'

'I got a Fat Man. They're a penny a dozen.' The boss eyed him up and down. 'Tell you what though. We ain't had a Tattooed Man since Gallery Smith died last year . . .'

That had been a month ago. Four short weeks. From someone he had learned of a tattoo artist far out in the rolling country, an old woman, they said, who knew her trade. If he took the cart track and turned right at the river and then left . . .

\* \* \*

He had walked out across a yellow meadow, which was crisp from the sun. Red poppies blew and bent in the wind as he walked, and he came to the old shack, which looked as if it had stood in a million rains.

Inside the door was a silent, bare room, and in the centre of the bare room sat an ancient woman.

Her eyes were stitched with red resin thread. Her nose was sealed with black wax-twine. Her ears were sewn, too, as if a darning-needle dragonfly had stitched all her senses shut. She sat, not moving, in the empty room. Dust lay in a yellow flour all about, unfootprinted in many weeks; if she had moved it

would have shown, but she had not moved. Her hands touched each other like thin, rusted instruments. Her feet were naked and obscene as galoshes, and near them sat vials of tattoo milk – red, lightning blue, brown, cat yellow. She was a thing sewn tight into whispers and silence.

Only her mouth moved, unsewn, 'Come in. Sit down. I'm lonely here.'

He did not obey.

'You came for the pictures,' she said in a high voice. 'I have a picture to show you, first.'

She tapped a blind finger to her thrust out palm. 'See!' she cried.

It was a tattoo portrait of William Philippus Phelps.

'Me!' he said.

Her cry stopped him at the door. 'Don't run.'

He held to the edges of the door, his back to her. 'That's me, that's me on your hand!'

'It's been there fifty years.' She stroked it like a cat, over and over.

He turned. 'It's an *old* tattoo.' He drew slowly nearer. He edged forward and bent to blink at it. He put out a trembling finger to brush the picture. 'Old. That's impossible! You don't know *me*. I don't know *you*. Your eyes, all sewn shut.'

'I've been waiting for you,' she said. 'And many people.' She displayed her arms and legs, like the spindles of an antique chair. 'I have pictures on me of people who have already come here to see me. And here are other pictures of other people who are coming to see me in the next one hundred years. And you, you have come.'

'How do you know it's me? You can't see!'

'You *feel* like the lions, the elephants and the tigers, to me. Unbutton your shirt. You need me. Don't be afraid. My needles are as clean as a doctor's fingers. When I'm finished with illustrating you, I'll wait for someone else to walk out here and find me.'

'And some day, a hundred summers from now, perhaps, I'll just go and lie down in the forest under some white mush-

rooms, and in the spring you won't find anything but a small blue cornflower . . .'

He began to unbutton his sleeves.

'I know the Deep Past and the Clear Present and the even Deeper Future,' she whispered, eyes knotted into blindness, face lifted to this unseen man. 'It is on my flesh. I will paint it on yours too. You will be the only *real* Illustrated Man in the universe. I'll give you special pictures you will never forget. Pictures of the Future on your skin.'

She pricked him with a needle.

\* \* \*

He ran back to the fair that night in a drunken terror and elation. Oh, how quickly the old dust-witch had stitched him with colour and design. At the end of a long afternoon of being bitten by a silver snake, his body was alive with portraiture. He looked as if he had dropped and been crushed between the steel rollers of a printing press, and come out like an incredible rotogravure. He was clothed in a garment of trolls and scarlet dinosaurs.

'Look!' he cried to Lisabeth. She glanced up from her dressing table as he tore his shirt away. He stood in the naked bulb-light of their caravan, expanding his impossible chest. Here, the Tremblies, half maiden, half goat, leaping when his biceps flexed. Here, the Country of Lost Souls, his chins. In so many accordion pleats of fat, numerous small scorpions, beetles and mice were crushed, held, hid, darting into view, vanishing, as he raised or lowered his chins.

'Good heavens!' cried Lisabeth. 'My husband's a freak.'

She ran from the caravan and he was left alone to pose before the mirror. Why had he done it? To have a job, yes, but, most of all, to cover the fat that had larded itself impossibly over his bones. To hide the fat under a layer of colour and fantasy, to hide it from his wife, but most of all from himself.

He thought of the old woman's last words. She had needled him two *special* tattoos, one on his chest, another for his back,

which she would not let him see. She covered each with cloth and sticking plaster.

'You are not to look at these two,' she had said.

'Why?'

'Later, you may look. The Future is in these pictures. You can't look now or it may spoil them. They are not quite finished. I put ink on your flesh and the sweat of you forms the rest of the picture, the Future – your sweat and your thought.'

Her empty mouth grinned. 'Next Saturday night, you may advertise! The Big Unveiling! Come see the Illustrated Man unveil his picture! You can make money in that way. You can charge admission to the Unveiling, like an Art Gallery.'

'Tell them you have a picture that even *you* never have seen, that *nobody* has seen yet. The most unusual picture ever painted. Almost alive. And it tells the Future. Roll the drums and blow the trumpets. And you can stand there and unveil at the Big Unveiling.'

'That's a good idea,' he said.

'But only unveil the picture on your chest,' she said. 'That is first. You must save the picture on your back, under the sticking plaster, for the following week. Understand?'

'How much do I owe you?'

'Nothing,' she said. 'If you walk with these pictures on you, I will be repaid with my own satisfaction. I will sit here for the next two weeks and think how clever my pictures are, for I make them to fit each man himself and what is inside him. Now, walk out of this house and never come back. Goodbye.'

\* \* \*

'Hey! The Big Unveiling!'

The red signs blew in the night wind: NO ORDINARY TATTOOED MAN! THIS ONE IS 'ILLUSTRATED' GREATER THAN MICHELANGELO! TONIGHT! ADMISSION ONE SHILLING!

Now the hour had come. Saturday night, the crowd stirring their animal feet in the hot sawdust.

'In one minute' – the boss pointed his cardboard megaphone – 'in the tent immediately to my rear, we will unveil the Mysterious Portrait upon the Illustrated Man's chest! Next Satur-

day night, the same hour, same place, we'll unveil the Picture upon the Illustrated Man's *back*! Bring your friends!'

There was a stuttering roll of drums.

Mr William Philippus Phelps jumped back and vanished; the crowd poured into the tent, and, once inside, found him re-established upon another platform, the band brassing out a jazz tune.

He looked for his wife and saw her, lost in the crowd, like a stranger, come to watch a freakish thing, a look of contemptuous curiosity upon her face. For, after all, he was her husband, and this was a thing she didn't know about him herself. It gave him a feeling of great height and warmth and light to find himself the centre of the jangling universe, the fair world, for one night. Even the other freaks – the Skeleton, the Seal Boy, the Yoga, the Magician and the Balloon – were scattered through the crowd.

'Ladies and gentlemen, the great moment!'

A trumpet flourish, a hum of drumsticks on tight cowhide.

Mr William Philippus Phelps let his cape fall. Dinosaurs, trolls and half women half snakes writhed on his skin in the dark light.

Ah, murmured the crowd, for surely there had never been a tattooed man like this! The beast eyes seemed to take red fire and blue fire, blinking and twisting. The roses on his fingers seemed to expel a sweet pink bouquet. The tyrannosaurus-rex reared up along his leg, and the sound of the brass trumpet in the hot tent heavens was a prehistoric cry from the red monster throat.

Mr William Philippus Phelps was a museum jolted to life. Fish swam in seas of electric blue ink. Fountains sparkled under yellow suns. Ancient buildings stood in meadows of harvest wheat. Rockets burned across spaces of muscle and flesh. The slightest inhalation of his breath threatened to make chaos of the entire printed universe. He seemed afire, the creatures flinching from the flame, drawing back from the great heat of his pride, as he expanded under the audience's rapt contemplation.

The boss laid his fingers on the sticking plaster. The audi-

ence rushed forward, silent in the oven vastness of the night tent.

'You ain't seen nothing yet!' he cried.

The plaster ripped free.

There was an instant in which nothing happened. An instant in which the Illustrated Man thought that the Unveiling was a terrible and irrevocable failure.

But then the audience gave a low moan.

The boss of the fair drew back, his eyes fixed.

Far out at the edge of the crowd, a woman, after a moment, began to cry, began to sob and did not stop.

Slowly, the Illustrated Man looked down at his naked chest and stomach.

\* \* \*

The thing that he saw made the roses on his hand discolour and die. All of his creatures seemed to wither, turn inwards, shrivel with the arctic coldness that pumped from his heart outwards to freeze and destroy them. He stood trembling. His hands floated up to touch that incredible picture, which lived, moved and shivered with life. It was like gazing into a small room, seeing a glimpse of someone else's life, so intimate, so impossible that one could not stand long to watch without turning away.

It was a picture of his wife, Lisabeth, and himself.

And he was killing her.

Before the eyes of a thousand people in a dark tent in the centre of a black forested land, he was killing his wife.

His great flowered hands were upon her throat, and her face was turning dark, and he killed her and he killed her and did not ever in the next minute stop killing her. It was real. While the crowd watched, she died, and he turned very sick. He was about to fall straight down into the crowd. The tent whirled like a monster batwing, flapping grotesquely. The last thing he heard was a woman, sobbing, far out on the shore of the silent crowd.

And the crying woman was Lisabeth, his wife.

\* \* \*



In the night, his bed was moist with perspiration. The carnival sounds melted away, and his wife, in her own bed, was quiet now, too. He fumbled with his chest. The sticking plaster was smooth. They had made him put it back.

He had fainted. When he revived, the fair boss had yelled at him, 'Why didn't you say what that picture was like?'

'I didn't know, I didn't,' said the Illustrated Man.

'Holy Mackerell!' said the boss. 'Scare the life out of everyone. Scared the life out of Lizzie, out of me. Anyway, where'd you get that damn tattoo?' He shuddered.

His wife stood over him.

'I'm sorry, Lisabeth,' he said, weakly, his eyes closed. 'I didn't know.'

'You did it on purpose,' she said. 'To scare me.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Either it goes or I go,' she said.

'Lisabeth.'

'You heard me. That picture comes off or I leave this show.'

'Yes, Phil,' said the boss. 'That's how it is.'

'Did you lose money? Did the crowd demand refunds?'

'It ain't the money, Phil. For that matter, once the word got round, hundreds of people wanted to come in. But I'm runnin' a clean show. That tattoo comes off! Was this your idea of a practical joke, Phil?'

He turned in the warm bed. No, not a joke. Not a joke at all. He had been as terrified as anyone. Not a joke. That little old dust-witch, what had she *done* to him and how had she done it? Had she put the picture there? No; she had said that the picture was unfinished, and that he himself, with his thoughts and his perspiration, would finish it. Well, he had done the job all right.

But what, if anything, was the significance? He didn't want to kill anyone. He didn't want to kill Lisabeth. Why should such a silly picture burn here on his flesh in the dark?

He crawled his fingers softly, cautiously down to touch the quivering place where the hidden portrait lay. He pressed tight, and the temperature of that spot was enormous. He

could almost feel that little evil picture killing and killing all through the night.

I don't wish to kill her, he thought, insistently, looking over at her bed. And then, five minutes later, he whispered aloud: 'Or *do* I?'

'What?' she cried, awake.

'Nothing,' he said, after a pause. 'Go to sleep.'

\* \* \*

The man bent forward, a buzzing instrument in his hand.

'This costs two pounds an inch. Costs more to peel tattoos off than put 'em on. Right, rip off the plaster.'

The Illustrated Man obeyed.

The skin man sat back. 'Gosh! No wonder you want that off! That's ghastly. *I* don't even want to look at it.' He flicked his machine. 'Ready? This won't hurt.'

The boss of the fair stood in the tent flap, watching. After five minutes, the skin man changed the instrument head, cursing. Ten minutes later he scraped his chair back and scratched his head. Half an hour later he got up, told Mr William Philippus Phelps to dress, and packed his instruments.

'Wait a minute,' said the boss. 'You ain't done the job.'

'And I'm not going to,' said the skin man.

'I'm paying good money. What's wrong?'

'Nothing, except that damn picture just won't come off. The thing must go right down to the bone.'

'You're crazy.'

'Mister, I've been in business thirty years and never seen a tattoo like this. An inch deep, if it's anything.'

'But I've got to get it off!' cried the Illustrated Man.

The skin man shook his head. 'Only one way to get rid of that.'

'How?'

'Take a knife and cut off your chest. You won't live long, but the picture'll be gone.'

'Come back here!'

But the skin man walked away.

They could hear the big Monday night crowd, waiting.

'That's a big crowd,' said the Illustrated Man.

'But they ain't going to see what they came to see,' said the carnival boss. 'You ain't going out there, except with the plaster on. Hold still now, I'm curious about this *other* picture, on your back. We might be able to give 'em an Unveiling on *this* one.'

'She said it wouldn't be ready for a week or so. The old woman said it would take time to set, to make a pattern.'

There was a soft ripping as the boss pulled aside a flap of white tape on the Illustrated Man's spine.

'What do you see?' gasped Mr Phelps, bent over.

The boss replaced the tape. 'Phelps, as a Tattooed Man you're a washout! Why'd you let that old woman decorate you?'

'I didn't know who she was.'

'She certainly cheated you on this one. No design to it. Nothing. No picture at all.'

'It'll come clear. You wait and see.'

The boss laughed. 'Right, I'll wait. Come on. We'll show the crowd part of you, anyway.'

They walked out into an explosion of brassy music.

\* \* \*

He stood monstrous in the middle of the night, putting out his hands like a blind man to balance himself in a world now tilted, now rushing, now threatening to spin him over and down into the mirror before which he raised his hands.

Upon the flat, dimly lighted table top were peroxides, acids, silver razors and squares of sandpaper. He took each of them in turn. He soaked the vicious tattoo upon his chest, he scraped at it. He worked steadily for an hour.

He was aware, suddenly, that someone stood in the caravan door behind him. It was three in the morning. There was a faint odour of beer. She had come home from town.

He did not turn. 'Lisabeth?' he said.

'You'd better get rid of it,' she said, watching his hands move the sandpaper. She stepped inside the caravan.

'I didn't want the picture to be like this,' he said.

'You did,' she said. 'You planned it.'

'I didn't.'

'I know you,' she sneered. 'Oh, I know you hate me. Well, that's nothing. I hate you. I've hated you for a long time now. Goodness, when you started putting on weight and fat, d'you think anyone could love you then? I could teach you some things about hate. Why don't you ask me?'

'Leave me alone,' he said.

'In front of that crowd, making a spectacle out of me!'

'I didn't know what was under the plaster.'

She walked round the table, hands fitted to her hips, talking to the beds, the walls, the table, talking it all out of her. And he thought: Or did I know? Who made this picture, me or the witch? Who formed it? How? Do I really want her dead? No! And yet . . .

He watched his wife draw nearer, nearer, he saw the ropy string of her throat vibrate to her shouting. This and this and *this* was wrong with him! That and that and *that* was unspeakable about him! He was a liar, a schemer, a fat, lazy, ugly man, a child. Did he think he could compete with the boss? Did he think he was sylphine and graceful, did he think he was a framed El Greco? Da Vinci! or Michelangelo! She brayed. She showed her teeth.

'Well, you can't scare me into staying with someone I don't want touching me with their sloppy paws!' she finished, triumphantly.

'Lisabeth,' he said.

'Don't Lisabeth me!' she shrieked. 'I know your plan. You had that picture put on to scare me. You thought I wouldn't *dare* leave you. Well!'

'Next Saturday night, the Second Unveiling,' he said. 'You'll be proud of me.'

'Proud! You're silly and pitiful. You're like a whale. Did you ever see a beached whale? I saw one when I was young. They came and shot it. Some coastguards shot it. You, a whale!'

'Lisabeth.'

'I'm leaving, that's all, and getting a divorce.'

'Don't.'

'And I'm marrying a man, not a fat woman – that's what you are, so much fat on you there isn't any sex!'

'You can't leave me,' he said.

'Just watch!'

'I love you,' he said.

'Oh,' she said. 'Go look at your pictures.'

He reached out.

'Keep your hands off,' she cried.

'Lisabeth.'

'Don't come near. You turn my stomach.'

'Lisabeth.'

All the eyes of his body seemed to fire, all the snakes to move, all the monsters to seethe, all the mouths to widen and rage. He moved towards her – not like a man, but a crowd.

He felt the great blooded reservoir of orangeade pump through him now, pulse in sickening sweet anger through his wrists, his legs, his heart. All of it, the oceans of mustard and relish and all the million drinks he had drowned himself in in the last year were aboil; his face was the colour of steamed beef. And the pink roses of his hand became those hungry, carnivorous flowers kept long years in tepid jungle and now let free to find their way on the night air before him.

He gathered her to him, like a great beast gathering in a struggling animal. It was a frantic gesture of love, quickening and demanding, which, as she struggled, hardened to another thing. She beat and clawed at the picture on his chest.

'You've got to love me, Lisabeth.'

'Let go!' she screamed. She beat at the picture that burned under her fists. She slashed at it with her fingernails.

'Oh, Lisabeth,' he said, his hands moved up to her shoulders, to her neck. 'Don't go away.'

'Help!' she screamed. Blood ran from his chest.

He put his fingers about her neck and squeezed.

She was a steam whistle cut in mid-shriek.

Outside, the grass rustled. There was the sound of running feet.

Mr William Philippus Phelps opened the caravan door.

They were waiting for him. Skeleton, Midget, Balloon, Yoga, Electra, Popeye, Seal Boy. The freaks, waiting in the middle of the night, in the dry grass.

He walked towards them. He moved with a feeling that he must get away; these people would understand nothing; they were not thinking people. And because he did not flee, because he only walked, balanced, stunned, between the tents, slowly, the freaks moved to let him pass. They watched him, because their watching guaranteed that he would not escape.

He walked out across the black meadow, moths fluttering in his face. He walked steadily as long as he was visible, not knowing where he was going. They watched him go, and then they turned to the silent caravan together and pushed the door slowly wide . . .

\* \* \*

The Illustrated Man walked steadily in the dry meadows beyond the town.

'He went that way!' a faint voice cried. Torches and lanterns bobbed over the hills. There were dim shapes, running.

Mr William Philippus Phelps waved to them. He was tired. He wanted only to be found now. He was tired of running away. 'There he is!' The torches changed direction. 'Come on! We'll get the bastard!'

When it was time, the Illustrated Man ran again. He was careful to run slowly. He deliberately fell down twice. Looking back, he saw the tent stakes they held in their hands.

He ran towards a street lamp on a far crossroads, where all the summer night seemed to gather; merry-go-rounds of fire-flies whirling, crickets moving their song towards that light, everything rushing, as if by some midnight attraction, towards that one high-hung lamp – the Illustrated Man first, the others close at his heels.

As he reached the light and passed a few yards under and beyond it, he did not need to look back. On the road ahead, in

silhouette, he saw the upraised tent stakes sweep violently up, up, and then *down*!

A minute passed.

In the country ravines, the crickets sang.

The freaks stood over the sprawled Illustrated Man, holding their tent stakes loosely.

Finally they rolled him over. Blood ran from his mouth.

They ripped the sticking plaster from his back. They stared down for a long moment at the freshly revealed picture. Someone whispered. Someone else swore, softly. The Thin Man pushed back and walked away and was sick. Another and another of the freaks stared, their mouths trembling, and moved away, leaving the Illustrated Man on the deserted road, in a pool of blood.

In the dim light, the unveiled illustration was easily seen.

It showed a crowd of freaks bending over a dying fat man on a dark and lonely road, looking at a tattoo on his back which illustrated a crowd of freaks bending over a dying fat man on a . . .

## PLAYTIME

*By A. G. J. Rough*

MRS TATE died suddenly. She slipped from her customary window-cleaning position on top of the washing machine, smashed the base of her skull against the gas stove and came to an abrupt halt as she thudded heavily to the kitchen floor. The body lay at an unnatural angle, staring upward with unseeing eyes, hearing and feeling nothing.

Young David hammered his demand for entry on the back door. Getting no response he sighed, stretched up for the door-knob and at the same time, kicked the door forward with one badly scuffed shoe.

Seeing his mother lying on the red-tile floor he frowned. Words such as 'dead' or 'unconscious' had, as yet, no place in his six-year-old way of thinking. Life to David was one enormous game in which everyone, with the sole exception of his parents, participated. He knew that Mr Diamond often turned a blind eye when he pilfered the occasional apple or orange from the gentleman's fruit stall. Even the neighbours were most tolerant when he trampled on their flower-beds or chased the household pets. The only people from whom he need fear retribution were his parents. However, just for once his mother seemed to be joining in the fun of things.

With a sweaty hand David brushed an aggravating lock of hair out of his eyes, edged round the inert figure, clambered up on to a chair and helped himself to a glass of cool water from the sink. He turned and looked down, feeling faintly uneasy as he looked into the pair of glassy eyes that glared up at him unblinkingly. David sipped the water slowly. Could his mother be 'dead', whatever that meant? He peered down at the faint smile which played around the slightly parted lips of the corpse and found that it reassured him. No, his mother was



playing, and in her present mood she might even prove to be much more fun than most of his friends.

David put down his glass and climbed down from the chair, kneeling beside the woman, tentatively he lifted one of her hands and he giggled as it flopped limply back to the ground when he let go. Mummy didn't even stir. She was really quite good at games and should play more often. He decided to try something else. Taking the glass of water from its resting place on the draining board he poured the contents over his mother's face, all the while watching for any trace of movement that might give the game away. None was forthcoming. The water simply trickled across the waxen features, leaving one or two drops of moisture trapped in the facial hair above the mouth, dribbled across the neck and formed a small puddle on the tiles beneath the head. The boy leant over and tickled his mother under the chin. The loose flesh vibrated beneath his fingertips. The mouth gaped slightly wider and a thread of saliva wound its way across the chin and on to David's hand. He quickly straightened up and wiped the sticky hand on the seat of his trousers, shocked and annoyed. He wasn't at all sure about the game or the rules. Surely his mother's action had given him unlimited licence as far as his behaviour was concerned?

Hurrying into the living room David searched for, and found, a box of crayons buried deep in his toy cupboard. Returning to the kitchen he removed the crayons from their box and started work. First of all Mummy was provided with a pair of black, misshapen spectacles and a long droopy moustache and finally, a lovely red nose, just like Daddy's. Mummy didn't move. She seemed to appreciate the joke. David couldn't understand how she'd stopped herself from laughing, for the crayon must have tickled her nose.

The sewing tin provided David with a pin. To start with he pricked his mother gently, but finding that this produced no visible or audible result he plunged the pin home time and time again. He was hungry, and the game had gone on quite long enough already. When he spoke, his mother ignored him completely. Even when he screamed and stamped, she still

only stared at him with the same comical face.

David opened the drawer in the sink unit and reached for the forbidden vegetable knife. Reaching for the knife he could feel the blind eyes watching him closely. He could almost hear his mother telling him not to touch it. So he did. Going back to the body he grabbed hold of his mother's forearm and dragged the sharp serrated edge of the knife across her skin. The flesh peeled back to reveal a glistening network of muscle, tendon and bone. David dropped the arm and the knife simultaneously, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. His mother was being unfair. He was puzzled and afraid. And when he again saw the glazed, unearthly eye staring at him, petulance took the upper hand. Crying, he snatched up the knife and drove it two-fistedly, down into the offending eyeball. The knife stood quiveringly erect in the swollen socket, adding a final touch of incongruity.

When David felt the coldness of his mother's skin and noticed a blue tint creeping into her normally fair complexion, he began to wonder. He heard vague murmurings in some distant corner of his mind, yet nothing would fall into place. Suddenly he stopped crying, sniffed, once again brushed the hair out of his eye and went into the living room. He had made a discovery. He understood.

When Mr Tate came home from work, David was waiting for him. The boy stood up, smiled and said to his father with absolute certainty and undeniable conviction, 'Mummy's dead!'



## THE TSANTSA

*By Maurice Sandoz*

FOR THE benefit of those of my readers who do not know the meaning of the word 'Tsantsa' – and there is nothing they need to be ashamed of in that – I will start with a definition.

It is Indian in origin and is still only familiar to the Jivaros Indian tribes dwelling on the equator in districts where very few Europeans have ever been. It denotes a singular war trophy: the head of an enemy who has been decapitated but not scalped. Processes, which have remained more or less secret, have not merely rendered these heads immune from decay, they have so much reduced their proportions that their size varies from that of an orange to that of a duck's egg. The strange thing is that this shrinking, this contraction of the tissues, does not involve any deformation of the victim's features. His face remains perfectly recognizable, only the scale of it is different. Shall we say, we seem to be looking at it 'through the wrong end of the telescope'; that is all.

If we are to believe the theories that have been advanced by explorers about the preparation of these grim trophies, this is what they give us as the approved recipe. But I fear it may discourage my readers, especially those of the fair sex, even more than the recipe of the great Vatel, who, when describing the method of roasting a chicken, began with these words: 'Take the gravy of three fine ducks . . .'

Here, then, is the recipe of the explorers:

'Take the head of your enemy without plucking the hair off; see that it has been recently separated from the trunk. With the help of a very sharp instrument – scissors for cutting up game will do admirably – incise the scalp right round, starting from the dint in the nape of the neck. It is important to see that the line of incision leaves the hair untouched and stops at

the forehead just where the hair begins to grow. Doing it this way makes it easier to conceal the incision.

'Working with a gentle and at the same time firm touch, which you will easily acquire at your third or fourth head, open the two tips of the incision you have made and gradually peel off the whole of the skin from the skull and all the muscles of the face, taking great care that nothing should be torn.

'Inside this limp mask place a round stone the dimensions of which should be slightly smaller than those of the head of your enemy. This stone should be of the temperature of boiling oil, which is what you will have used to heat it with.

'Sew up the wound, moisten the face with fermented fruit juice – a wine lends itself perfectly to this ablution – in which you have left pomegranate peel to soak, or the skin of any other fruit that is rich in tannin, and expose your handiwork to the rays of the sun for eight hours, keeping away the flies, which will try to make for so attractive a morsel.

'Next day, take out the stitches and replace the stone by another hot one, exactly like the first except that it should be slightly smaller in size.

'By repeating this operation every day, until the shrunk tissues refuse to contract any farther, you will at last have obtained the head of which you have dreamed and will be able to enjoy the reward of your efforts.

'In order to prevent the results of so much trouble from being spoilt, it will be as well to insert a lump of camphor in the mouth of the tsantsa before, of course, proceeding to the first operation, because at a later stage the lips, which incidentally should be sewn up with gut, harden and cannot be parted again.

'By acting on these instructions you stand more chance of preserving your tsantsa for the delight of generations to come.'

It was at Marseilles that, thanks to the good offices of Dr Marchand, I paid my first visit to a lunatic asylum. The strange thing is that during this very first visit I happened straight away to meet with one of the most curious cases of

insanity it has ever been my lot to study, like the person who has never in his life touched a card yet sometimes breaks the bank at Monte Carlo.

I ought perhaps to say that, though my first easy success encouraged me to persevere, I needed a deal of patience to find others to serve as worthy pendants to it.

The private nursing home in Marseilles was not far from the zoological gardens, and I at once got a queer impression from visiting patients who lived behind locked doors, when I had just been watching the animals imprisoned behind the solid bars of their cages.

Dr Marchand, with whom I was perfectly frank about the object of my visit, looked me up and down with a thoughtful, rather surly expression. Suddenly his face brightened.

'I've got it,' he cried in a tone of relief. 'As you may well imagine, I am bounded by the rules of professional secrecy. Most of my patients belong to good and' (here the doctor hesitated a moment) 'well-to-do families of the town and neighbourhood. The less talk there is about them, the better pleased these relations are with me.'

'Anyway, among my guests is a man of about forty who does not come from these parts but has a family living in Brazil. The family defrays the cost of his maintenance once a year by cheque – payment, I need hardly say, being made in advance. They never inquire after his health, for which I don't blame them as he is incurable, except to ask whether José F. is still alive and whether they are bound in consequence to continue paying for his keep.'

'My impression is that if I talk to you of this man and his case I am not likely to injure the patient or his relatives.'

'Do you care to follow me?'

I acquiesced and followed Dr Marchand up to the second storey, a relatively new part of the building, where those who are convalescent and tired are supposed to 'rest'; persons who, for the most part, will never see Marseilles again except through the barred windows of their rooms, which, I may add, are clean and comfortable.

Dr Marchand knocked at the door of a room which was

situated, as I still recall, at the corner of the corridor. A deep voice answered, 'Come in.'

Stretched at length on an easy chair, muffled in a shawl and wearing only a dressing gown, was a man with strong features and still young in years.

What struck me first of all about him was the elegance of his hands: the hands, I thought, of a mummy, they were so long and emaciated.

Next, it was his face which held my attention. I could hardly take my eyes from it.

The features were regular, the brows beautifully shaped above handsome, bright eyes; the bow of the lips too was very regular and sensual. And yet I derived no pleasure from looking at his face.

There must have been something missing somewhere. I soon found out what it was when the man rose to greet us.

He was tall and, at the first glance, seemed well proportioned, but the head was not in scale with the rest. If it did not spoil his appearance when he was seen in profile, as soon as he looked at you full face you perceived that it was too small to crown the body adequately. I compared it in my mind to the pommel of a riding whip. The forehead, without actually retracting, had something 'squeezed' about it, which left a disagreeable impression.

The last of his race, I thought, and sat down.

I had time to look around me while the doctor was asking after the health of his patient.

There were books – lots of books, in different languages. The complete works of Proust kept company with those of Thomas Mann, volumes of Lawrence and Huxley with those of D'Annunzio.

The perfect order in which the room was kept gave no hint that the mind of its occupant was wandering.

'My friend would like to make your acquaintance,' the doctor said to him, after having come to the end of his usual questions. 'He is studying metaphysical as well as physical problems. Thus I was led to talk about you. From motives of discretion I did not allude to the matter, but if you felt

disposed to submit your case to him exactly as you did to me on your arrival in Marseilles, I fancy you would interest him enormously and would also be of assistance to anyone – should there ever be anyone – who might be tempted to repeat your dangerous experiment.'

I must confess that the doctor's preamble excited my curiosity to the highest pitch, and in my mind I put up a prayer that the patient might not seek refuge in an obstinate silence. Psychiatrists will bear me out that this is what happens only too often.

'My experiment!' exclaimed José F. 'My crime, is what you mean, Doctor. You have hit on the one argument to induce me to repeat, for the very last time, the narrative of the events which brought me to you.'

Dr Marchand got up.

'You are aware, Don José, that I know your story by heart. You never change the tenor of it or even the order of events. That being so, you will excuse me if I leave you alone with my friend. You know how many guests' (I noticed that the doctor avoided, so far as he could, using the word 'patient') 'are asking for me every moment, and I must see that I don't make enemies of them.'

'You go, Doctor. Your friend shall rejoin you as soon as he has heard it all. Please observe I do not say "as soon as he has believed it all".'

The doctor slipped away, but not till he had handed me a box of cigarettes. 'You may need them,' he said. 'The story you are about to hear is not a short one.'

'I need not introduce myself,' my interlocutor began. 'It is enough that you should know that I am French, and that I have no claim to the title "Don José" bestowed on me by Dr Marchand, who likes to have his little joke. My father was born in Brazil and made a fortune in the sugar industry. When he died he left his property to his brother, who is my guardian, or, rather, who became such when I entered this – boarding house. My mother died at my birth, and I was brought up at the College of the Immaculate Conception at Rio as soon as I was of an age to be admitted.



'I think – and the doctor shares my view – that it was this complete lack of any maternal tenderness, for which neither my contacts with indifferent schoolfellows nor my distant relationships with priests could possibly compensate, that was the reason for my being conscious, long before reaching the age of puberty, of a growing desire for feminine company. I will go even further and confess that it was a desire to be governed, taught and, above all, dominated by someone of the other sex who was gentle and at the same time self-willed.'

I noticed that Don José stressed the word 'self-willed' with special satisfaction.

Ha! thought I. A victim, no doubt, of masochism.

And Mr F. continued his story:

'All the women I knew in Brazilian society seemed to me too gentle and submissive for me to be able to pick my ideal in them. Centuries of Portuguese influence and constant pre-occupation with their religious observances have fitted them for all the duties, but also for all the sacrifices, that marriage demands. On the other hand, they are soon at a loss when faced by unforeseen difficulties. On a journey, for instance, they are terrified by everything: by unfamiliar food, by foreign languages – even by Spanish, in spite of its being closely allied to their mother tongue; the smallest thing upsets them, and everything frightens them – the sight of an unknown insect, for instance, or even dealing with servants they have not seen before.

'I quickly realized that I should never find in Rio, at any rate among Brazilians of the feminine sex, the young woman of energy' (here again I noticed that the patient took a definite pleasure in pronouncing the word 'energy') 'who was to rescue me from the circle of males in which from my earliest childhood I had too long been imprisoned. I was wary of masculine brutality with its vulgarity and its tendency to persecution.'

(At the word 'persecution' I pricked up my ears. Was I about to listen to some confidences from a victim of persecution mania? That would have been particularly interesting for me; but I found I was mistaken.)

'Rio, as you well know, is a seaport where every year boats

deposit batches of foreigners, who arrive from all parts of the world and often settle down there, in the hopes of making, or remaking, a fortune. Some have been attracted by the beauty of the capital, adorned with its fringe of beaches; others have come to study the range of the country's inexhaustible resources.

'It was just after the American liner *New Star* had berthed that I met Alice and her mother.

'They had come to Rio de Janeiro to collect the inheritance of a brother of Alice's. During his lifetime he had been regarded as an unsatisfactory subject whose negative qualities and positive defects had kept his kindred aloof from him. But as soon as the family discovered that he had left some property they also discovered that he had possessed some merits, and brazenly proclaimed their relationship.'

Here José F. broke off:

'The family I refer to,' said he, 'was pretty well known. Would you like me to call them . . . Hoyet?'

I made a gesture of acquiescence.

'The difficulties inseparable from unfreezing the funds kept Mrs Hoyet and her daughter tied to Brazil, where they were able to live by nibbling at this unexpected capital. I fancy that Mrs Hoyet's resources in New York were on the modest side and that the expedition to Brazil, which enabled them to carry on without touching their American income, must have struck her as providential. In any case, mother and daughter left their hotel and took rooms in Rio in one of the tiny colonial houses sheltering in the shadow of the skyscrapers that border the seashore at Copacabana.'

While I listened to this narrative, which formed, in a way, the prologue to José F.'s adventures I could not help reflecting that if his brain was disturbed, there were no signs whatsoever of any such disturbance in his talk, and I could not but admire the clearness of his exposition and applaud his logic and regard for chronology.

'Unless I am mistaken, I was introduced to Mrs Hoyet at a charity bazaar. I made myself agreeable to her before I had seen the daughter, who was a famous beauty, and she appre-

ciated this, perceiving that my gallantry was disinterested. I think she was rather exasperated at always being "the mother of the beautiful Alice" and at having the still visible relics of her own beauty so often ignored.

'At her third glass of champagne she decided that I was a "nice boy" and introduced me to her daughter.

'I invited Alice to dance a tango. Ah, that tango! I still remember it.'

(Good heavens, thought I, if he does not spare me a description of his first tango with Miss Hoyet, whenever shall we get to the main action?)

'Miss Hoyet danced admirably; but I noticed one rather curious thing, that although her movements were in harmony with mine she did not submit entirely to the will of her partner.

'Don't misunderstand me. There was never any question of actual resistance on her part; that would have upset our dancing. But, how shall I put it? It was a case of collaboration which was not entirely disinterested. Thus I became aware that while she simulated submission, it was she who "guided" me, though I was hardly conscious of it.

'Locked together, we revolved under the chandeliers of the Casino ballroom, but we never drew near the corner of the room where Mrs Hoyet, in hopeless solitude, was smoking cigarettes, leaning her elbows on the marble table behind which our empty chairs awaited us.

'I used all my ingenuity to compel my partner to approach the spot where her mother sat. Each time, without, as I said before, any apparent pressure on her part, she succeeded in making me avoid this part of the room, which called up in her mind, I imagine, some sort of constraint, or perhaps the supervision, however kind, of her liberty.

'Believe me, I was in heaven. I had at last met the woman to "dominate" me, which was the secret desire of my heart.

'As you may well imagine, things did not stop short at a tango. We saw each other day after day, and the two of us wandered about Rio and its delightful surroundings. We were often to be found under the trees of the famous botanical

gardens. There, in the quiet of tropical arbours, I had time to observe and gradually to discover the strange character of my companion.

'She disliked beautiful things, but took an interest in what was curious – even in what was monstrous. She would pass by roses without giving them a glance and magnolias without enjoying their scent but she stopped in front of the insect-eating plants, fascinated by them, though they are hideous, and stood for a long time gazing at the horrible *Aristolochias* and the rather frightening calyxes of the arums.

'“Look at this flower,” she said. “Isn't it like a spider? Like a spider which has just caught a butterfly! And this arum looks artificial, as though it had been made up out of a piece of snakeskin.”

'That made me a little uncomfortable, certainly, but only a little! Youthful exuberance, thought I, and the fascination exercised by unusual shapes.

'We also visited the zoological gardens of Rio and wandered about admiring – at any rate I did – its marvellous collection of birds.

'“We must come back again on Thursday,” Miss Hoyet finally said.

'“Why Thursday?” I asked in surprise.

'“It's on Thursday that they feed the snakes,” she calmly answered.

'We did in fact go back there on a Thursday, and even now I regret our visit. No one who has not seen a boa constrictor first strangle and then slowly and methodically crush the guinea pig or rabbit it has been given can possibly imagine what a hideous and terrible sight it is. “Terrible” is no exaggeration. Anything inevitable and deliberate has always seemed to me to be terrible. How slowly the snakes approached their destined prey, so as to be able to fascinate them and not frighten them at first sight. With what deliberation they crushed them, with what deliberation their jaws engulfed the still panting victims. It had the inexorable deliberation of the minute hand of a watch. To a superficial observer the hand appears to be stationary, yet in an hour

it has travelled right round the dial and timed the last breath of many a poor mortal!

My interlocutor seemed to become agitated. It made me a little nervous and I furtively measured the distance that separated me from the door and the bell.

Mr F. noticed that my attention had wandered, but fortunately misunderstood the reason.

'It's nothing,' he said. 'We shan't be disturbed. Dr Marchand has left strict orders that we are not to be disturbed.' (I, for my part, much regretted that the doctor had extended his consideration quite so far.)

'It is none of my business to describe the nature of our relations. I must however confess that I was completely under the charm of Circe, who exercised her baleful spells on me.

'I realized quite clearly that the only thing which counted with her was her own pleasure, and not mine. But I was so enamoured of her that her pleasure was my only pleasure. I was her prisoner. I was taken captive by the invisible threads with which she bound me without my perceiving it. And, would you believe me, I imagined all the time that I was in her debt and owed her everything; and all the time I tried to cancel this imaginary debt by showering on her those trifling gifts which are said to promote mutual affection.

'So as to make quite sure that my gifts would be welcome, I left Miss Hoyet to choose them. This she did; with so much skill, however, that I could almost imagine it was I who had chosen them. In a word, it was a case of the famous tango all over again. I thought I was guiding my partner, and what really happened was that she was making me follow her wherever she wanted to go.

'The first object that attracted her was a tiny ruby displayed in the windows of Cristobald Brothers' strange curiosity shop, where you may purchase butterflies mounted between two sheets of glass, or Portuguese crucifixes, or vast aquamarines or beryls of the colour of crystallized angelica.

'“If that ruby belonged to me, I should have it mounted quite differently,” hinted Alice.

'I bought the stone and offered it to her.

' "This ruby is of little value because it isn't transparent; that's why I let you offer it to me. But it gives me far more pleasure than a perfectly clear stone. It has exactly the look of a drop of clotted blood."

'And indeed, when Alice placed the cabochon, which was the size of a pea, on the back of her pale hand, you might have thought that she had been scratched by a bramble and that a large drop of blood had issued from an invisible wound.

'On another occasion it was a rock crystal in which a red tourmaline had been miraculously embedded.

' "Oh, my dear," she cried, "look at this crystal. It's bleeding! Have you ever seen anything so extraordinary? Do you think it will be very expensive? It would be dreadful to think of its falling into the hands of someone who is unable to appreciate the drama going on in that stone."

'Need I tell you I made my companion the offer of the stone that dripped blood?

'That was how our romance began. Mrs Hoyet took hardly any interest in it; I had lost much of her goodwill since I had taken up with her daughter.

'One day, however, I found her alone in the hall of my hotel and suggested that we should go and take tea at a pastry cook's.

' "If you like," she replied rather coldly.

'When we got there, Mrs Hoyet declined the offer of tea, preferring to make it port wine. Under the influence of this tonic she became, I will not say more amiable, but at any rate more ready to talk.

'We spoke, in turn, of New York and Los Angeles, of life in Washington and in Boston, which I said was my favourite town.

'This declaration, which I made in all sincerity, appeared to soften her.

' "I was born at Boston," she said.

'When, a few moments later, I took leave of her, after having seen her back to the door of her little house, she looked me straight in the eyes and pronounced this rather enigmatic

phrase, the serious import of which was only to become clear to me much later :

“My dear boy, don’t give way to all of Alice’s fancies; don’t yield to all her whims.”

‘It seemed to me that she purposely underlined the words *all*, as though I should feel and understand the menace implicit in them.

‘It was about a month later that Alice and I returned to Cristobald Brothers’ curiosity shop and, to pass the time, went over it from top to bottom.

‘In a showcase which was less well lit than some of the others and had escaped our attention on other visits, probably because it was in the dark, we found a group of grinning masks from China and Japan, and a few idols of Polynesian origin. They were surrounding a very strange object which I must describe to you. Do you know what a *tsantsa* is?’

I replied that I did.

‘Then that will save my describing it at length,’ answered Mr F. ‘Anyway, I can tell you that this *tsantsa* was set out in a rather odd fashion.

‘On an alabaster base stood a glass stem that disappeared into the neck of the tiny human head which was no larger than an orange.

‘The place where the neck had been severed was concealed by a trimming of humming-bird feathers, the presence of which, so far from attenuating the savage aspect of the trophy, only served to emphasize it. The long hairs, reaching down to the alabaster base, caressed it with the tips of their locks when there was the slightest draught, and thus gave animation to the uncanny little figure. The glass stem only just rested, no doubt, under the arch of the cranium, in the very centre of the scalp, so that the head, too, rocked gently up and down whenever there was any displacement of air in the room. I can assure you that this semblance of acquiescence in an inanimate head was, to say the least of it, impressive. Alice Hoyet gazed at the moving object, fascinated by it, and, without knowing she did so, nodded her head just as the *tsantsa* did. It really seemed to me that she was putting a series of

questions to the mummy and receiving satisfactory answers.

“There!” said Alice suddenly. “There is the first thing I’ve seen for ages that I am really longing to possess. . . . If only —”

‘I could not help noticed that my lovely friend did not, for once, in a way, resort to her usual technique, which enabled her to make her wishes known by roundabout ways. No, she spoke quite frankly. I also noted that it was not very kind of her to give me to understand how little she valued all the small presents I had been able to make her, up to that moment, in comparison with this new treasure. But what shocked me still more was to discover a young, beautiful and charming girl who could wish to possess so utterly repulsive an object. I did not hide my feelings from her. My observations were not well received.

“I don’t want *this* relic,” answered Alice, while she turned on me those pale eyes of periwinkle blue the like of which I have never found again, save in the features of very small children. “No, I don’t want *this* relic; the one I want will be rather different. I’ll talk to you about it one day when you are a little more amiable.”

‘And we left the shop in silence — a silence which I found disturbing, as though it were charged with menace.

‘From that day onward Alice was no longer quite the same, at least not with me.

‘She was always as friendly — no, I ought to call it tempting — as ever, I never found her more desirable, and I never desired her more than I did then. But there was no more question of my obtaining favours, big or small, which up till then she had dispensed, I must admit, very parsimoniously.

‘It is true that we often used to go out and dine together, but all our meetings became — how shall I put it? — dreadfully platonic. So platonic that my nerves suffered badly in consequence, for it is much easier to endure the absence of favours than to lose them when you have once been accustomed to them.’

(Now we have it, thought I; this is what has caused the trouble: it’s a case of ‘suppression of the libido’ with its in-



evitable consequences. How Freud would have loved to hear this story!)

'There was no more flirting between us, no more kissing.

'Yet Alice would often gaze at me with her clear eyes, and her mouth would smile as much as to say "When do you want me?"

'I decided to have a word with her about our "situation".

' "You are ill, my friend," she replied. "It's you who have changed, not I. I'm just the same as ever."

'But even while she was saying this, she placed her hand on my breast, and gently but firmly prevented my approaching any closer to her. The gesture belied the reassuring words. I was simple enough to open my heart to her mother.

' "I must have done something to displease Alice without knowing what it is. She does not ostensibly avoid me, but I feel as if a glass partition had been set up between us – tangible, though quite invisible."

'Mrs Hoyet eyed me with an expression which betrayed no surprise, though her look seemed tinged with a touch of sadness.

' "Perhaps this state of affairs is best for you," she said finally. "Alice is capricious."

'And she left me.

'All of a sudden it seemed to me that my behaviour had been monstrous. I had never – no, never – discussed plans for the future with my beautiful friend. I had been living in unpardonable egoism in the present, as though it were going to last for ever. I had admitted unconsciously that she loved me as much as I loved her, and it had never occurred to me to find what I might call a more conventional solution of the difficulties our free-and-easy relations had given rise to.

'I was on the wrong road, and it was high time to leave it and to make the amends that honour demanded.

'The first time I found myself with Alice, I told her that I realized how wrong I had been, that I felt I owed her my apologies, and I asked her if she would consent to become my wife.

' "You are ill," she replied for the second time. "Aren't you

happy to be free, to have no tie binding you to me or any other woman? I for my part want no tie in my life. No possession is as precious as liberty."

"So, then, I was mistaken. Alice bore me no grudge on account of the nature of our relations, which, nevertheless, might compromise her.

"Rightly or wrongly, I reported our conversation to Mrs Hoyet, doubtless because in the back of my mind I wanted to whitewash myself a little in her eyes so that I should not look like an unscrupulous seducer.

"I should have been happy to welcome you as a son-in-law," she replied with the calm that never deserted her, "though . . . you have rather neglected me."

"Then, dropping this light tone, she added:

"You are wasting your time. My daughter does not like men. No," she said, raising her hand as though to banish the shadow of an ugly suspicion. "No, I don't mean that at all. My daughter does not like anyone. She only likes *things*."

"Here again Mrs Hoyet accentuated "*things*", which she pronounced in the emphatic tone that public speakers reserve for the words Honour, Liberty and Duty.

"The truth then was that Alice liked no one. She only liked things. This meant that her own mother could not flatter herself that she counted for anything in her eyes. Still less had I any sort of existence for her. Or, at least, I only began to exist when her singular mind was filled with an overwhelming longing to possess something, whether it was a blood-red ruby, or a pink tourmaline embedded in a piece of rock crystal.

"That night I slept badly. I even fancy I may not have slept at all. All my life I had dreamed of finding a woman to dominate me, a woman who would love me because I obeyed her. And what I had found was a woman who put up with me because I was of use to her. How humiliating that was!

"I had believed myself to be loved by a woman, and in reality it was I who was in love with a siren. And she made use of me to get what she wanted."

José broke off. He took a handkerchief and mopped his

forehead. The evocation of his past life had quite obviously affected him and cost him an effort.

This I wanted to spare him.

'You are tiring yourself,' I said to him, 'and it's my fault. Wouldn't you rather I came back tomorrow? We'll take up your story at the exact place where you have left it.'

'Impossible,' replied my host. 'How many a time I have run over in my mind the series of misfortunes which have brought me here. If I interrupted the story I am telling you at the point we have reached, I should have to continue the gloomy, implacable sequel on my own, all alone, in this prison chamber, as I have done a thousand times and more. And if you came back tomorrow I should have to take up the thread of the narrative from the beginning, so as to be able to give you the exact sequence of events. No, I beg of you to hear me to the end.'

His excitement rather frightened me, but from the convincing way he argued I saw that by staying I should do him less harm than by going.

'I am quite willing to listen to you,' I replied.

José F. seemed reassured and went on more calmly.

'The following day a consoling, or rather a comforting, thought gained possession of me. I was free, I was young, I was rich. I could well afford the luxury of having an elusive friend. I could gratify her wishes and win her smiles. In a word, I could give her whatever she liked to ask and receive in exchange the favours I so highly valued.

'I shall get the better of her, thought I. In reality I was a beaten man, a beaten man who had unconditionally surrendered.

'Alice must have understood the completeness of my surrender, for she approached me straightaway. It looked as though she were trying, by a cheerfulness that did not seem assumed, to make me forget the shadows which had separated us. In point of fact, she was only trying to regain her influence. Her "caprices", as her mother called them, were not very alarming. Sometimes a row in a boat by moonlight, or else the purchase of a few rare flowers, more curious than beautiful. I

remember perfectly well the day on which a stroll, which had no ostensible object, brought us back again to Cristobald's shop.

'Involuntarily, I thought once more of the famous tango, with myself as her obedient cavalier, in the course of which she had succeeded, without exercising any apparent pressure, in drawing me away as far as possible from the place where her mother awaited her.

'Our walk took us through a labyrinth of little streets without much interest. We wandered about talking of one thing and another, and suddenly came out opposite the flower market in the Rue de Buenos Aires.

'She did not cast a glance at the scented blossoms beautifully arranged in raffia baskets. Making her way round the flower hall, she stopped in front of the window of her favourite shop.

'A phrase rose to my lips so automatically that I was struck by the sound of my own voice after I had uttered it.

' "Is there anything here that tempts you, my dear Alice?"

'She replied without a moment's hesitation:

' "You know perfectly well that I want a tsantsa."

'I had a shock. This beautiful young person, whose sober and harmonious clothes proclaimed her good taste, and whose gait was consistently light and graceful, clung to her morbid inclination and asked – begged, indeed, with a sort of unhealthy insistence – to be given this really frightful object.

'It was too late to turn back. Besides, I no longer had the necessary energy to protest.

' "Let's go in," I said to her rather sharply.

' "But, my good friend," she calmly replied, "it isn't this tsantsa I want. I want a tsantsa that is the only one of its sort in the world." Then she remained silent.

' "I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you mean," I said. "All tsantsas are more or less alike, in size and even in expression, and this one seems to be as desirable – forgive me, as little desirable – an example as any other."

' "I want a tsantsa unlike any other in the world," she replied, having made up her mind all at once to overcome her

reticence. "I want a tsantsa prepared from the head of a white man . . . and he must be fair-headed," she added.

"I could hardly believe my ears.

"What a horrible joke! You are joking, Alice, aren't you?" said I, feeling a little uncomfortable at the sight of my companion's determined and overcast expression. "Besides, such a tsantsa doesn't exist," I added in conclusion, feeling that the joke was in dubious taste and had gone far enough.

"Well, then, one has got to be made – that's all," she replied. And as she walked away from the shop she hummed a Russian song she was fond of and which I had learned from her.

*"I want what is not in the world;  
I want what does not yet exist."*

We went back to Copacabana in silence. I said goodbye to her at her door. Suddenly she kissed me.

Three days later I found myself by chance – I wonder if it really was by chance – outside Cristobald's shop.

I entered and made a few trifling purchases of which I had no particular need. I then got into conversation with the good man, who by now knew me well and treated me as a friend, and I discussed the possibility of breeding those sky-blue butterflies with a metallic sheen which are made up into souvenirs of questionable taste for the use of tourists.

"Why," said I, "do they exterminate these wonderful insects which are becoming more and more rare? You admit it yourself, since you are obliged to raise their price from year to year, when it would be such a simple matter to breed them, as one does silkworms, especially as the food the caterpillars require can be found at the very door of Rio and abounds in the jungle adjoining the 'Chinese View'."

"No doubt, no doubt," replied Mr Cristobald, who agreed with me more, I fear, because he regretted to see one of his sources of revenue shrinking than from any regret at seeing these heavenly butterflies disappear.

"But had I gone there to talk about butterflies? I was aware in a confused kind of way what I had really gone to see him

about, and I was secretly ashamed that I was unable either to broach the subject with the astute dealer, or even to admit to myself the reason for my having entered his shop.

'It was only when I had my hand on the latch of the door that I plucked up the necessary courage to bring out the great question.

' "What would be the price of a tsantsa like the one you showed us a little while ago?"

' "It's not for sale," replied the jeweller, "or, to speak more plainly, it's no longer for sale." To soften the disappointment his refusal to sell might cause me, he added: "The government has forbidden any further dealings in them."

' "But where did you purchase it?" I hazarded the shot, hardly expecting a truthful answer. A dealer in curios does not care to divulge the source of his wares. He gave it to me, however.

' "At Trinidad, in a curiosity shop belonging to a Swiss."

' And he let me have his name and address.

' The same evening I wrote to this dealer. As you may imagine, I was neither so simple nor so daring as to mention a trophy owing its existence to the decapitation of a white man. I confined myself to inquiring whether "in spite of a recent decree" it was still possible by his good offices to procure a tsantsa. I also asked how much "a curiosity of that sort" would be likely to cost - for a museum, I added, doubtless to exonerate myself in my own eyes, and to give him to understand that, so far as I was concerned, such an object did not interest me. In a postscript, as though it had only just occurred to me since beginning my letter, I added the following question:

' "Has there ever been, to your knowledge, such a thing as a tsanta made from the head of a European?" and I awaited his reply.

' To my surprise, I did not have to wait long for it. Three weeks later my correspondence brought me a letter dated from Trinidad.'

Mr F. rose and took from a drawer a letter whose crumpled paper and discoloured ink sufficiently denoted its age.

I read it and asked his permission to copy it, to which he

was kind enough to agree. The letter from Roche, the man in Trinidad, ran as follows:

Sir,

As you know, any dealing in tsantsas is strictly forbidden, both by the British and the Brazilian governments, with very good reason too. For certain technical details, which I will not describe here, have shown that several tsantsas are of quite recent origin and have probably been prepared, not as more or less legitimate war trophies, but for the sole purpose of satisfying the demands of private collectors.

But as you are inquiring on behalf of a museum, and I possess a good example of a warrior tsantsa, which I can prove was made before the law was promulgated, I can arrange to have it brought for your inspection by a confidential agent who, as luck will have it, has to go to Rio towards the end of this month.

I prefer not to discuss in a letter the price of this exceedingly rare object, but one must obviously take count of the fact that we are dealing with a very 'special' kind of curio, the value of which is determined not only by the almost complete secrecy with which it is prepared, but also, and above all, by the difficulty of procuring 'the raw material' from which it is fabricated.

Believe me, etc.

PS. The Rev. Father Kirschner, in his work *Curiosidad de las Amazonas*, notes the existence of a tsantsa which was made from the head of a white missionary killed by the natives of the banks of the Amazon. Such a thing never has and never will, of course, come into the market.

Mr F. had helped me to decipher the letter's faded script.

'I recall,' he went on, 'I recall how, on receipt of this letter, just as I was reading the last sentence, the refrain of the Russian song of which Alice was so fond set up insidious echoes in my mind:

*I want what is not in the world;  
I want what does not yet exist.*

And then a feeling of immense peace came over me.

'Alice, I thought, will never have her horrible tsantsa.

'And I was so successful in ridding my mind of the unpleasant problem that I did not even trouble to reply to the letter from Trinidad.

'Ah! sir, had I replied and brought our dealings to an end, all the evil' (Mr F. dwelt on the word *evil*) 'would have been avoided. Why did I not write to say that I was not taking this warrior tsantsa?

'A month went by. A happy month. Alice was gentle and tranquil. She granted me just enough of her favours to make me believe that it only depended on me to obtain more.

'Her mother, on the other hand, seemed to avoid me. It was of course my fault, as by my clumsy confidences I had let her perceive that my relations with her daughter were perhaps something more than friendly.

'Once, however, on meeting me in the hall of the hotel, she spoke to me.

'“Why not travel,” she said to me quite simply. “Why not travel? It's such a wonderful cure!”

'I recalled a phrase of Jean Cocteau on the subject of the opium smoker.

Saying to a smoker, “Smoke no more, you'll be happier,” is the same as saying to Romeo: “Kill Juliet, you'll feel much better.”

'Travel? Travel by myself? That would be to kill Juliet. No, our shadows were destined to mingle. My life only existed on those terms. We had renewed our daily walks and sometimes pushed them as far as the “Chinese View”, as the pagoda was called which was built on the granite rock formations surrounding Rio.

'From this charming pavilion one can see the series of bays that frame the town, and one may travel with the eyes and the imagination without having to move.

'It was on returning from one of these excursions that I was addressed by the hall porter at the Copacabana.



"A man has been here who wanted to speak to you, sir. He will return this evening."

"What is his name?" I inquired.

"He did not leave his name but said you were expecting him," replied the porter in what was obviously a tone of disapproval. Evidently my visitor was a *persona non grata*.

"I was not expecting anybody that day. Some sort of tout, thought I.

"At nine o'clock in the evening my unknown visitor called again.

"I understood at once why the hotel porter had not approved.

"The visitor, when he appeared, was wearing buffalo leggings which were covered with dust, and for the braided members of the staff of a grand hotel, who are far more intolerant snobs than the guests, that was quite inadmissible.

"Apart from that, his figure was robust and his complexion bronzed. What struck me more was that he was hairless. This absence of hair was not due to the use of the razor, but to the fact that he was naturally beardless, as many Indians are and also some half-castes.

"Without waiting to be questioned, he addressed me in bad Portuguese, interspersed with Spanish and Italian words.

"I come from Señor Roche," said he, pointing to a leather satchel which he carried under his arm.

"Roche?" said I, astonished. "I don't know anyone of that name."

"Sí, sí," he replied, like a man sure of his facts. "Señor Roche of Trinidad."

The name of the island wakened memories.

"Ah!" said I, "I understand what you mean or rather of whom you want to talk. Take a seat will you?"

"And, rather intrigued, I pointed to a deserted corner of the bar.

"My visitor opened his satchel and, turning out a silk handkerchief, drew from it with infinite precaution, which reminded me of the delicate gestures a mother would use in handling her newborn baby, an ebony-coloured tsantsa.

"Pretty! Don't you like it?" cried this strange commercial

traveller who seemed enchanted at the horrible perfection of the object he offered me.

'In fact, the warrior head had been reduced by the secret treatment to less than a quarter of its original dimensions. He tried to put it on my knees.

"No, no, I don't want it," I said, pushing away the terrible thing with aversion which was anything but feigned.

'My visitor was not to be put off so easily. He brought out a letter from his pocket. I recognized my own handwriting. It was the letter I had written to Roche a month earlier.

'Mr Sanchez — that was my visitor's name — marked the postscript with a stroke of his nail, the famous postscript which I had scribbled right at the end of my letter in the hope that by doing so I had minimized its importance.

'Underlined by his sharp and dirty nail, it suddenly acquired capital importance; indeed, it looked as though the whole of the letter had only been written in order to lead up to this postscript.

"Do you want a white tsantsa?" he suddenly asked point-blank, bending his face towards mine as though to propose some secret pact.

"But," said I, a little taken aback, "do you actually happen to have one? I thought that Father Kirschner —"

"Father Kirschner?" broke in the man. "Never heard of him. No, a white tsantsa. As white as" — he was feeling for his words — "as white as ivory!"

'And then I committed the crime.

"How much?" I asked.'

'I beg your pardon,' I interrupted. 'I don't understand why you have just used the word "crime". You bought something which it is forbidden to deal in, I agree. More than that, it was possibly obtained by criminal means. But you were not a guilty party, and if you had not been the purchaser, someone else would have bought it. So you are not guilty!'

It seemed to me that Mr F. coloured slightly. However that may be, I noticed that he made an effort to continue his narrative.

'Sir,' he said at last, 'the word "crime" is unfortunately the

only admissible one. I felt convinced that when Sanchez offered me the white tsantsa and asked a hundred thousand pesos for it, he was not yet in possession of it and that he would have to procure one.'

'But, look,' I interrupted, 'what you are telling me ought to reassure you still more. Seeing that Sanchez had to obtain this anatomical specimen from someone else, that pushes the crime back yet a further stage.'

'You do not understand me, because the whole thing is monstrous,' replied F. 'Sanchez had to obtain his head from tribes on the Amazon; they in turn were not in possession of it, but had to prepare it to order. Do you quite understand me? To order.'

The confession was out.

Mr F. seemed relieved. But with his habitual gesture he mopped his forehead as before, in spite of the cool temperature of the room in which we were sitting.

What could I reply? I kept silent.

After all, I had not come here to argue with a man who, I had been assured, was a madman, but to listen to his story.

'This visit of Sanchez had taken place in December, and as I heard no more about him during the succeeding months and he gave no sign of life, I came to hope that this individual belonged to the world of nightmares.

'Alice was once more a victim of her intermittent attacks of coldness. "Victim" is perhaps hardly the word, as I am now inclined to think that every attitude she adopted towards me was carefully studied. She seldom gave me the pleasure of her company on my walks, which henceforth I took alone, and she never kissed me any more; she had never, it is true, bestowed her kisses on me, but she had given me back mine without apparent displeasure.

'When I complained of her coldness, which I did not think I had deserved, she gazed at me with her beautiful childlike eyes without saying a word. Once however she replied with this enigmatic phrase: "How can I help it? I am disappointed. . . ." And she refused to explain the riddle.

'I gathered that she was alluding to the tsantsa, but as the

thought awakened my suspicions of having concluded a disgraceful bargain, as well as horror at having given way to a shameful temptation, I dismissed the explanation as too simple, and for the first time in my life began to practice the famous American slogan: "Forget it."

'In spite of taking up this attitude I began to long for the return of Sanchez, though only a short time before I had so much dreaded it.

'I had a dim suspicion that a great many things depended on his return. Even today I doubt whether Miss Hoyet was really so anxious to have her tsantsa. What attracted her was the idea of making me climb down – capitulate perhaps expresses it better.

'I could not help having a feeling that, if I blindly yielded to her whims, she would no longer hold out against mine. That would be the "fair exchange" which is the basis of all sound business. As you see, I am not trying to read poetry into our story, which belonged to the world of the cinema. Above all things, I felt it would put an end to the tension between us which her caprice had created.

'The last hot spells brought on a few cases of yellow fever in the hamlets on the frontiers of Brazil and the neighbouring countries to the north. Very sensibly the authorities at once issued further regulations to compel those living in the capital to undergo preventive vaccination.

'I went with Mrs Hoyet to the immunization pavilion. Alice refused to accompany us.

'That was her undoing, I fancy, for three weeks later she was in the isolation hospital, a victim of the dangerous disease.

'Judge of my agony: I was not allowed to see the patient. At the very moment when she was hanging between life and death, Sanchez arrived on the scene. Once more the hotel porter informed me that a man wished to speak to me, but this time I guessed with whom I had to deal.

'I sent Sanchez a message to come up to my room. He appeared a few minutes later, carrying his inseparable leather satchel, which I eyed on this occasion rather apprehensively. What did it contain?

'But, would you believe it, such is human nature that I took a certain pleasure in his visit. After all, this was the last act of a drama which had been unendurable for me; it was about to be played and I was anxious to see the final fall of the curtain!

'Sanchez, without addressing me with his usual salutations, opened the leather pocket, and with his motherly precautions, which strangely belied the roughness of his appearance, unrolled the few yards of silk in which the tsantsa was wrapped.

'The thing made its appearance. I had a real shock, it was so utterly unlike anything I had expected.

'I do not know why, but I had steeled myself to see the head of a white man with chestnut-coloured hair, which would harmonize with the bluish tinge of a close-shaven chin and contrast with the pallor of a sallow complexion.

'But this tsantsa had pale, silky locks of astonishing fineness, which became alive at the slightest movement of the head, as though they belonged to a living body.

'The colour of the face was milk-white, and the turned-up nose was dotted with freckles like those one sees on the faces of English youths.

'I immediately got the impression that I was being offered a tsantsa made with the head of a young boy, of a student or, rather, of a growing schoolboy.

'I refused to touch this fragment of corpse (as I called it in my own mind) and begged Sanchez to put it back in the silk from which he had removed it with the gestures of a sentimental conjurer.

'Even through the wrapping I was dimly conscious that this was no antique but something new, horribly new, the freshness of which was due to the actual youthfulness of the sacrificial victim.

'Sanchez's behaviour, moreover, reinforced my impression.

'"I regret," said he, "that I cannot accept a hundred thousand cruzeiros. A lot of people had to be made to keep their mouths shut, and that was not as easy as shutting the mouth of the tsantsa. Consciences are very dear. So it will be two hundred thousand cruzeiros that you owe me."

'I was so disgusted with Sanchez (and with myself) that no

sum would have seemed too big at that moment as the price of getting rid of him, and I immediately gave him, without a word of protest, a cheque for the amount he demanded.

'Sanchez took his departure, leaving the silk wrapping on the table.

'As I was hiding the macabre object in a drawer, the door opened again.

'“Look,” said Sanchez, who had come back, “if the National Bank asks what the cheque is for, say that it is for a magnificent stone.”

'And Sanchez closed the door again.

'Thus the drama ended, and from then onward I should enjoy a more agreeable life. At least I thought so at the time.

'The very next day Mrs Hoyet, without waiting for the daily visit I paid in order to get news of Alice, who was still kept in quarantine, asked me to come and see her in her house, where, very much to my surprise, I was conducted up to her room.

'The very first words with which she received me, cutting out the usual polite greetings, made me understand the reason for her breaking the rules of correct behaviour.

'“Alice has died,” she said quite simply. “Will you help me to fulfil all the necessary formalities for the funeral?”

'“There, there,” she added, seeing me turn pale from the shock. “Quick! Give yourself a neat whisky; that will set you right again.”

'These were her only words of sympathy.

'I pass in silence over the three following days. The funeral was on a skimpy scale; it was probably fear of contagion that reduced the number of participants to a minimum.

'On the next day but one Mrs Hoyet told me she had decided to go back to Boston, where a second funeral service would take place. She gave me to understand that her distant relations in Boston would consider my presence at it useless, if not out of place. How could I insist?

'I helped her to obtain a comfortable berth on a ship going to Philadelphia, and I decided to take the first passenger boat available for Europe.

'It seemed to me, in fact, that by putting a long distance between myself and the scenes where so much had happened, I might lighten a little the burden of my past.

'I was deceiving myself. It is precisely here in Marseilles that my general collapse set in. What I am now about to tell you is something very strange indeed. No one is disposed to credit what I say, and all those in whom I have confided have invariably thought that I was out of my mind. I will not ask you to believe me, but only listen to me. One cannot expect anyone to believe in things that are incomprehensible and out of the ordinary.'

Mr F. rose and opened the windows which overlooked the garden. Far away, Notre Dame de la Garde seemed to float in the air. Everything would have spoken of peace and quiet if the solid bars, cutting across the landscape, had not reminded me of the spot in which we found ourselves. They seemed to warn me, in their own dumb language, to be careful and to avoid taking too literally the stories I had been told.

'It was at Marseilles,' F. continued after sitting down again, 'that I felt the first onset of the illness which has brought me here.

'Oh, it was nothing serious to begin with; just an occasional migraine which I attributed to a change of diet and of climate. But these headaches became more frequent and more violent. At first they lasted an hour and I rid myself of them by taking a capsule of aspirin; later on the attacks would continue for several hours and would not yield even to big doses of opiates. I felt as if my head had been taken in a vice and some unseen power were tightening the screw. You may say that was just autosuggestion. Up to a point, I agree, but one day, as I was preparing to go out for my morning stroll and put on my felt hat, I found that it came right down over my ears.

'The barber took too much off last night, thought I. As the hat was an old one, I bought another in the course of my walk, taking care to see that it fitted perfectly.

'Three months later, to my surprise, the new hat in its turn came down over my ears.

'This time I was angry! I had not had my hair cut the day

before. I went back to the hatter and vented my ill humour on him. He was very apologetic. "Since the war," he explained, "the felt we get has not the old quality; moreover, the leather used for the linings is too new. If you will allow me to put a cork band inside, that should make it fit all right." I left the shop reassured.

'Another three months went by. Suddenly I had to accept the evidence. The hat was indeed of a very poor quality and had become much larger in size.

'I gave it to the floor waiter in my hotel, who was obviously delighted to possess a practically new hat, and went to another shop. This time, to avoid trouble, I bought a hat from Lock, the London maker, regardless of the prohibitive value of the pound. You know how carefully these hats are manufactured and at what a price they are sold.

'Well, three months later I had to have the cork lining doubled, and three months later still I put it in the rag bag.

'The truth began to be apparent and to leap to the eye. The top of my head was shrinking.

'The pains, which grew worse and worse, no longer yielded to narcotics. Morphia alone still gave me some relief. And if the drug partially relieved the pain, it was unable to calm my apprehensions. I saw – I beg your pardon, I see – my skull melting, as you might say, beneath my eyes. I was the victim, as I was well aware, of a strange phenomenon which was linked in my imagination, and is still linked today, with the horrible bargain concluded the year before.'

I interrupted Mr F. By so doing I wanted to give him the impression that I was not disputing his way of looking at the matter. That attitude is always wise with madmen, thought I.

'And the head, the tsantsa. What have you done with it?'

'On arrival at Marseilles I presented it to the anthropological museum in the town. The curator expressed himself as very grateful for my gift. You can see it there, if you feel so inclined. As for me, I will never go to look at it again; no, even if I were allowed out from here, I would not go.

'I need not tell you, I suppose,' he continued with a note of



gratitude in his voice – gratitude due, no doubt, to the fact that he realized I was listening – ‘that I went to one doctor after another to tell them of my case. My story, of course, strikes them as fantastic. One of these doctors, a friend of my half brother, cabled to him as head of our family to say how worried he was about me, thus unscrupulously violating the code of professional secrecy. There was a family council. You know the proverb, “The absent are always in the wrong.” I was interned.

‘Would you believe it, I was quite in agreement about my internment, for several reasons. First of all, I considered myself guilty, and this prison that you see appeared to be almost too lenient a treatment for what I always call my “crime”.

‘Besides, I was in cruel pain and am now. Only a nursing home would provide me with the doses of morphia which still procure me a little sleep, and in normal life I could never have obtained it in sufficiently large quantities.

‘And then there was another thing. The modification in the shape of my cranium, which, for a long time, only I could see, was becoming apparent to the eyes of the most casual observer. I can tell quite easily. People turn round to stare at me as I pass. My Aztec-like skull puzzles them; it is not only conical but comical.’

I made a slight gesture of protest, just out of politeness, I admit.

‘For pity’s sake, let us quit the subject. You can see for yourself that I have become a figure for Carnival. May Ash Wednesday not be long in coming.’

Mr F. had risen. I understood that the audience was at an end and that he had no more to say to me. Moreover, he seemed exhausted, and I rose in my turn.

‘I can assure you that I have been keenly interested in your case. In my eyes you are immensely less guilty than you imagine. Just as Adam would never have plucked the fruit of the tree of knowledge had it not been for the treachery of Eve, you would never have bought the tsantsa but for the tricks and wiles of Miss Hoyet.’

‘She is dead, sir,’ put in Mr F. ‘Let her rest in peace.’

At that moment I realized with some dismay that he was still in love with the woman who had killed him.

The eyes of my interlocutor, sunk in the base of his pyramidal skull, had a strange glint in them. It was with a feeling of having escaped that I took leave of him and shut the door of his room behind me.

\* \* \*

'A strange story, in truth, my dear Doctor,' said I a few minutes later to Dr Marchand, who had waited for me in his office. 'A kind of persecution mania, associated with an inferiority complex, with the additional complication of masochism. . . .'

'You have clear insight,' ventured the doctor.

'Anyhow, the story of the hats is very odd. There we leave the realm of the subjective, don't we?' I asked. 'Unless, of course, it's a complete invention.'

'No, no,' answered the alienist. 'I'll tell you what has happened:

'You know that in the newborn child the two halves of the cranium are not joined to one another. It is only some months later that, very gradually, the two edges link up, join and become consolidated.

'In the case of my patient, these joins, for reasons of which I am unaware but which I attribute to a deficiency of calcium, had never taken place. It was only when he was of mature age that the mineral equilibrium was re-established and allowed the normal process to function.

'It is possible that the fact of his having quitted the tropics, which render one liable to anaemia, may have hastened the procedure.

'But a suture occurring so late could hardly do otherwise than provoke those pains in the head of which Mr F. complained and which are perfectly explicable and not in the least imaginary. On the other hand, what was imaginary was the explanation of my patient, who attributed the shrinking of his cranium to his having purchased a tsantsa which he took to have been manufactured (that is the right term to employ)

specially for him. From that to an obsession is but a step. And Mr F. has taken it.

'I was successful in arresting the disease temporarily by inserting some platinum arches between the edges of the bones. The operation was a success because for a year Mr F. had no more pain. When the pains began to return I had his head shaved, and beneath where the thick hair had been I could observe that the platinum plates had been bent by the irresistible force of the bone walls coming together.

'Of course, I offered to put in some fresh arches, which would have guaranteed him another year without suffering; at least, that seemed probable. He refused, and absolutely refuses now, and it is not part of my method to use violence towards my patients, especially when they are still capable of reasoning on certain points that concern them, as this man can.'

I thanked the doctor and left him. When crossing the threshold of the Villa de la Garde, I had the same feeling of relief that I had experienced a short time before when leaving the room of the sick man.

A few months later I returned to Marseilles. The leisure of a holiday, and curiosity combined, led my steps one day to the anthropological museum of this town.

There I looked in vain in the collection (which was, nevertheless, very well classified) for the white tsantsa presented by 'Don José'. The tsantsa, I thought, perhaps existed only in the excited imagination of my friend of a day.

The point was worth elucidating, and I sent in my card to the curator of the museum who received me almost at once.

'Yes, sir,' he replied to my question. 'Yes, this very curious object was presented to our museum a few years ago by a stranger, who was ill and was a resident in this town. Incidentally, he has died since.'

'Died?' I exclaimed.

He nodded and went on:

'It was a unique piece, at any rate when it was handed over to us, but the damp climate of Marseilles was not good for it. The skin of this anatomical specimen, which was probably badly tanned, began to revert after a few months to its original

dimensions. After two years it was a life-size, or very nearly life-size, human head that we had in a showcase. More than that, it was evidently the head of a rather charming young boy. It was impossible to look at it without a mixture of pity and horror. Visitors wrote to protest, with good reason.

'The following detail will show you how different the head had at that time become from the tiny doll-like head we had accepted as a curiosity. We decided that its proper place was no longer in our museum, but in a graveyard. We gave it into the care of a priest, who took it on himself to have it buried, though I am unaware of the exact spot.'

I took my leave and decided to recall myself to the memory of Dr Marchand.

I described to him the strange impression produced on me by the discovery of the change brought about in the white tsantsa, which grew bigger in proportion as the skull of the late Mr F. diminished.

'I don't quite see what you are getting at,' replied the doctor, who seemed rather put out by my visit.

'You surely don't mean to imply that my patient was right in establishing a connection between his own deformity, or rather his progressive deformation, and that of a museum specimen the recollection of which haunted his unhinged mind?'

What was I to answer?

In the eyes of science and men of science, the doctor was right. And yet . . .



## THE 'BEAN-NIGHE'

*By Dorothy K. Haynes*

THERE WERE only three colours left in the world, the purple of the night clouds, the yellow streaks in the western sky and the colour of the river, dark green, like a channel filled with broken bottles. The water came smooth round the bend, a motionless black ink-line, then chopped into little green waves as the river broadened.

The girl dragged her feet a little, raking the white frill of pebbles by the riverbank. She was thinking of the croft, just beyond the last hump of the moor. She had three miles to walk to her work in the morning, and three to walk back at night. They kept her so late at Knockhallow, cleaning and carrying and cleaning again, that it was nearly always dark before she got home. In the winter, when the snow was too deep to be crossed, she only came home once a fortnight. Sleeping at Knockhallow, with the winds roaring round the turrets and draughts creeping round corners, she shivered for the friendly warmth of her own bed, with her sister sharing the same plaid and pillow, and the fire left on all night, glowing red on the rough walls. In the summer, when Jeannie kicked and scratched, and Ian was coughing through the wall, trying to smother the noise in the blankets, she gasped for the loneliness which at least allowed her room to breathe. She lived in a perpetual dream of being otherwise, but did not realize it, because she did not know what she wanted. At the end of her day's work, all her thought was to be home again, free to sit or sleep, with nothing to do.

The heather had faded to grey, the trees beyond the river were like black paper-shapes gummed against the sky, and bats were nothing but flickers in the air. In the gloaming, sounds carried a long, long way, distinct as a bell in an empty

room. The girl stopped to listen to the loneliness. A bird shrieked in the trees and flew away, trailing a sob behind it; something darted from the heather, rattled a stone and fled, and from somewhere by the waterside came the splash-clap noise of a woman washing clothes. It rose above the glug and gurgle of the current, stopped for a while and began again. It would be her mother, washing out something for Ian. When he coughed a lot, and spat red mouthfuls into the jar by his bed, his clothes were often soaked with sweat, and his mother, having no water in the house, would take them down to the river, rinse them and leave them outside to dry.

The splash-clap grew louder, then stopped as Mary drew near enough to see. 'Mother!' she called. 'Will I help you, Mother?' The woman did not answer. She was bent double, dabbling with her hands, a dim white smudge in the greyness. Her white gown was down to her ankles, and the garment she was washing clouded the water like milk. It looked as if she had risen suddenly, urgently from her bed, and hastened to the river while still asleep, treading trancelike on heather and thistle. She rubbed and rinsed at some stain, soused and splashed the water, then stood up, lifting streaming white linen at arms' length, wringing it, flapping it and soaking it again. Suddenly, disturbed, she looked over her shoulder, and Mary saw that it was not her mother at all. This woman was short, with a withered, mean face, and small, horrible feet grappling the ground, bare, webbed like a duck's.

The girl stepped back, too frightened to speak. One more backward step, and she was running and stumbling over the stones, looking over her shoulder to see whether the ugly woman was following. Her legs were wet, spattered with drops as if the washer had whirled the wet garment to strike her. She could see nothing now but a white shadow, standing quite still, staring after her.

Inside the kitchen, her mother was warming milk at the fire. Big and comforting, with her hair halfway down her back, she put a cup and plate on the table and lifted a finger to her lips. 'Jeannie's just sleeping,' she said. 'Dinna wake her.'

'Mother, Mother—'

'Wheesht, can't ye? What is't? Is there trouble up at Knockhallow for ye?'

'No, no, Mother. Mother, there's a woman down there, washing — I don't like the look of her. You should have seen the way she glowered at me, and the ugly face of her —'

'Mary! Did she speak to ye? Did she speak?'

'No, but she would have come at me, if I'd waited.'

'Did you speak — ask her anything?'

'I only said "Mother." I thought it was you washing like you sometimes do, for Ian. Then she turned —'

'What was she washing, Mary, for the love of God? Did you see?'

'Something white — I don't know. I didn't like it. Mother, what's wrong? What have I done, Mother?'

'God help us, child, you'll wake your brother. *He* doesn't need to know yet. Mary, yon was the bean-nighe, that washes the shrouds of the dying. Bless your nimble feet that she didn't catch you, Mary, or she'd have lamed you for life. There was old Donal Fergus that she caught on the hip with the wet shroud, and he never walked again.'

'But whose shroud —'

'Somebody soon to die. Oh, Holy Mary, and *he* took a bad turn this day, after his breakfast. Three cups of blood, and him still weak from the last bleeding he took —'

'Ian?'

'Aye. She'd have told you that, if you'd crept up and held her. She has to answer, if you catch her first — but the risk's not worth it. It's Ian she's washing for.'

'But she has no right! She's got no right to come and tell people things like that. What right has *she* — with his shroud, getting it ready before he needs it —'

'Hush, dearie, quiet. It gives us time to prepare. It's a sorry job for her, too, to wash the dismal things, all night long, always desolate. Even God must be sorry for the poor creature sometimes.'

\* \* \*

In the morning, she did not go to work. The horror of the



bean-nighe was upon her, and she was afraid to leave the house. Let the cook at Knockhallow storm in her kitchen, let the housemaid do the menial tasks herself; she would stay away till the death was past, and her brother's body carried over the threshold.

'What's wrong with Mary?' asked Ian, pale among the pillows, beautiful as no man ought to be.

'Oh, she had a sick turn during the night,' said the mother. 'I'm keeping her off work for a day or two.'

'Poor Mother!' He twisted his lips, trying not to cough. 'Always somebody ill in the house. Never mind, I'm better this morning. It won't be long till I can fish again.'

The woman turned away, before he saw her tears. He was always so sure he would be well again, always talking of the river, where the salmon printed silver circles in the air as they leaped under the sun.

As the day grew hotter, he was carried out to sit at the door, and Mary sat beside him, silent, till he wondered why she would not speak to him. She felt she could not leave him for a moment, must make the most of her time with him, but she was in agony lest she should say one rash word. The river was a navy blue line in the distance, the moor heaved slanting shoulders of brown and yellow, and the sun burned like a spot of bright solder. Their mother worked, and Jeannie worked. Only the girl and her brother were idle; they sat limp in the quivering air, he tired with the heat, she tired with terror.

Remembering her father's death, she tried to think what it would be like to lose Ian. There would be the sombre waiting at the bedside, and the flatness of the moment when it was all over. There would be black clothes to buy, a coffin and a funeral to pay for. (It cost a lot to drive horses over the moor to the graveyard.) There would be festivity of a sort, eating and drinking, a gathering together of neighbours far distant, and after that, a little more room in the house. No more nights disturbed with his coughing, no more sickening glimpses of blood in the jar by his bedside. She thought of these things as she sat beside him, and she could hardly believe them, because things like that belonged to dreams and stories. Nevertheless,

she never doubted her mother. If it was possible for her to see the web-footed washer (and there was no doubt that she had seen her), it was possible for the omen to come true. It did not occur to her, then, that she could be washing the shroud for anyone else but Ian. It could not be for Jeannie, who was a healthy elf, able for a woman's work; not for her mother, who was only brought to bed when her children were born; not for herself, because such things could not apply to one so ordinary. No, it was Ian who was going to die, and though it would be cruel to tell him so, it would be a mortal sin to let him die unprepared.

\* \* \*

But two days passed, and Ian did not die. The mornings broke blue and hazy, and the sun shifted, till its heat bored into the head like pain. The heath rustled underfoot, the flowers whitened and dried, and the rocks burned. Only the thistles seemed to thrive, their green-silver spikes tense with strength, their plumes burning like blue gas jets.

The second night passed, and on the third day, Ian was better than he had been for many months. It might be true that he would one day die of his sickness, but when? Would it be within the year, or the month, or the week? Since all must die, the bean-nighe tells only of the death which is soon to strike. Perhaps it was not *his* shroud. Then whose —?

The work of the croft was left undone. Who could tend land and cattle when there was so soon to be death in the house? Jeannie did not know what worried her elders, but she would not work when everybody else idled. True, the house had been cleaned ready for the funeral, but it had been done quickly, and now there was not enough work inside for three pairs of hands. Ian did not notice. Sunk in his book, drowned in deep ponds of print, he lay at the door and heeded nothing. Time went by like a slow, hot cloud, and life stood still, waiting for death to come and free them from their waiting.

On the third night, a faint breeze of doubt troubled the watchers. Nothing had happened. Perhaps, nothing would happen. Ian was cheerful, his cough nothing more troublesome

than an odd huskiness in the throat. Mary began to worry about her work. She did not care for scrubbing stone floors, and running here and there with never a minute to herself, but the drudgery of a big household was better than the idleness of suspense. Up at Knockhallow, there was laughter in the kitchen, and comradeship below stairs. She spoke to her mother about it.

'Mother, hadn't I better be going back to work? Perhaps they'll not take me back at all, if I stay away too long.'

'Go back to work, and your brother like to die at any minute? Shame, Mary! The least you can do —'

'But, Mother, he's not dying yet. Is he not better in himself? Wouldn't you say so, now?'

'Oh, merciful Lord, I don't know what I'd say! If it wasn't that you swear you saw the washerwoman —'

'Mother, would it be among us the death had to be? Are you sure it would be among one of us?'

'It would. Who else is there? Can you see any other house across the moor? Is there any other family near us? It was one of us that saw the bean-nighe. And isn't it likely to be Ian would go next, him that has the same trouble as his father? Would you say it was one of the healthy ones that would be taken?'

'No. Only, Ian is better, and we might have to wait and wait — I'd rather it would come at once, Mother. I don't like to wait on, not knowing.'

The woman went to the door, and looked at the river. It was sunken and dry, hardly visible in its channel. She looked at her daughter, and her eyes were half frightened at the suggestion she made.

'Mary, there's only one way to know. You'll have to ask her.'

'Ask her? Oh — no! I wouldn't go by her again — she's frightsome, Mother!'

'You'll have to. If you don't find out, we'll never know till it's too late. Any one of us might be taken, and Ian left. We might be taken sudden, and no time to prepare. If it should be Ian, we can tell him — I don't think he'll be feared to die —'

'But if it's not Ian? Suppose she says it's you? How will I tell you? Or if it's me? What would I do?'

'What's before us will not go past us. We're as well to know it all, when we know half. Listen, and I'll tell you how to manage. You'll have to mind yourself. Creep soft, as quiet as you can, so's she won't hear you, or know you're there, then catch hold of her tight, so she can't get away —'

'Can't you do it, instead of me? You don't know how she glowered at me. I couldn't face yon again —'

'It's best for you to go, seeing you saw her last time. If you grasp her tight, she can't harm you. It's like a nettle.'

'Wouldn't you come with me?'

'Someone has to mind Ian. Go, now, like a good girl, Mary. When it's dark, that's when she comes —'

\* \* \*

There were only three colours left in the world, the purple of the night clouds, the grey of the heather, and the long black line of the river. She had waited a long while in the house, sitting at the fire till both Jeannie and Ian were asleep. Now, it was so dark that the afterglow had drained out of the sky, and the trees across the river were as vague as tumbledown steeples.

Long before she reached the place, she heard the splash-clap of the washer. Tonight, no bird called, no bat was a-flutter, no small-legged thing scuttered among the roots and stones. The sound was much louder. Her throat burned with a sour fluid of fear, her face went cold, yet she could not turn back. She stood and stared at the river, straining to see with her eyes what she was already seeing in her mind.

The strange washer was there. Seen like this, anonymous in her white garment, she was pathetic rather than horrible. Bent over the water, the white shroud slapping as she beat it on the stones, she was only a tired, sad body washing in the dark. There was a world of heartbreak in the way she lifted the linen, the water dripping from it in silver fringes. Was she there every night, or did she move from river to mere and swamp, wherever her ghastly work awaited her?

Mary wanted to weep at the misery of the thought, but fear, and the questions she had to ask, made her wary. She took off her shoes, and crept barefoot towards the river. The bean-nighe went on washing, deaf, deafened by the sludge and splash of her work. The girl's lip was between her teeth, her breathing fast and heavy, her heart beating like a muffled bell. One hand was stretched out to touch the trailing white hem, when a stone slipped under her foot. She stumbled, her hands blind in front of her. The being turned, her small face screwed and angry. There was a whirl of wet cloth, the stinging smack, smack of wet cloth on bare legs, and Mary was lying alone, with the dark river beside her, and not another soul in sight.

After the bean-nighe had gone, the sounds of the night began again. The air was full of the flutter of wings, the trees rustled and owls answered each other across the river. It was the first drop of rain that roused the girl. Her head shielded by her arms, her shoulders raised, cowering from ill usage, she pulled herself together and tried to rise. Her legs seemed to be made of lead. The stinging had left her flesh, and all she could feel was a dull numbness, an aching suggestion of pain to come. Whimpering, goaded by fear to a desperate strength, she knotted her muscles and forced and strained to move herself. Her legs lay useless, like two heavy sandbags anchoring her to the riverbank for ever more. The rain came quicker now and quicker, hissing into the river. The night was very black. She raised herself on her arms and dragged herself slowly, slowly, but the rain seemed to force her down and weary her. Suddenly, in despair, she gave up and screamed for her mother.

The footsteps came rushing over the brow of the little hill. Her mother had left Ian, the house, everything, when she heard the wild howl of her. 'Walk, Mary, lass!' she kept pleading. 'Try, for the love of God!' But Mary could not walk. The woman carried her in her arms to the croft, sure-footed with love, keening all the way. It was only when they were safe in the kitchen, with the moor and river shut out, that they remembered that a deeper tragedy was still in store for them; and they did not know on whom it would fall.

## THE TUNNEL

*By Raymond Harvey*

GEORGE WIGGS was just about to light his second cigarette when the small bell on the far wall of his signal box shattered the silence. Although he had been a signaller now for over eight years, the sudden pinging of the warning bell still made him jump. Automatically he fished out his pocket watch and glanced at the hands. Hmm, the 12.18's early tonight, he thought to himself as he replaced his watch. Still, the goods trains usually were early or on time. It was always the passenger trains that were late and which made his job more difficult. He pushed himself up from the old armchair and taking up his large white duster, made his way over to the neat row of brass handles. Selecting the appropriate lever he wrapped his duster around the handle and with an experienced tug shifted the lever into the required position. This done he pressed the bell button to warn the next signal box, then after writing the time in the log book returned to his armchair. Now for a quiet half hour, he thought to himself, knowing that the next train was not due until 12.45.

George settled down in the armchair and picked up the unlighted cigarette from the ashtray. Soon the blue tobacco smoke was curling into the air which was already laden with the smell of burning paraffin from the two bright lamps in the signal box. Comfortable and content, George selected one of the colourful magazines from his pile on the floor. One of his first jobs when he came on duty was to unlock his cupboard and take out his pile of bright magazines. George was very proud of his collection, for all the magazines contained pin-up photographs of girls. George had soon realized that his job required a great deal of killing time in between trains and had found that studying colour pictures of naked females was a

great help. Yet, as George gazed longingly at the picture of a large-breasted blonde girl emerging from the sea, he couldn't help comparing her with Veronica, his wife. Veronica may not be as well proportioned as this nymph of the sea, but she was just as pretty and her hair was just as blonde. But this nymph of the sea was smiling at him. Veronica didn't smile at him. This worried George. He realized that he and his wife had been steadily drifting apart in the last few years. He still loved Veronica deeply, but never seemed to get an opportunity of showing her. There was so much night-shift to do in his job and when he got home in the morning tired and ready for bed, Veronica would be getting up and starting her day. The only time he ever saw her really was from four o'clock to about nine o'clock in the evening when she always seemed to be busy doing some job or other and much too busy to spend time with George. On a few occasions he had put his arms around her while she was doing something around the house, only to be brushed away with a 'Oh, George, how do you expect me to do my work with you getting in the way,' or 'George, will you stop it and grow up.' Now he didn't try any more but contented himself with his pile of lovely girls, who always smiled at him and never told him to get out of the way or grow up.

Suddenly George jumped again. This time it was not the warning bell, but the jangling of his telephone bell that broke the silence. He closed his magazine and replaced it carefully on the pile. Now what was the matter, he wondered as he picked up the receiver.

'Hello, this is George Wiggs, box 172 speaking.'

'Hello, George. Harry here.' The voice of the chief controller crackled in his ear. 'Just ringing to tell you we've had a derailment. It's one helluva mess. Goods, not passenger, so no injuries, thank goodness.'

'Oh dear,' broke in George, 'how did it . . .'

'Sorry, George. No time for details. Too much to be done. Just letting you know you can stand down for tonight. I hope we'll be all clear by tomorrow. Goodnight.' There was a sharp click and the line was dead. George replaced the receiver slowly. Well, well, a stand down. He took out his watch and

saw it was only 12.35. If he got off as soon as possible he could be home before one o'clock. He gathered up his pile of magazines and locked them away. Then putting on his coat, he turned out the two oil lamps, locked the signal-box door and clip-clopped down the wooden steps.

The countryside was bathed in the pale white light of the full moon as he started his way home along the railway track. As the line would not be used that night he could take the short cut through Dingle tunnel. He strode briskly down the track, walking on the sleepers between the rails until at last he came to the dark cave-like opening of the tunnel. As he entered the tunnel the moonlight vanished and it was like leaving daylight and entering night, but he strode on confidently, having used this route many times in the past. Experience enabled him to pace his steps exactly from sleeper to sleeper although he could not see them. His footsteps echoed along the tunnel, together with the noise of tiny splashes as drips of water fell from the roof of the tunnel into the pools of stagnant water below. As he strode along he could hear the scratching patter of the rats as they scurried around in the tunnel searching for food. Here and there he could hear the rustling of paper as their sharp little teeth gnawed away at some scraps thrown from a passing train. Every now and then he would hiss out a 'shoo, gerraway,' and listen to their claws scampering on the cinders. Then he was out in the clean moonlight again and able to see where he was going.

The church clock was striking one o'clock as he turned down his street. He was thinking of how Veronica would feel having him home in bed with her. She would be in bed by now. He would go up quietly, undress and then kiss her gently. She would wake up and he would make love to her and they would be blissfully happy. His stride quickened as his imagination created the scene for him. He did love Veronica so deeply and he did want her so much. He quietly opened the gate and closed it behind him. Then to his amazement he saw the dark hulk of a motor-bike in the pathway leaning against the wall. He looked at the number plate and recognized it as the bike of one of his best friends, Stephen Hollins, but what



on earth was it doing here at this time? Puzzled he went to the back door and slipped his key into the lock. He quietly opened and closed the door and sat down on the floor to take off his shoes. All he could hear was his own heavy breathing after the brisk walk home.

The house was dark and quiet, but he could find his way around with his eyes shut. He crept silently up the stairs and tiptoed along the passage to the bedroom door. Before he reached the door his body froze. Faintly the voices floated from the bedroom. 'Kiss me again, Steve. Oh, darling, kiss me.' It was Veronica's voice and intermingled with it were the deep grunts of a man's voice, 'Love you, love you.'

George was dazed as he crept to the doorway. The door was half open and he could see the large mirror of his wife's dressing table. Reflected in the mirror and bathed in white moonlight lay the naked bodies of his wife and Stephen Hollins. Veronica's body looked like a white marble statue lying there, while the darker body of Stephen lay more in the shadow. But George could see quite clearly the heads locked in a passionate kiss, while Stephen's dark hand caressed the white moonlit body of his wife. The dark hand fascinated George; he watched its every move and the more it caressed her naked flesh the more he hated it. George knew if he watched much more he would charge in and kill both of them there and then, but instant death would be too good for them; they must suffer for this and suffer they would. George left the house as silently as he had entered and made his way back to the signal box for the night, and every step of the way back his plan became clearer and clearer, and when he finally reached the box, he was actually smiling.

George returned home at his usual time and was careful to behave exactly as he normally did. He went to bed at the usual time and got up at 3.30 pm when Veronica called him. After his meal, he went to get some more of the pills that the doctor had prescribed to help him sleep and then packed his sandwich box as usual. At seven o'clock he told Veronica that he had dropped in to see Stephen while he was out. He watched her face carefully as he was talking to her, but apart from the fact

that she avoided his eyes while she spoke, she covered up very well.

'What did you want to see Stephen for?' she asked, pretending to be looking for something in a drawer.

'Oh, just to ask him to bring you over to the signal box at 10.30 this evening,' he answered casually. Veronica looked at him for the first time since Stephen's name had been mentioned.

'What on earth do I want to go over to your silly little box at 10.30 for, may I ask?' she said sarcastically.

'It's a big surprise, dear,' he said smiling at her. 'I can't tell you yet, but I know it will make you very happy.' Veronica did not answer back but looked very puzzled. 'Well, will you come, darling?' he asked.

'What did Stephen say?' she asked cautiously.

'Why, he said he'd come with you with pleasure,' answered George.

'Oh, very well, then, but I'm not staying long, mind, and you'd better not be wasting my time.'

'I wouldn't dream of dragging you over for nothing, dear, you know that,' said George soothingly. Veronica grunted and went about her work again.

That evening when he started his shift, George did not unlock his magazine cupboard as usual but took out three china tea mugs and poured some milk into each one. Then he took some tablets from a little brown bottle and dropped them in two of the mugs. He got the primus stove working and put the kettle on. When Veronica and Stephen appeared at the door of the signal box, he was just pouring the boiling water into the teapot.

'Ah, here you are,' he said cheerfully, 'just in time for a cup of tea.' Veronica and Stephen sat down without comment, while George fussed around trying to make them feel at home.

'Now, shall I be mother?' he laughed as he poured the steaming tea into the three mugs.

'Help yourselves to sugar.' He pushed forward the tin box. 'Here we are; the mugs with handles for the guests, the one without for me.'

'Now look here, George. We didn't come all the way over here at this time of night, just to play tea parties with you.' Veronica's eyes flashed as she spoke. 'You said you had some ...'

'Patience, my dear,' interrupted George, 'all in good time. Just relax, drink your tea and make yourselves at home.'

Veronica and Stephen exchanged a quick glance, then settled back with their tea. While they were drinking, George pretended to be too busy to talk, and fussed around the signal box looking in books and pretending to check everything. At last, he settled down and drank his tea.

'Now,' he said, 'my good news is that I have been promoted to a bigger box in the North of England.' He paused and watched his wife and her lover, then continued, 'We get a house supplied, so as we will not be seeing Stephen any more I thought it a good idea to have this little farewell tea party.' He beamed across at them. Veronica looked stunned. She gazed at Stephen, not knowing what to say.

'Well, isn't anyone going to congratulate me, then?' asked George with a smile. Veronica and Stephen were too busy looking at each other in desperation to congratulate him.

'Well, dear me,' continued George, 'anyone would think you didn't want me to get this job, dear. Are you sure you wouldn't rather stay with Stephen? I can go on my own if you like.' He waited for her reply. Veronica seemed to have difficulty in thinking. She was holding her head and her eyes looked very tired.

'I don't want to go to ... to ... to ...' but that was all she said before her head slumped to one side of the armchair.

'Veronica, what is it?' Stephen asked getting to his feet and bending over her. But he seemed to lose his balance and toppled head first to the floor and lay in a heap where he had fallen. George's smile widened. 'Yes, I knew you wanted to be together, my dears, so together you shall be.'

He went to his cupboard and took out a coil of wire and a lantern. He placed the articles on the table and then began to undress his wife.

Stephen felt the sting of cold water on his face and opened

his eyes. He was lying inside a railway tunnel with George Wiggs standing over him with a lantern. He felt cold and stiff and tried to get up.

'Sorry, Stephen, old chap, but I'm afraid you can't get up. You see, I've tied you down with wire.' Stephen screwed his head around and saw that his wrists and ankles were securely tied with wire in such a way that his arms and legs were spread-eagled across the railway lines.

'Yes, Stephen,' said George, realizing Stephen had seen his plight, 'when the train comes along it will sever both feet just above the ankles and both hands and arms nearly to the elbows.'

'You madman,' cried Stephen, 'you can't do this! Let me go at once. Get this wire off, do you hear me?'

'Yes, I hear you, Stephen, but I'm just making sure your dirty little hands don't touch my wife any more.' George grinned down at him.

'Clever, don't you think, Stephen, and if you concentrate you should be able to feel Veronica's feet with your feet, you see she's in exactly the same dilemma as you are.'

Stephen craned his head and gazed down over his own naked body towards his feet and there he saw the naked spread-eagled body of Veronica. So that was the plan; the train would pass over both of them and just cut off their arms and feet so that they died slowly in great pain. He dropped his head back exhausted.

'Please listen, George. I'll do anything you say, just . . .'

'Sorry, old chap,' said George, 'but you're wasting your time. I've got to go now, anyway, so I'll just wake Veronica, and then I'll leave you two lovebirds to it.'

With that, he splashed some water over Veronica, waited until she opened her eyes, then said:

'Goodbye, Veronica. I hope you and your lover will be very happy for the next ten minutes.'

Then he picked up his lantern and crunched his way back along the cinders towards the signal box.

In the feeble glow of moonlight that reached them from the mouth of the tunnel, Veronica twisted her head to try and

understand what was happening. She babbled a stream of questions to Stephen and when she got the answers, she just screamed at the top of her voice to George to come and set her free, but George d'd not come. He was too busy making a bonfire with two piles of clothes behind the signal box. Even while she was screaming at the top of her voice, Stephen could hear the distant rumble of the approaching train. He tugged with his arms and legs, but the wire merely bit deeper into the flesh. He looked along the tunnel in time to see the front lights of the train flashing down towards them. The tracks were trembling beneath his legs and arms now, and Veronica's screams filled his ears with the roar of the engine. He pressed his head back, closed his eyes and felt his body stiffen in anticipation.

Two red-hot knives seemed to slice through his legs, then his arms, while all around, thunder seemed to be crashing at him. Then the thunder rolled away into the distance. He was aware of a burning pain in his arms and legs. He opened his eyes weakly and looked at the horrible little stumps that twitched just below each elbow. He clumsily propped himself up on his left elbow and saw his legs now came to dark points, while on either side of the rails an array of feet and forearms with open hands lay strewn about. Veronica groaned, then remembering what had just happened began screaming again as she saw the severed parts of her body. Stephen knew that they were both bleeding badly now, but would probably suffer this horrible pain for a long time before death finally came.

Veronica was beside herself now, calling George every name she could think of in between her wild screaming fits. Stephen realized there was only one way out for them. In extreme pain he worked his body on his bleeding stumps over to her, then wrapping the remains of his arms around her neck, he dragged her head round and placed it over the sticky rail. Then he placed his head over and tried to hold her still as best he could. He hoped that the wait for the next train would not be too long and when it came it would sever off the heads cleanly so that they would die quickly.

While they waited lying in the warm pool of their mingling

bloods, their attention was distracted by the long dark shapes that scurried around them, slowly getting nearer. Suddenly Veronica shrieked as a long fat rat began gnawing at her right foot, which was about a yard from her face. Other rats then closed in to start nibbling at other parts of severed limbs that lay around. Stephen tried to grip her to comfort her, but by now she was raving away to herself. Suddenly, she began complaining of the pain in her ankles getting worse. Stephen could think of nothing to say in comfort to her when he looked over his shoulder down at her legs and to his horror saw two black shapes pulling and chewing at the stumps of her legs. He threw his right leg across hers and the shapes scuttled back into the shadows. Then under his throat he felt the rail vibrate and he knew the end would soon come. He made sure her neck was also on the trembling rail, then closed his eyes. He felt her body stiffen against his as the roar of the train approached. He felt her firm breasts press against his body, then a great white light flashed through his head – then darkness.



## THE GROWTH

*By Bruce Lowery*

DAD HAD BEEN killed in the Canado-American War and I helped support Mother who had only a part-time job at the public library in our little town. In the evenings after work, she always had a habit of chattering to me for hours. Usually she gossiped about people seen at the library. Often she talked about some newly purchased patent medicine and its good or bad effects upon her.

It all began in that dreadful year 2021. For more than a week, she kept uncommonly quiet. Her face looked worried. On several occasions her eyes lifted from her knitting or reading to gaze long and oddly into space. I supposed that her health was troubling her more than usual; she was nearly sixty. But I knew she would tell me when ready. She attached great importance to privacy; despite my curiosity, I preferred to respect that silence.

Then one evening, with a prolonged anxious look into my eyes, she spoke at last. 'I would like to have your opinion about something . . . that has been worrying me.'

Ever since I could remember, Mother had been concerned about her health, although she avoided doctors. In fact, relatives, neighbours and even I, often made fun of the numerous bottles, pills and antiseptics. She would always answer reproachfully that no one could know how obsessed she was with disease and illness. All these precautions were a daily necessity to her peace of mind.

'About a week ago,' she continued, 'I noticed a little lump on my skin.'

I asked to see the lump and, as I had expected, she refused. Born in 1962, Mother had been devoted to the late twentieth-century revival of Victorian virtues. In all twenty-seven years



of my life with her, I had never seen her even partially unclothed. She had seldom put aside her modesty even for doctors, despite her constant fear of maladies.

She also declined to give me many details – the size of the lump, that was all. Slightly bigger than a pea, it was located just beneath her ribs on her lower left side.

‘How did it begin?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Have you seen a doctor?’

‘No,’ she stammered. ‘I’m afraid. You know I don’t trust doctors.’

‘Oh, well. You’re always fretting over nothing, anyway.’ I smiled to tranquillize her. I was much more disturbed about her mental peace than about the lump which I thought insignificant. ‘Is that all that’s been bothering you for a week? Forget about it, it’ll go away.’

Visibly, Mother became more troubled every day. ‘What shall I do? It’s growing! In only two days, it has increased to the size of a large marble!’

I asked to see it. Again she refused. ‘It hurts when I touch it,’ she confided, her fingertips pushing cautiously against her side. ‘I do have to tell someone. But I’m so embarrassed . . .’

‘Nonsense. It’s time you saw a doctor.’

‘But maybe he’ll make it out much worse than it is,’ she whined. ‘Or maybe he’ll diagnose it wrongly.’

There were only three doctors in town then. I reassured Mother that one of them could certainly take care of her. However, they all proved unsatisfactory – through no fault of their own, as I later learned. Each claimed that he had never seen the like before. Two prescribed salves to ease the soreness. One refused to treat the growing lump at all and recommended a skin specialist in Chicago.

Alarmed, I decided to make the trip. Mother protested that we could not afford such expense. My savings as a bank clerk, I replied, had been put away for such emergencies.

Meanwhile, we had lost much time, nearly two weeks. The growth was more than five inches in diameter. I could now see its shape protruding at least three inches beneath her blouse.

After explaining the situation, I was granted an exceptional leave of absence from the bank. At Mother's request, I gave my employer as few details as possible.

Mother complained continually during our long Tube voyage to Chicago. 'It hurts all the time now. There is a queer drawing sensation on my side like a suction cup.'

We spent our first night in Chicago in a hotel. I could hear her tossing fitfully in her bed. Twice I was awakened abruptly by gasping and shrill screams. 'I try not to sleep on it,' she explained. 'But sometimes I roll over on to it by mistake. Then it's excruciating - pains that dart out in all directions from the growth!'

Mother was put under observation in one of the best private clinics in Chicago. From the beginning, the treatment threatened to be long and costly. Fortunately, the head of the clinic, a learned man of foreign extraction, offered to keep Mother as a charity patient. I was amazed that he should do this. But, as he put it with intense interest, 'Her case is unique!'

Luckily, I found a room in a boarding house around the corner from the clinic. At Mother's request, I was very soon granted permission to come and visit whenever I pleased, even at night. Such liberty struck me as a bad sign. I was at her bedside as often as possible.

I could get no information from the doctors at all. They seemed vexed whenever I asked and always put me off. I often saw them coming in and out of Mother's room wearing puzzled looks. 'It's serious,' they would say to me evasively and hastily, 'but it will soon be removed and she'll get well.' 'But when?' I would ask. They would only reply that they had not yet finished the necessary examinations and diagnoses.

Extensive X-rays were made. I managed to get snatches of information concerning them, although I was never permitted to see them. A number of small pebble formations were found grouped irregularly together in one part of the growth, it seemed. The X-ray plates also revealed the development of two organs of dubious nature inside. One organ would tremble spasmodically and then lapse back to inertia. I had, in fact, begun to notice a quivering in the bulge beneath the sheet.

Another organ, motionless but always growing, was shaped something like a pear. That was all I knew. Nobody would tell me anything more.

A tiny specimen of the growth was to be removed for examination under the microscope. I was not allowed to witness the removal, of course. I waited uneasily in the adjoining room. Suddenly, I jumped at the sound of a piercing cry followed by loud sobbing. The local anaesthetic was, I learned, insufficient. They were forced to anaesthetize her completely in order to finish removing the specimen.

The growth had attained the size of a large melon. It extended from her left breast down to her pelvic bone. I was shocked at the speed of its progress. The bigger it grew the faster it grew.

Curiosity got the better of me and again I risked asking Mother to let me see it. She seemed deeply hurt that such a question could come from me. Ashamed, I resolved never to ask her again under any circumstances.

The days went by. 'When are they going to operate? When?' Mother cried frantically. I attempted to get information from the doctors. They said the operation would soon be scheduled, but were evasive about the exact date. I began lingering near the laboratory door in hopes of overhearing bits of conversation. In vain. I finally did succeed in getting the chief doctor alone in the corridor. He seemed either very irritated or very embarrassed. He told me flatly that his profession forbade him to disclose such knowledge. When I protested, he replied, 'Just remember, we are doing our best. Even though you are her son,' he added, 'it is best for both her sake and yours to ask as few questions as possible.'

Now I was very much alarmed and began to make all sorts of suppositions. Nevertheless, I always tried to be cheerful with Mother. The most unbearable was to see that eternal question in her eyes, to hear it on her lips: 'Why? Why?' Worse still was to have her ask me to leave after saying, 'I need sleep . . . I only wish you didn't have to see me this way.' Obviously, she really wanted me to stay and comfort her. In vain I endeavoured to get her mind off the growth. 'I can't

think of anything else – always feeling the pain, always thinking of it!’ she would whimper, unable to take her eyes from the rising mass beneath the sheet.

‘But it can’t be helped, Mother. Try to think of pleasant things. Try to think of the past.’

‘The past? Strange,’ she smiled wanly. ‘I haven’t been here long and yet I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to be well. Now it seems as if I had always been like this.’

She arched her back on the bed, grimacing in frequent spasms. ‘I can feel pain cutting all through me – out to my fingertips, down into my feet. Then there’s that excruciating sensation of drawing. When I gave birth to you, I thought nothing could be worse than labour pains. But that only lasted half an hour, just time enough to get to the hospital. It was sheer pleasure compared to this . . .’

I shuddered. ‘Mother, I wish you hadn’t made that comparison . . .’

Soon the growth covered her entire side and abdomen. Of course, that was only what I could gather from the size of the mound. I assumed there might be much more than I could see. Above, it had reached her clavicle, and below, it was encroaching upon the tissue of the upper leg. Sometimes I could actually see the thing give a twitch or quiver of its own. Mother was often so drugged with morphine and sedatives that she scarcely recognized me. When I came by at night to look in on her, I could hear her moaning and sobbing from the end of the corridor. I would open the door quietly, exchange whispers with the night nurse at her bedside, wait a while, then leave at last.

One day, upon entering her room, I passed the chief doctor on his way out. ‘I’m going to get well!’ she cried deliriously. It was the first time I had seen her happy and smiling despite the pain. ‘They are going to operate! I’m going to get well!’

The days went by. Still no definite plans for an operation had been made. I demanded to know when they would operate, but I was told again that they had many things to take into consideration, especially Mother’s resistance to the shock of such an operation. Besides, they claimed to need still more

information about the growth.

Day by day I could see Mother's hope fading. And the growth continued to swell.

The desire to view the growth became more and more of an obsession with me. I loathed myself for such base curiosity in a crisis. Try as I might, I could not get it out of my mind. I kept wondering why the doctors had said that it was for my sake that I was not told more.

'What's going to happen to me?' Mother groaned, her head twisting anxiously on the pillow. 'Do you really think I'll ever get well?'

She was searching my eyes. She knew me better than anyone and I was aware it would take much cunning to conceal from her what I really thought. 'Of course, you're going to get well. I overheard the doctors saying you would,' I added, hoping such a false detail might help to convince her. 'Cheer up. In a few weeks we'll be going home, Mother dear.'

'Oh, I hope so!' She managed a feeble smile.

One night, as I sat beside the nurse, drowsing in my chair, I was jolted awake by a long shrill scream followed by terrified gasping and choking. 'It's getting bigger!' she shrieked, 'bigger and bigger!'

Although her nightgown had once been extremely loose and comfortable, the garment had become agonizingly tight with the gradual swelling and it had to be ripped off immediately. I was asked to leave.

Mother continued to moan and weep softly, tossing her head from side to side on the pillow. And always that intolerable question in her eyes! That question addressed to the invisible forces of justice in nature. 'Why? Why? I can't remember ever having done anything wrong in my life, certainly nothing to deserve even five minutes of this!'

Occasionally, I could see her hand wander irresistibly over to the growing bulge. For a while, her fingers would explore the swelling, then she would suddenly gasp and jerk them away again. 'I keep hoping it's all a dream,' she sobbed desperately. 'Then I want to touch it to make sure. But it's always there, and always bigger.'

Mother begged the doctors to operate immediately. They replied elusively that she would have to wait until a specialist came who alone could perform it. Yet they continually reassured her and told her not to give up hope.

Doctors had begun travelling in from New York, Europe and everywhere. The chief doctor would take them into Mother's room and ask me to leave while he showed them the growth. Mother complained helplessly of being 'exhibited like a freak'. But when they said that it was for her own good, she could do nothing but give in.

Finally I had understood the futility of trying to see the growth or even of finding out much. Mother knew nothing. And no one would tell me much. However, I did glean bits of information.

The growth defied the diagnoses of even the finest specialists in the world. They consulted together for long periods. Yet when they entered the room or passed in the hall, I could easily see from the bewildered looks that no definite conclusion could be reached. Nearly two weeks they had had to study the case. They could not have left any possibility unconsidered. They had checked even the most obscure treatises on rare excrescences in the human organism. Such a growth had never before been met with – to the best of their knowledge – in the history of medicine. And naturally they hesitated to operate without knowing more.

My curiosity made me ashamed; I was thankful Mother could not read my mind. I knew that the doctors frequently consulted in the laboratory. Seeing the hall empty one day, I stopped and cautiously turned the doorknob. When I had the door open a couple of inches, I could hear voices. A group of bearded, foreign-looking men, wearing old-fashioned coats and those things they used to call neckties, were deeply engrossed in huge medical books, microscopes, glass specimen slides and elaborate charts. I could gather from their conversation, so long as they spoke English, that the charts indicated such information about the growth as colour, shape, texture and general development. But they had not as yet determined the nature of the two organs or of the pebble formations visible on

the X-rays. As possible explanations for the growth, they mentioned a new type of cancer, fall-out, cosmic burns and moon virus, but these were all rejected. I could infer very little from this and my damned inquisitiveness was only excited rather than alleviated.

'... and the roots are deep and widespread,' I overheard the head doctor say. 'An operation, without the slightest doubt, could only hasten her death. We must, of course, put the patient's interest first. Besides, valuable scientific data might be distorted, if not lost altogether, if we were to interfere with the natural development of the growth ...'

I closed the door carefully, thinking the word 'natural' an odd choice. Now I had the certainty of what I had guessed for some time – that they had no intention of operating and that Mother could in no way be saved. I took this news quite well; in fact, I looked forward to the day when Mother would find release in death.

Mother whimpered constantly, asking when they would operate, when the thing would go away, when the pain would stop. The pain must have been considerable because the doses of morphine had to be increased regularly. Mother's appetite had reached fantastic proportions.

I could watch the writhing shape beneath the sheet. It was growing very rapidly now. There was always a visible advance between morning and evening and as much or more again the following morning when I returned to her bedside. Over her abdomen it rose more than a foot and a half high. Then, gradually it tapered off near the edges which extended from her collar down into her legs. The growth was creeping out on all limbs now, especially the left arm and left leg. I knew that the following day I would see it emerge on her neck; I would see it for the first time.

This Mother knew as well. Neither of us had spoken of it. The next day I found she had ordered a screen placed between her bed and my chair. I protested, but she explained, 'It's bad enough that the doctors and nurses should see me this way. But not you, my own boy – I simply can't bear to have you

look at me the way I am. Oh, what did I ever do to deserve this!’

Indeed, Mother had led such an exemplary life that one would almost have thought that too much virtue was displeasing to God.

Although afraid of hurting her at such a time, I did risk objecting to the screen. She agreed, and it was removed. But whenever I came into the room, she covered her head with the sheet. From then on, I saw nothing but the massive squirming growth beneath the sheet, and her right hand. I held her hand, but we spoke very little. She was very numb from the unrelenting pain and groggy from the morphine. Despite this she never once neglected to pull the sheet over her head before I was let in.

One morning there was an odd silence. Without her continual moaning, the room seemed unbearably quiet. I knew she could no longer speak. She just squeezed my hand repeatedly, desperately. She was trying to give me a message. I presumed she wanted the doctors to operate immediately. I pleaded with them, but in vain. ‘Don’t worry, Mother, they’re going to operate,’ I soothed. ‘They’re going to operate now. Soon you’ll be going back to your job in the library. Soon you’ll be seeing all your old friends again.’ These lies seemed to ease the tension in her hand somewhat.

Since it was no longer possible to feed her, I knew it would only be a matter of time. I was afraid the doctors might resort to intravenous feeding and prolong the agony, but no. Apparently, they wished to do nothing that might interfere with what they called the ‘natural’ progress of the thing.

Even so, time dragged out unmercifully. The next day an extra nurse went on duty with the usual one. I assumed that meant the end was not far off. The nurse kept writing and marking notes on charts. Mother continued to pull the sheet up over her face when I came near. It was amazing that she still had the strength. I was deeply moved by this obstinate desire of hers to spare me. It would have been easy now to lift back the sheet and satisfy my curiosity. But I resisted the temptation and respected her wish.



I then thought I saw the bulge writhing mysteriously of its own. Mother would no longer give me her hand to hold. I learned indirectly that, in addition to Mother's heartbeat, they had discovered another throbbing sound. One of the two unaccountable organs inside the growth had begun to beat of its own.

Seven or eight hours later, Mother's breathing suddenly began growing more and more arduous. Then it stopped unexpectedly. I wept with mixed relief and sadness; thank God, Mother was delivered at last.

After a long stillness, there came a violent twitching in the growth. Doctors began rushing in and whispering excitedly among themselves. The head doctor stood observing the quivering mass for a moment, then abruptly insisted I leave.

Before I was out of the room, however, the silence was broken by a loud phlegmy rattling noise, long and laboured. I wanted to stay, but the head doctor got angry and ordered me out, telling me it was for my own good. Later, I demanded information. Choosing his words very cautiously for my sake, he explained that the other undefined pear-shaped organ had finally turned out to be a kind of lung. Thus it had saved itself from extinction after Mother's breathing had stopped. But it could not exist for long, he declared. Once it had exhausted its only source of nourishment, it would have to die.

During the night, I entered the clinic. Despite the heavy padded door to the room, I could distinctly hear the thick rattle of the breathing growth. The intake of air was prolonged and tortured while the release was decidedly shorter and almost effortless. Apparently, the loud rattling was caused by some viscous obstruction in the air passage.

Early the next morning, I returned to investigate. I saw two men leading the night nurse away. As she passed by with her cap askew, she stared at me and grinned unnaturally. I learned later that the morning nurse upon arriving had found that the night nurse had uncovered the growth and was staring at its heaving shape. With each successive rattling sound, she would give a little nod in rhythm.

Everyone was waiting now, waiting; it was agony. Finally,

the rattle ceased. Then the chief doctor arrived just in time to perform an autopsy so as to gather information needed to complete his medical paper. I was about to ask him if I might at last view the remains. Yet when I saw his face, pale and upset, after the autopsy, I knew such a request would be refused 'for my sake'.

So that no one on the outside would see the growth, customary procedure was disregarded and not even the undertaker was allowed to accompany the empty coffin to the clinic. The remains were placed inside the casket. I made arrangements to have the body shipped home the next day on the same Tube that I was to take. It was unlikely, I thought, that I should ever see the growth at all.

I had to admit I didn't even know exactly when my mother had died. The right date, however, was needed to order a tombstone. I asked the head doctor. We both hesitated between the day the growth's breathing had stopped and the day Mother's nose had been closed by its advance. At length, we decided upon the latter.

I was to spend one last night in Chicago. I could not help noticing which room the coffin had been put in. Late that night I lay awake thinking that I, her own son, would never know exactly what had killed my mother. I decided I had a right to see the growth. Taking my flashlight, I slipped down the corridor. The night staff was small and I easily reached the coffin without drawing attention.

The room was dark, yet I did not dare use anything but the flashlight. When I opened the lid, the odour of decay which met my nostrils was not human, rather more like that of mushrooms. I was momentarily overcome by a heady nausea and the urge to vomit. By breathing through my mouth, I managed to attenuate the strength of the odour, but only partially. So I covered my mouth with my handkerchief.

The disrespectful way I directed the flashlight inside the casket fills me with self-loathing even today. I was deeply ashamed to recall Mother's last wish. Yet that did not stop me.

What I saw inside the casket was a large mass wrapped in a

kind of white winding-sheet. I began to wonder if I hadn't made a mistake. It seemed considerably deflated compared to the size of the mound I had seen on the bed. I tugged at the sheet, but it clung to the viscous substance like adhesive tape. I pulled harder until I finally peeled it off, causing the mass to rise a bit, then drop down again with the soft thud of gelatine.

Seeing it at last, I immediately understood why the nurse had lost her mind. I had to turn away a moment and steady myself against the wall. Again I looked inside. The mass was totally without shape. I wondered where they had put Mother. I could find no traces of head, arms, legs or body. Perhaps they had put the body elsewhere and this was only the growth. A single oblong mound of jelly was all I could see. Perhaps they intended to put the body in later, after further examination. Certainly, this could only be the growth.

A shiny membrane remotely resembling skin covered the lumpy shape. The colouring varied from a nacreous grey lustre to an almost transparent bottle-green. Violet-black veins of all thicknesses, some a full inch wide, wove a dark network over the lighter tissue. Upon closer inspection with the flashlight, I realized, however, that the bottle-green colour was also a vast network of veins, finer than that of a leaf, which branched away from the large violet-black vessels.

I thought I might have rolled it over in jerking out the winding-sheet. There was nothing to indicate which side I might be looking at. It had no sides. How was I going to turn it over without touching it? Steeling myself, I endeavoured to grasp it somewhere. But the slimy, glutinous membrane was as slippery as a large half-deflated squid. The combined senses of smell, touch and sight were overpowering. I had to fight a kind of seasickness.

I depressed the opalescent mass here and there expecting to locate something solid as an aid to turning the thing over. Beneath the transparent surface I found several hard objects grouped irregularly. No doubt they were the pebble formations the doctors had mentioned. Bringing the light closer, I could see they looked much like teeth, though somewhat beastlike and larger than human teeth. I went on searching for some-

thing like a bone, but there was no other hard substance in the gummy bulk. It was then that I was sure Mother's body was elsewhere. For her skeleton and flesh could not have been so unrecognizably absorbed into this shapeless animal jelly!

I was queasy from loathing, but I could not stop. I had to go on. Reaching underneath, I hooked my fingers into something. In a second I managed to roll the thing over with a sticky, moist thud. What my fingers had caught hold of was the stitched, lengthwise slit of the doctor's autopsy. The change of position caused some violet-black substance from the veins to ooze thickly through the stitches.

I supposed that, since autopsies were made through the abdomen, this must be the front. But there was no other way of telling. With the flashlight, I searched closely for some trace of eyes, nose or mouth. There was absolutely nothing but the lumpy, vein-webbed surface. Then suddenly I came across a strange orifice near the middle of the stitched slit. Obviously, this was the hole whose phlegmy rattle had driven the night nurse mad. It was lined with loose flaps of lavender membrane which easily explained the loud sucking noise it had made.

Then, to my aversion, I found, near that queer nostril, a huge eye. It had not been noticeable at first because it lay half hidden beneath the iridescent skin and the network of veins. It was at least three inches in diameter and did not look much like a human eye. It had no iris; there was only a gaping black hole, probably the pupil. If the growth had survived, perhaps the eye would eventually have risen up through the viscid tissue to the surface.

To my surprise, I next discovered three little protuberances at what I guessed to be the lower right end of the mass. They resembled . . . yes, they were . . . ends of toes, the ends of Mother's toes. I knew now that I had been wrong to suppose that the growth might have been separated from the body.

Frantically, I searched for some other sign. On the right side, I found more protuberances, four of them. One was even long enough to have a bit of fingernail still attached to it. The nail was easy to recognize as Mother's by its delicate oval

form. On the fingertips, the division between the normal human flesh and the shiny membrane was quite distinct. The advance of the tiny green capillaries – like ivy on a wall – had been arrested by death. I could not have told where Mother's head had been, had I not discovered, at the upper end of the mass, a few remaining strands of grey hair . . .

Mother is on record as the first one to go – nearly two years before the epidemic began and growths started appearing on people everywhere.

## LOVER'S LEAP

*By Frank Quinton*

IT WAS BAD enough in the daytime; being on the pier with all its memories. At least, one had the anonymity of being a face in the holiday crowd.

Tonight, in the summer theatre, it was far worse.

Bernard stared down the passage that led onstage from his dressing room; it was like a condemned man's last walk. But he mustn't dramatize this.

Flicking a thread of cotton from his trousers, he straightened his waistcoat, and went on his way with upright elegance.

He felt the soldierly gaze of the stage doorkeeper in his box at the far end, and the breeze of freedom from the stage door beyond. Then he wheeled left and walked into the wings.

In the aura from the stage, he saw Barbara Johnson's wicked wink, from the lighting control board. She played the part of his stage daughter, and had just made an exit.

He squeezed her fingers, briefly, and set his face towards the stage.

'Come on, Richard. Richard, darling, are you there?' called his stage wife.

'Coming, my dear.' He ran on, and paused for the ripple of applause.

He opened his mouth, and then, nearly forgot his lines.

There he was! Just as they had said, the bald man in the front row, with the mayoral insignia round his neck. -

What the rest of the company didn't know, was that it was his brother, Paul.

Somehow Bernard managed to act his way through to the end of the play, and even to take three curtain calls.

Had Paul recognized him?

Probably not, for he was heavily made-up, and his stage

name was Howard Booth; had been for years. A name he brought back from his tour in Melbourne.

On the way back to the dressing room he spoke to Harold Hitchen, the stage manager of the smart little touring play.

'I don't feel like meeting a mayor tonight. Please don't invite his worship backstage.'

Hitchen bristled. 'In a seaside town like this, it doesn't pay to be unsociable,' he rapped. 'A little hobnobbing with the mayor will encourage other townsfolk to see the play. Anyway, you can relax, he seems to have vanished.'

Good, thought Bernard, letting himself into the dressing room; it's not often that I'm that lucky.

He dropped into a gilded armchair in the corner. A black cloud hovered over his mind – probably the heat – and he closed his eyes.

'Darling – may I come in?' Barbara knocked and put her head round the door. 'Don't forget the party tonight.'

'Oh no, you must excuse me this time, my dear.'

'Why? Where are you going?' She pouted.

He tried to make it flippant: 'For a walk on the pier, I expect.' The first excuse that came into his head.

She looked at him with a question in her eyes.

'Not tonight, my darling,' he repeated.

'Oh, very well, then. Goodnight, Dad,' and she was gone.

'Dad?' – yes, he was getting old. Twelve years older than that faraway April when he stole the heart of his brother's pretty wife, Ella.

It hadn't lasted long; Ella had moved on to other men's arms. Many other men. Who was she kissing now? Certainly not Paul; him she never returned to. That would have taken real guts.

There was a tap on the door.

'Come in.'

'Good evening, Bernard,' said Paul.

Bernard jerked upright.

The enamelled mayoral chain round his brother's neck cast a golden reflection on his throat. He was immaculate, calm, steady eyed.

Bernard rose and held out a shaky hand. 'It's been a long time,' he said, inadequately.

Paul gripped the hand. He looked at him and said: 'I see you haven't changed much. Still got your hair, your fine teeth.'

'And now, a beard,' said Bernard, with a forced smile.

'Oh yes. It's one of your professional disguises, of course. The kind you wear when you want to be taken for someone else.'

'And you've your mayoral chain. I thought it was only worn on special occasions?'

'This is one. Brothers meeting, after twelve long years.'

Bernard nodded agreement. 'Shall we go and have a drink at the Albion?'

'That's not a fitting celebration. I've a better idea. Why not be my guest? I have a perfect meal waiting at home for you.'

Bernard's hungry stomach applauded the suggestion. He had a passion for good food, and Paul was a fine hobby chef. Funny, how men with hair ate well, and men without cooked well.

Something made him hesitate, though.

He was the same flesh and blood as the other, and he could not believe that such a proud nature would so readily forgive the man who stole his wife. Unless, of course, he wanted to be rid of her!

And that might well be the explanation.

They had stopped near a large, specially built Rolls, waiting outside the foyer, when the problem was suddenly solved.

A chauffeur whipped the car door open for the mayor, and his worship ushered Bernard inside ahead of him.

'Home, please, George,' he ordered.

Paul sank into the foam soft seat with its broad arm. Like most actors, he adored luxury.

A car radio whispered orchestral music, and the mayor offered him a small, but good cigar.

Suddenly, he succumbed.

Here he was, being whisked in a luxurious car whose princely headlights shed their radiance along the hedgerows, to



a good dinner, at a large, well-appointed house. Might as well sit back and enjoy it.

There was one question he would have asked, but didn't dare – was there still that same cosy swimming pool at the bottom of the garden? Or had Paul filled it in, to bury the memory of that occasion when he came home unexpectedly from London, and caught Ella and Bernard bathing in the nude?

Paul removed his mayoral chain, and folded the medallions inside a velvet-lined case which he placed in his pocket.

'Phew! It's a sweltering night,' he said. 'How about a nice cold swim before dinner?'

Bernard squirmed. 'In the pool?' he said.

'Where else?' smiled Paul. 'It's been modernized since you last saw it. Contemporary tiles, concealed lighting – a regular little lido.'

The big car glided up a curved drive and stopped in front of a Georgian house.

The lights were on, and through the tall windows, Bernard could see the eighteenth-century staircase descending through four floors.

Its scrolled iron balustrade was decorated with vine leaves and debouched on to a white marble-floored hall, where a Moorish hanging lamp shed mysterious light on to a Grecian statue, with averted head.

Paul produced a big key to unlock the front door, and Bernard stared.

'No servants?'

'Marie, the cook-housekeeper, is off for the weekend, and the day help finishes at five.'

Bernard sweated.

Suddenly, he was aware of the ceaseless, cheerless chirping of the grasshoppers which infested the fields around. From every blade of grass, and every tree, for miles around they were saying, Don't-do-it, don't-do-it, don't-do-it, as he entered the house.

Paul switched on the rosy lighting in the lounge and opened a wine cupboard.

'Feel like a drink?'

Bernard nodded.

He had an embarrassing memory of the beautiful staircase which welcomed them into the house.

If it could gossip, it would resound with squeals of laughter; the laughter of a faithless wife, whom he chased upstairs to her husband's empty bedroom . . .

But, mercifully, it was silent.

Paul held a bottle up to the light, and examined it critically.

'You'll like this,' he said. 'It's a Californian wine, Pinot Noir, 1965. I discovered it on a trade visit to Los Angeles. Fit for a prince.'

He wiped a wine glass and poured the beverage out with a connoisseur's care.

Then he handed it to Bernard. 'You can finish the bottle after our swim,' he said, putting it back in the wine cupboard.

'Aren't you having a drink, then?'

'Of course. Mine's a gin and tonic.' Paul helped himself to them.

He smiled. 'I remember you once said it was a curious non-drink.'

They toasted glasses, and he added: 'I suppose you would call me, now, a non-husband.'

Here it was! His first reference to his brother's adultery. And it was so casual, that Bernard was encouraged to say: 'I want to talk to you about that.'

Paul dismissed it with a wave. 'Let the past bury the past,' he said.

The other closed his eyes and nodded. It was incredibly philosophic, but, perhaps, understandable.

What a damned good Yankee wine this was!

Paul savoured his brother's approval. A little overdone, perhaps, but then, there was not a more pleasure-loving man in the whole, wide world than Bernard.

Deeply admiring of good food, good music, and, of course, not-so-good women. Over-sensitive to pain, to love, to criticism.

Such delicate powers of appreciation merited much.

The host rubbed his hands briskly. 'Now! We'll have that dip. You'll find a pair of swimming trunks, towel and sandals in the wardrobe drawer of the guest room. Hurry, now, because there's a treat waiting.'

Bernard looked at him. 'Pimento, with fried chicken?'

Paul held up a demurring hand. 'Don't worry. I know your favourites.'

Going up the stairs, Bernard felt the past whispering to him; a memory that caressed. Warm, white, smiling.

He reached the landing and walked down the oak-floored passage to the guest room, with one little heart tug, as he passed the bedroom door on the right.

Then he came to his room, and looked for the mirror. An actor's habit which he had acquired from living in innumerable digs. There was a tall cheval in an alcove, and he saw himself in it. Uncertain of this house, and above all, the motives of its master.

He cheered up again, when he stripped; self-admiring his flat, youthful belly, his still-evident waist. Not bad, for forty-eight!

The swimming trunks were a musty red pair, but they would do. He would have liked a bathing cap to protect his prized head of hair. Still, it would have been boastful to inquire about one, Paul being so bald.

He put the trunks on and picked up the rolled towel that lay in the large drawer underneath the wardrobe.

Something slipped from the striped folds and crashed at his bare feet; an old scent bottle, of unusual design. The one he bought as a Christmas present for Ella, in '55, the year before she left Paul.

He unscrewed the top of the triangular bottle and put it to his nose.

Odourless. Scoured clean. Not so much as a whiff of her . . .

Disturbing, it should be hidden in his towel, like that.

He went downstairs, lingering softly, edgily, on each shallow step.

Paul was waiting in the garden which sloped down to the water.

'Just a quickie,' he said. 'Race you to the pool!'

The challenge put Bernard on his mettle. It would have been polite to let his host win, but vanity prevailed; and he shot ahead to the edge of the pool.

Running to the springboard, he vaulted into the air. A perfect dive.

Too late, he smelt the fumes that were rising . . .

In another half second, he hit the surface and dropped head-first into the liquid.

It gripped him with a paralysing brutality, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet.

His delicate, sensation-loving skin felt everything. First, a sudden scourging by ten thousand whips of fire, each biting spitefully into his flesh.

Then, as he screamed, the acid began to torture him to death, dissolving his hair, burning and blinding his eyes.

Accomplishing an unspeakable cruelty to his body, it choked back his screams by pouring into his mouth.

There, it murdered the taste buds that had so delicately savoured the Californian wine, and flowed down his throat and lungs, and into his stomach.

Every moment seemed to last a century, but it was really, a fairly quick death. It was followed by a deep silence – a silence in which the acid continued to eat his corpse as it slid slowly into the depths.

There was a chuckle from the lawn.

Paul took a cigar from the dressing gown folded over his arm, and felt for a match without taking his eyes off the scene. He lit the cigar, and puffed a cloud of fragrant smoke to combat the miasma of the pool.

At last he became aware the phone was ringing in the house behind him, and went indoors.

'Hello —' he picked up the receiver.

'Paul!' barked Briggs, angrily. 'So I've found you at last. Call yourself a manufacturer! What the hell are you doing about that last delivery of acid? I had to close down the battery reclaiming plant this afternoon, because the stuff hadn't

arrived. I can't operate with exhausted chemicals. You know that.'

'My dear old Jack,' said Paul, apologetically, 'I'll see you get a delivery tomorrow. Sorry about the delay, but I didn't have any carboys available.'

'You see' – and he looked through the picture window at the pool again – 'I had a rush job on my hands.'

'Rush job! – I'm surprised at you. Don't you ever think about an old customer?'

'I do, I do.'

But when he had hung up, Paul added, privately: *And I don't forget a cool customer, either . . .*

## THE JANISSARIES OF EMILION

*By Basil Copper*

### I

HE AWOKED, for the third consecutive occasion at dawn, sweating and terrified, with the details of the dream vivid in his mind. His hands were clutching the simple iron frame of the bedstead above his head and the dew of his night terror had soaked the linen of the bedding so profusely that he could not believe it was simply the result of the heat of the summer air.

He lay quietly, taking in the soothing details of the plainly furnished room, with its restful cream walls. It was just turned five and the solitary calls of newly awakened birds were beginning to penetrate from the green wall of the garden, but his ears still seemed lapped in the soft susurrance of the surf.

The dream had begun in a very casual and haphazard manner, but its details had tended to clarify and repeat themselves on subsequent occasions, so that each repetition added a strata to his consciousness, as an artist adds pigment at the successive stages of a painting.

It was not until much later that Farlow had been admitted to Greenmansion which was, not to put too fine a point on it, a luxuriously appointed mental home. The superintendent had kept copious notes on the case, which interested him very much indeed, but for obvious reasons the denouement of the affair had been kept from the attention of the larger world.

Farlow was an old friend of mine and I have pieced the story together as it was told me over a longish space of time, both from his own lips and from those of the Superintendent, Dr Sondquist, a psychiatrist of great sympathy and brilliance, who had been responsible for some spectacular cures. Farlow was an extraordinary man in many ways; hypersensitive per-

haps, but a genius in his line – that of higher physics – and it was at his own request that he had been admitted as a private patient to Greenmansion, for ‘rest and observation’. I visited him there on many occasions, as often as my own duties permitted, but I had heard the beginning of his story long before he took what his friends considered this last drastic step. It was as strange a tale in its way as I had ever heard and, considering its bizarre and horrible end, a remarkable one.

It had begun, he told me, in the most prosaic and ordinary manner. It had been just six months before and he had perhaps, as he put it, been rather overdoing things; long hours in the laboratory, hurried lunches and evenings devoted to calculus had developed both nerves and mind to a high pitch of strain and sensitivity. He had come home tired out one evening and after several hours of fruitless calculation on his current abstruse problem, he had put down the elaborate figures for the night.

By now it was past one o’clock in the morning and not the best time for a heavy meal, followed by almost a pint of black coffee. Be that as it may, Farlow had eaten little since midday and he was the last man to bother about what he put in his insides. The demands of science had left him little time for seeking the company of the gentler sex, and so he had never married; his simple needs were looked after by a housekeeper of dour aspect but efficient habits, and she went off duty at nine o’clock.

So Farlow made this heavy and ill-advised meal, swallowed the coffee and made his way slowly to bed, his head throbbing with exhaustion, his mind chagrined at the inconclusive results of his long labours over the elusive problem. Not unnaturally he slept badly, and it must have been at least 3 am before sleep finally found him. But suddenly, it seemed to him, he was wide awake. I should imagine we have all had that sort of experience at one time or another. It is simply that we are dreaming that we are awake. We believe ourselves to be awake, but subconsciously know ourselves to be still within the dream. I put this to Farlow the first time he started to unburden himself to me on the subject. That was not so, he

said. Though he was within the dream he knew himself to be awake.

Everything was so vividly real; every touch and sensation of this often-repeated dream was so actually realized that it was his own room and everyday life that afterwards seemed so dim and faded. It was as if he had at night escaped to another life which was more immediate and more exciting than the world of reality. That his dream world was a place of terror and fear for him was neither here nor there. Farlow also believed in the physical reality of this world, though he had subsequently studied maps and atlases of obscure parts of the world in vain.

And despite the fact that the aspects of what I will continue to call his dream world bore this terrible air of menace, Farlow was convinced that if he could but overcome the sinister shadows of the dream he could be happier than any man could hope to be in the everyday world of ordinary life. Now, I must emphasize at this point, that Farlow was as sane as you or I; possibly saner, for his work as a scientist compelled him to weigh every grain of truth and to proceed to his results by empirical methods. At no time, even during his sojourn in Greenmansion, did he exceed the normal, according to Dr Sondquist, save in this one matter of the dream.

And that was something no one was in a position to disprove, save Farlow himself; for he was the one who was experiencing the reality of his vision. Judging by the end of it all, Farlow was possibly the sanest man among us. And if that were so, what terrors lie in wait just behind the curtain of what we call consciousness, may well give pause to the boldest of us, when criticizing a man like Farlow. It was my own belief that in his refined and hypersensitive way he had merely gone beyond the stage arrived at by the norm of coarser mortals, and a veil had been torn aside or breached in some unusual manner.

To put it more simply, what happened was this. It was just ten past three when Farlow was last awake, for he switched on the light and the time was only twenty past three. Yet Farlow, with all the gravity of which a scientist is capable, assured me solemnly that he had been away for more than three hours. It was a ridiculous assertion, on the surface that is, for we all



know that a second or two in a dream may be stretched to eternity for the sleeper; and in the split second before awakening at a heavy noise, the brain may substitute a whole chain of events in a minute space of time, to account for the sound.

Be that as it may and bearing in mind Farlow's own remarks on the aftermath of the dream, which I would not for one moment doubt, I am inclined to believe him. He slept and yet he awoke a short while afterwards and this is what he experienced. He was cold; he was in water and he was, or had been a little while before, in deadly danger of his life. His mouth was soaked with moisture and salt, and he coughed heavily as he thrashed feebly about in shallow water. He felt the rough kiss of sand between his bare toes, and when he opened his eyes he found himself in the shallows of a wild, bleak shore. Exhaustedly, he started to drag himself up on to a long beach of sloping white sand. He lay on his side coughing as the water receded, and watched a rosy dawn fingering the sky.

That was all on this occasion. He awoke, or rather he then returned to the normal twentieth-century world and the nightmare of his own position. Farlow had become aware of the difficulties of his 'dream' from the very first moment he had, as he continued to say, pierced the curtain. For in his terror, as he fumbled to switch on the light and look at the clock, he found sand between his toes and his pyjamas were soaked with cold, salt water.

## II

The reaction of Farlow to the bizarre and terrible situation in which he found himself may easily be imagined; certainly no one but Farlow himself could comprehend the shock to mind and system. It was months before he could bring himself to speak to me of this first 'expedition beyond the veil', as he termed it. For two nights following this extraordinary awakening he did not dare to sleep. And on the third night his exhaustion was too great for dreaming.

For over a week his sleep was normal, and then he had the second experience. He had retired soon after midnight and

went straight from sleeping to an 'awake' state. Once again he was struggling in a shallow sea, once again he dragged himself painfully ashore, but this time the vision, call it what you will, went on a little longer. Farlow lay on the beach, coughing out salt water and intermittently opening his eyes; he saw dawn creep slowly up that wild and beautiful shore and knew himself to be somewhere in the East. But it was not the East as known today, but at a time of great antiquity.

And then, as the sun came up through the mist, the scene changed like the opening of a door and Farlow awoke in his own bed, once again soaked to the skin with salt water. It was about that time that he consulted a doctor friend who was, of course, unable to help. Farlow somewhat naturally did not tell him the whole story, not wishing to be thought insane, and without the terrible awakenings, the matter seemed no more to the doctor than a dream which repeated itself, as sometimes happens to many people.

It was difficult for an outsider to conceive the torment of Farlow's mind at this time; it would have been bad enough for a normal person, but Farlow was a scientist and his mind rejected such things automatically. It was against all the known laws of nature, and yet it was happening. The third dream was a repetition of the others, but to Farlow's relief it began with him already lying on the beach. The sun was a little higher in the sky and the mist was beginning to disperse. Strangely, he retained his fear of drowning in the dream state, but he noticed vividly that he appeared to have recovered from the experience of being in the sea. With this so-called evidence and the heat of the sun on the beach, he estimated that he had been lying on the sand for about three hours.

Thus it appeared to him that the dreams were progressive in time and that if they continued, the incidents would overlap in the manner of a cinema film projected over and over again, with the difference that a little more of the action would be revealed each time. It took him quite a long while to work this out, of course, for his waking self at first rejected the implications. In the fourth dream the sun was higher in the sky, the mist was thinning out a little and when he awoke to his own

room in the twentieth century he had been able to see that he was dressed in some sort of open-necked blouse made of linen of an antique cut.

The lower half of his body was clad in baggy pantaloons of some dark material of a type quite beyond his experience, and as he had noticed on the first occasion, his feet were bare. The most extraordinary thing about this fourth dream was that though he had awakened on the three previous occasions drenched in what appeared to be sea-water, he woke this last time with his skin barely damp. Farlow then argued that his experiences in the dream state had a physical or rational basis, and from this he deduced that the sun beating on his other self was drying him out.

At this stage he was still trying to rationalize his terrors, and one thing which greatly exercised his mind was the minor curiosity of how the physical situation of his dream self could be carried over into real life in one case and not the other. He was referring, naturally, to the water on his skin which was physically evident on awakening and the fact that he was still dressed in pyjamas. If the same rules applied in transferring one substance from the dream to another dimension, then in theory he should have still been dressed in the shirt and trousers.

His analytical powers were beginning to be affected at this stage, and there was the additional problem of what happened to his pyjamas while 'he' was on the beach. Or were there two selves existing in different planes? But however he argued it, Farlow met with a breakdown of all logical rules, whenever he applied them to one set of circumstances or the other – the dream world or the real. The line between the two was becoming very blurred.

This sort of thing had been going on for several months when Farlow began to take me into his confidence. He was always a thin, finely strung sort of man and his experiences of the past weeks had put deep shadows under his eyes and his physical frame looked frailer than at any time I remembered. It took several evenings of half-coherent, hedging talk before he really broached the subject, but once he had got fairly

started his thoughts came tumbling out like water released from a flood-gate.

His greatest fear was that I should suppose his sanity to be in question, but after I had listened to him for several evenings and questioned him keenly about certain points, I was able to reassure him on this. If ever a man was sane in the true sense of the word, it was Farlow. He had told me about the first half dozen or so dreams, which had taken him to a point higher up the beach. It was warm and comfortable there, in the hot sand, and as the dreams or visions or whatever you like to call them, now began with him already ashore and dry, there were no unpleasant physical effects on awakening, for which he was thankful.

So far as he could make out, for he did not always check by the clock, the duration of each dream was firmly stamped in his mind as being about three hours, but the actual time in this world amounted to ten minutes. He saw no particular significance in this, but he made the curious remark that if the dream had commenced with him far at sea, and several miles from land, and he could not have swum to shore in the three hours allowed, he would have drowned. I did not see how he could possibly argue that and I felt it was time to turn his thoughts away from such morbid directions. But though I spoke warmly and, as I thought, sensibly on the point, he brushed my valid objections aside with a sigh. He just felt convinced that it would be so, he said, and nothing I could say would turn him aside from this.

I asked him then if he thought that there would have been a drowned corpse in the bed when he came back to this world, and he answered quite simply in the affirmative. This impelled me to question him further; it was implicit in his argument that his physical self was absent from his bed during the course of the dreams, and I offered to keep watch in his room if that would help. This he would not have at any price; he gave no reason, but looked at me curiously, and it was my own personal view that he feared that any intervention by another person, however well meant, might endanger him and prevent him from 'getting back'.

I did not press the matter, for I saw how serious the situation had become. The next evening I visited Farlow he seemed calmer and more rational. He had had a quiet night and he proceeded to bring me up to date on his reasoning. The dreams now began with him lying, fully conscious, far up the beach, well rested and quite dry in the heat of the sun. The sand stretched for mile after mile and he seemed to know in his heart that he was in the East and in an ancient time. The mist was clearing as the sun rose, the waves moved languidly in the sunlight, and far off to the east the spires of some city at the edge of the shore were revealing themselves.

All through his series of visions Farlow, even in his dream state, had no notion of who he was, how he had come to be in the sea, or what he was doing on the shore. He was invariably dressed in the blouse and dark pantaloons and always woke with a dry skin and dressed in pyjamas. The fear of the dream had not yet begun, and so far as he could estimate the pattern of three hours' dream and ten minutes' real time continued.

The dreams averaged about one a week – though there were occasions when there were two – and were always progressive. They usually occurred when Farlow was more than ordinarily tired, which gave him the notion that the barriers of every day were broken down at those times. His doctor friend had been unable to help. It was in these circumstances that he resolved to bring something back with him from the dream world of the shore, if it were physically possible. I was sitting in Farlow's study after dinner late one evening when he told me this. I could see that it had cost him a great effort to speak of it.

'And were you successful?' I asked, forcing the words out. Farlow's eyes were dark caverns of sombre knowledge as he nodded slowly. Abruptly he got up and went over to his desk. He unlocked one of the drawers, drew out something wrapped in white cloth and put it down on the table in front of me.

'Have a look at this,' he said. 'You need not be alarmed. It isn't anything unpleasant.'

I must confess my hand was a little unsteady as I un-

wrapped the cloth. Perhaps I was disappointed or it may have been a curious look on my face, but Farlow relaxed and smiled grimly. What I had before me was a piece of reddish-coloured rock, about six inches long and three wide, weighing perhaps a couple of pounds. I looked at it stupefied.

'You don't mean to say that you actually brought this back from your dream?' I said. Nothing could have been more banal than my sentence, but I was even more surprised when Farlow agreed.

'Yes,' he said simply. 'That is exactly what I do mean.'

I couldn't think of anything to say that was neither idiotic nor a reflection on Farlow's sanity, so I turned the piece of rock over in my hand and added: 'Have you had someone look at this?'

Farlow nodded again. 'Smithers. One of the best geologists we've got. He was quite excited. He was damned puzzled too. He places it at the time of Christ. What upset him was the fact that there had been no weathering since.'

Farlow and I exchanged a long glance. Then I held up my whisky glass for the stiff peg he started to pour me. There was nothing to say.

### III

I was unavoidably called away on business soon after Farlow's incredible revelation and though I kept in touch by letter, it was more than three weeks before I saw him again. Brief as the interval had been there was an indefinable difference in his face; a subtle fear lurking at the back of his eyes which I did not like. It took a day or two to regain the old intimacy and it was not until several nights later that he started to bring me up to date. There had been more dreams, of course; that much he had already hinted on my return.

They had been progressive, I knew, though he had not gone into details, but now they had taken a more sinister turn. He had been sitting halfway up the beach, fully recovered from his ordeal in the sea. His memory in the dream recalled this fact, but nothing beyond it. He still did not know his identity or the location of the shore. It was lighter now and the mist was

almost gone. The turrets and spires of the distant city winked and shimmered through the grey wisps of morning haze and he felt a lightening of the heart.

Over several sittings Farlow took me through a whole series of dreams, in which the pattern gradually became darker until eventually horror tinged the atmosphere. How he first heard, Farlow did not remember, but over a period which lasted about ten days, he absorbed the fact that the city was called Emilion. He was dreaming almost every night now, and each time the dream began with him sitting on the beach, with the sky brighter, the mists thinning away, the fair face of the city more clearly revealed.

The brightness and beauty of Emilion was something beyond this world, said Farlow; it gladdened the heart and filled his whole being with joy. And as he daily gained in strength in the dream, he started to run on the beach and splash in and out of the warm water, as he gazed at the distant city, which rose spire on golden spire out of a sea of rosy mist.

The only thing to compare with it in this world, said Farlow, was Mont St Michel on a bright spring morning with the sun gilding the tops of the wavelets; but lovely as that was by earthly standards, it was a poor thing compared with the unearthly beauty of the dream.

'Multiply Mont St Michel a hundredfold and there you have Emilion,' Farlow told me simply, the firelight coming and going on his dark, tired face.

Even during the daytime waking hours, the name of Emilion had filled his soul with quiet contentment and he had spent much of his spare time brooding over the old maps and atlases, particularly those of medieval times, but without success. Emilion as a city seemed to belong to the land of make-believe. Then one night, about a week before my return, the dream had begun to change. The banners and turrets and spires of Emilion were seen across a vast stretch of foaming strand, more than a mile wide, which was stained all pink and gold with the light of the rising sun, as the shallow waves broke across it. There was a woman in the city, whom Farlow loved, I gathered.

He himself was only vaguely aware of this, but gradually through the whole astonishing series of dreams, the fact had permeated his heart. He did not know her name; only that he loved; that the girl was there; and that to Emilion he must find his way. And yet, as is the way with dreams, even of the vivid kind which Farlow was experiencing, the thing could not be rushed. He could not simply proceed to the city as one would in normal life. In timeless, slow-motion sequences, the dream proceeded from night to night. Each time Farlow would be but a few feet nearer the edge of the vast foaming foreshore which separated him from the city. And then one night there came a subtle change in the picture.

For as he gazed across at the turrets of Emilion, he became aware of a faint white swathe, like a hazy touch of gauze along the base of the picture. It swirled across the sand, beneath the city walls, more than a mile and a half away. It was stationary, yet seemed to move with incredible speed, and Farlow was conscious of a faint unease. A breath of cold wind seemed to disperse the last folds of mist still hanging over the surface of the sea, and a strange fear gnawed at his heart. He stopped walking towards the city and gazed at the faint patch of white which blurred the far distance. And then he awoke to nameless dread and an icy dew on his forehead.

He feared sleep the following night, but it overtook him just the same; he was on the shore looking across the far strand and there, in the distance, was the strange misty cloud which moved with such tremendous speed. And it seemed to him that it had come a little nearer. The cold wind blew on Farlow and he felt the deep-rooted fear there is no allaying. And once again he awoke. Several times more he dreamed, and each time it was the same; every night the city of Emilion shone across the foaming water, but the patch of white had spread and began to reveal itself in detail.

And the wind blew with a cold breath and it seemed to Farlow that it made a whispering murmur in the sky. And what it said with such insidious clamour in his ear was: 'THE JANISSARIES OF EMILION!' And Farlow woke with a shrieking cry.



## IV

'What do you make of it?' Farlow asked me for the fourth time. I lit a cigarette with a hand which was none too steady.

'The Janissaries were a sort of mameluke, weren't they?' I said at last.

Farlow nodded. He reached down a thick tome from one of his shelves.

'I wasted no time in looking them up,' he said. He read from the reference work in front of him. According to this the Janissaries were a body of Turkish infantry in olden times, forming the personal bodyguard of the Sultan of Turkey. They had been abolished in 1826. The reference book also gave them as: Personal instrument of tyranny. Turkish Soldier.

I tried to look wiser than I felt as Farlow finished reading. 'How does this tie in with the period being two thousand years ago? Or the East?' I asked quickly, before Farlow could speak.

'The Janissaries were a terribly ancient force, which existed under many names,' Farlow replied quietly. 'They were mounted at an earlier period. And they operated outside Turkey. In the East particularly. And you must remember that Turkey was an Oriental Empire. It was only since Ataturk . . .'

'Very well,' I interrupted him. 'You surely can't take this latest phase seriously.'

Farlow held up his hand to stop me from saying anything further. One look at his face was enough for me to see that he was deadly serious.

'You have not heard me out,' he said patiently. 'There have been more dreams since those of which I have just told you.'

Put briefly, Farlow's dream self had stood upon the shore and as the vision progressed from day to day had seen the white cloud grow, until it had blossomed into something which resembled a dark mass of many points, topped with a hazy, billowing mist. On the last occasion on which he had dreamed, he had seen little spurts of foam as the mass entered the surf on the far side of the gulf which separated it from him. And

the great fear which had paralysed him seemed to fix on his heart like a stone and the freezing wind which followed had again whispered: 'THE JANISSARIES OF EMILION!'

And like a man who escapes from a nightmare to find himself still within it, the wretched Farlow had screamed awake to find his day but the prelude to the fears of the following night. I tried to comfort my friend as best I could, though it was scant encouragement my presence was able to give. I was of the opinion that a priest or psychiatrist might do more good; but who could accompany him within this dark dream and stand at his side in strong support against the nightmare which menaced him? It was an insidious, sombre battle being waged nightly within the man's mind and I feared the end as I heard his next words.

He sat quietly at the table and said to me in even tones: 'I have thought it out carefully. In the last dream, only two nights ago, I was able to distinguish clearly for the first time the nature of the threat. I shall never reach the city. Crossing the water to reach me are a body of horsemen, clad in white robes, moving at a tremendous speed. Even at the slow rate at which the dream progresses the end cannot be long delayed. A few weeks at most.'

I sought to reassure him with some platitude, but the words died in my throat.

'They are the Janissaries of Emilion!' Farlow called out in a strangled voice. 'I can begin to distinguish the cruel Oriental faces. I have become a man on whom they had revenge in the ancient times.'

'But what can a dream do to harm you?' I burst out impatiently, in spite of myself.

'Fool!' Farlow almost shrieked. 'They will kill me! When they catch me I shall die.'

I was silent before this outburst. Farlow had turned away and stood looking unseeingly at the bookcase.

I reached for my hat. 'In my opinion, you need good medical advice, my friend, and at once,' I said. 'If I might recommend . . .'

'Good evening,' said Farlow in dead, measured tones. I

went out and quietly closed the door behind me. That night even I doubted Farlow's sanity.

## V

In this extreme crisis, and with Farlow's sanity and even life at stake I sought out Dr Sondquist. In as subtle a manner as I could I laid something of the case before him. To my relief Dr Sondquist treated the matter as being within the normal bounds of psychiatric practice. He had an impressive-sounding line of Jungian and Adlerian quotations and his crisp, incisive manner convinced me that here was a man who could recall Farlow from the dark shore-line to which his mind had wandered, if anyone could.

To my relief, my next interview with Farlow passed off much better than I had expected. My friend seemed to have forgotten his outburst of the previous day. Though he was pale and distraught he had lost something of the terrible atmosphere of nerves at cracking point which had previously surrounded him. We spoke quietly and calmly. I gathered that his sleep had been dreamless for once. The upshot of our conversation was that Farlow agreed to go and see Dr Sondquist. A week later, after much careful heart-searching, he entered Greenmansion for the rest and observation to which I have already referred.

I thus necessarily lost something of the close contact which we had formerly enjoyed, though I was able to visit Farlow twice a week in the earlier stages and Dr Sondquist kept me fully informed of the patient's progress. The end of the story I had to piece together for myself from Farlow's own conversation, from a diary he left which the Superintendent allowed me to examine and from my last terrible conversation with Sondquist.

When I first saw Farlow after his entry into Greenmansion I was disturbed to note that he appeared even more fine-drawn and gaunt than before. But the white-painted walls of the sanatorium and the air of quiet efficiency and bustle which radiated from the nursing and medical staff had had a beneficial effect, I should have said.

Without preamble he plunged at once into the details of his latest visions, as though they were more than he could bear to contemplate alone, which was, after all, no more than the truth. He had dreamed twice more, he said; it was the same and yet not the same. The Janissaries, for so he had identified them, were much nearer. He was still rooted to the shore, but the white-cloaked riders were now splashing through the shallows about halfway across the foaming stretch of water which barred his way to the city of Emilion.

He could see that they carried some sort of banner which bore the green crescent, and the short, heavy-bladed swords they waved, glinted in the bright sunshine of mid-morning. Their turbanned heads bobbed rhythmically as they rode and their black horses, bunched closely together, clove the white, frothing water with their steel-shod hooves. But what gave Farlow such a terrible sense of impending doom was the cruelty of the faces beneath the turbans of the Janissaries of Emilion. Their bearded jaws, the narrow, blazing eyes and the red, thin lips which parted to reveal the shining, sharp-pointed white teeth looked so rapacious and sadistic that his dream self was near to fainting with fear.

In the last dream of the previous night they were so close that he could hear the guttural cries they uttered and see the details of the elaborate bits on the bridles of the horses. The riders wore boots of soft leather and the metal spurs they used, dug deeply into the flanks of the plunging horses. And again the cold wind blew across the blue sky, bringing with it the great chilling despair and for the twentieth or thirtieth time Farlow awoke to nightmare.

I gave my unfortunate friend what comfort I could and took my leave. Unfortunately, Sondquist was away that day so I could not have the conversation with him which might have made some difference to the outcome of the business, though I was rapidly coming to the same conclusion that had plunged Farlow into such profound melancholy; namely, that the outcome of the dream could not be halted, but what that outcome was, none of us, least of all Farlow, fortunately, could have foreseen.

My next information came from the diary Farlow had kept over the last few months. The extract which I have summarized is from the period immediately following my last visit. Farlow was by this time having shock treatment of a particularly violent type, and his days had thus begun to assume the same detached, unworldly aspect as that of his nights. Sondquist was worried about him, beneath the urbane and professional exterior, and the object of the special treatment was to break up the dream patterns and so disperse them. At least, this is how the diary of Farlow read to the mind of a layman. There was much abstruse speculation of a suprametaphysical type, which was a bit too heavy going for me, and I skipped those pages in which Farlow gave himself up to such musings on the physical laws of nature and of the construction of the universe.

But the effect of the treatment had been merely to delay the progress of the dreams; so that where Farlow had, for example, been experiencing three sequences of the dream-state in a week, he now had one. So the object realized had been only that of a slowing-up process; the treatment had no power to disrupt, destroy or dispel the pattern which had assumed a cloud of such alarming proportion on Farlow's mental horizon.

He spent such part of his day not occupied in treatment, lying on the small iron bed, fully clothed, looking up at the ceiling and listening to the soothing noises of the birds from the garden beyond. He lay listening to the roaring of the blood in his ears; he could hear the fluids of his body bubbling beneath the surface of his skin. He was enormously conscious of being alive; he could almost feel his toenails growing underneath his socks. And with this tremendous feeling, this consciousness of the vital force within himself, Farlow at forty-nine, realized that he had much to live for, much yet to give the world in the way of knowledge and research; with this realization came a tremendous effort to shake off the dark sense of doom which now not only filled the horizon of his dream but the entire horizon of his waking life.

One of his last entries in the diary said with tragic foreknowledge: 'Those faces, those ghastly, cruel faces! And

those eyes! If Sondquist is not successful, they will reach me soon. And that will be the end . . .'

## VI

The end came sooner than expected. To me it was a profound shock. I had been unable to visit Farlow for nearly a week. When I telephoned Greenmansion to inquire about my friend, the matron had been evasive and had put me on to the doctor in charge. He in turn had not been helpful and had referred me to Sondquist. But as Sondquist himself was too busy to come to the phone it did not get me much farther forward. I was not at all satisfied and decided to visit the sanatorium in person.

It was a day of early summer in which the shimmering haze, the contented songs of birds and the heavy warmth which rose from the ground, spoke of even greater heat to come. As I drove out to Greenmansion, the beauty of the afternoon made a vivid contrast in my mind to the dark situation in which the unfortunate Farlow found himself. As soon as I arrived I saw that there was something wrong. The main gates of the sanatorium were shut and locked and I had to ring at the porter's lodge.

He in turn had to phone the main building to get permission for me to proceed. While he was doing this I left my car, and quietly opened the small gate at the side of the lodge, which was unlocked. As I slipped past I heard the porter's cry of protest, but he was too late. I was in the grounds and rapidly walking towards the house. As soon as I came up to the front steps I could see by the unusual activity that I was too late to help my friend. An ambulance from the State Department concerned was parked against the side of the lawn and next to it two big blue police cars with State licence plates. I was met by a white-faced matron who tried to dissuade me from seeing Dr Sondquist.

'Ring the Superintendent tonight, please,' she said. 'It will be best.'

I shook my head. 'I wish to see Dr Sondquist at once,' I said firmly. She hesitated and then reluctantly went into her office. I had waited in the hall for nearly ten minutes before the

measured tread of the doctor sounded along the corridor. He looked harassed and worn.

'I wish to see Farlow,' I said without further preamble. Sondquist shook his head and a curious look came and went in his eyes.

'I have bad news for you, I am afraid,' he said. 'Farlow died last night.'

The information took some moments to sink in and I then became aware that Sondquist had led me to a chair; the matron hovered in the background. The Superintendent handed me a glass of brandy and I mechanically swallowed it.

'What happened?' I stammered, as soon as I had recovered my senses somewhat.

Again the curious look passed over Sondquist's face. 'He had a heart attack in the night,' he said. 'There was nothing we could do.'

I just did not believe him and my disbelief must have shown in my next words.

'Then why are the police here?' I asked in stumbling tones.

Sondquist shook his head impatiently. 'That is about another matter altogether,' he said hurriedly. Spots of red stood out high on his cheekbones. He put his hand on my shoulder in a friendly manner.

'I have much to do at the moment. Why not ring me this afternoon and we will arrange an appointment for tomorrow, when I have more time. Then I will answer all your questions.'

I agreed dully, and a few minutes later drove back to town. But the interview with the doctor next day did not seem at all satisfactory to me and there were many of my questions left unanswered. The funeral took place quietly and the weeks passed by and poor Farlow and his problems seemed forgotten by the world at large. But I had not forgotten. I kept up my acquaintance with Sondquist and after many visits, when he had come to trust me and had seen that there was more than morbid curiosity in my questionings, he satisfied my queries. Sometimes I wish he hadn't. For then I should sleep better at nights.

It was more than a year afterwards before he could bring himself to confide in me. It was almost September and a thin fire of twigs crackled in his study at Greenmansion, for though the days continued in blazing heat, there was an underlying chill in the evenings. He had got out some of the record books on Farlow's treatment and had allowed me to look at the patient's own diary.

After we had been talking for some time, I asked him: 'Do you think Farlow was mad?'

Sondquist hesitated and then shook his head emphatically.

'I sometimes feel that I may be,' he said enigmatically and a look of strain showed in his eyes.

'What does that mean?' I asked.

The doctor drummed nervously with his long thin fingers on the desk, then picked up his glass of wine and drained it.

'Would you really like to know how Farlow died?' he said.

I nodded. The doctor turned and stared sombrely into the fire, as though the answer to the problem of Farlow lay somewhere amid the flickering flames.

'I can rely on your complete discretion in this matter?' he said after a long silence.

'Absolutely,' I said.

Sondquist turned to face me and looked me straight in the eyes as he told me the end of the story.

'You are completely aware of all the progressive stages of Farlow's dreams or visions, I take it?' he asked.

'He gave me his confidence,' I said.

Sondquist told me that Farlow had been quiet and co-operative, as he always was, during the last day or two of his treatment. But on the afternoon before his death he had become more than usually agitated and in a long interview with Dr Sondquist had gone deeply into his fears. The import of his story was that the Janissaries of Emilion were so close to him in his last dream that he could almost touch them. If he slept that night he felt they would destroy him somehow, that he would die.

Sondquist, who had, of course, a different interpretation of the dream, held that the final vision would have been the



catalyst; that it held the kernel of the problem. He told Farlow that in the crisis of his last dream he would finally overcome his fear and be able to live a normal life. After that night, if it came, he said, Farlow would be cured. My friend's reaction to this was the expected. He became violent, said that Sondquist had no notion of the real problem, and that the Superintendent's life was not at stake. In the end he became so agitated that he had to be physically restrained by the attendants. He shrieked a good deal about the Janissaries of Emilion and begged Sondquist to have a guard placed over him that night.

The Superintendent put him under sedatives and the night staff were instructed to look at him from time to time during the dark hours. Farlow had been taken to a padded room, though a straight-jacket had not been thought necessary, and he was sleeping a normal sleep in his bed, when one of the male nurses last looked in through the peephole at about 2 am.

The sanatorium was roused by the most appalling screams around four in the morning. The uproar had come from Farlow's room, and it was like nothing else in the Superintendent's experience. The first male nurse to look through the peephole in Farlow's door had a violent fit of vomiting and the matron fainted. It was with some difficulty that Sondquist was able to take charge; after a careful examination of the contents of the room the police were sent for, photographs were taken, and the subsequent investigation, undertaken at County level, had lasted more than a week.

For the sake of public opinion as well as that of Greenmansion and the reputation of Dr Sondquist, the higher authorities, among them the County Coroner, had agreed that no public examination of the matter should take place and the affair was hushed over. The truth was so fantastic that the only written record of it remained in the private files of Dr Sondquist and these were kept perpetually locked in a private safe-deposit, to be opened only on his death.

It was at this point that I put my final questions. Dr Sondquist made his answers and permitted me to see some photographs which I felt would have been better destroyed. I can

never forget what they depicted. Sick at heart, I at length took my leave and drove like a drunken man back to my house. When I had recovered my senses somewhat, I wrapped the piece of rock Farlow had given me, in a piece of sacking, and weighted it with stones secured by wire.

Then I drove out to the Point and hurled it into the deepest part of the sea. That done, some of the shadow seemed lifted from my mind. But the thing haunts my brain and latterly my sleep too has become more and more broken. Pray God that I do not dream the same dream as Farlow.

What Sondquist had told me and what the photographs depicted had been like something from an obscene slaughter-house. For in Farlow's room, which was padded and contained no sharp edges of any kind, much less a weapon, the gutted, disembowelled and eviscerated monstrosity which had once been my friend was spread about in carmine horror; there an eyeball, here a leg or an arm like some demoniac scene in a canvas by Bosch. Save that this was gory reality. No wonder the staff had fainted or that the ambulance attendants had used masks and tongs when clearing up.

Said Sondquist in a trembling voice as I took my leave: 'Make no mistake about it, though the thing is scientifically impossible, Farlow had been hacked to pieces as surely as if a dozen men had attacked him with sharpened swords or knives!'



## THE COFFIN MAKERS

*By Raymond Williams*

THE LONG white bony fingers of Samuel Peel placed the shiny brass screw carefully in the small hole. Holding the screw head with his left hand he proceeded to twist it in place with his screwdriver, giving a sharp wheezy grunt with each turn. He then stood back to survey his work. The large brass handle looked as straight as the others on the beautifully grained wood of the coffin. He entwined his skiny fingers around the gleaming brass handle and tried to shake it but the handle was firmly held by the embedded screws. He gave a grunt of satisfaction. That had been the last of the handles. Now all that remained was the square brass plaque to go on the coffin lid and he would be finished for the day. He picked up the plaque from his work bench and studied the engraving:

John William Edmunds  
Born 1786 Died 1839

Each letter and figure was clear to read and perfectly formed. Yes, he thought to himself, I've made a good job of that but pity they didn't want more of it like 'age 53' or 'Doctor of Medicine', then he would have been paid a lot more for the job. His thoughts were interrupted by the 'clonk' of a wooden mallet on a chisel handle. His looked round at his companion working at a bench littered with wood scrapings.

Thomas Carter was a giant of a man who looked more like a blacksmith than a carpenter. His large frame was bent over the coffin lid on his bench. The muscles in his thick arms rippled as he chiselled the last few pieces away. Thomas always turned out a first-class coffin, but this one was really the best he had ever made. The reason why Thomas had excelled himself was

that the coffin was for dear Doctor Edmunds – Doctor Edmunds, the man who had nursed Thomas' sick mother for those last terrible six years of her life, when she had wasted slowly away in front of their eyes. Doctor Edmunds who had always taken so much care with the many injuries Thomas had sustained through a slipped chisel or an accidental hammer blow. Thomas had shown his gratitude and admiration for the doctor in the only way he could: by making a perfect coffin for him to lie in peace until the Day of Judgement called him out of it to God's side.

Samuel turned his attention back to the brass plaque and was in the process of screwing it down when the workshop door swung open to permit the entrance of Mr Clive Thornwood their employer.

'What, not ready yet?' His thin piercing voice shrilled through the room. 'The funeral's tomorrow, you know, not next month.'

He strutted around the workshop on his spidery legs, inspecting the workmanship with his black beady eyes. 'Hm, nice finish there, Thomas,' he said, running an experienced finger along the coffin lid. 'Brass on yet, Samuel?' he squawked.

'Handles done, sir, and I'm on the plate now,' he answered, returning to his task with the screwdriver.

'Hm, good, good. Come on, then, let's get the job finished. We're due over at the house in an hour's time.' With that he left as swiftly as he had appeared and soon the workmen could hear the clop of the horses' hooves outside as their employer got the cart ready.

Later that evening the three men trundled along the cobblestones with the bright coffin behind them on the cart. At the doctor's house they solemnly unloaded the box and carefully manoeuvred it along the dark passageway into the candlelight of the front room. The widow, so they were informed by her sister, was too overcome to be present, but if they needed anything she would be in the kitchen. When the door closed they lowered the coffin on to the two stools arranged in readiness. The body lay beneath a large white sheet awaiting them.

'Right, let's get on with it,' said Thornwood, flicking the white sheet away. 'I've got the head. You, Samuel, take the feet, Thomas the middle. Thomas, did you hear me? Take the middle.' Thomas moved forward slowly, his face a picture of grief. His strong jaw quivered, while his large brown eyes brimmed with tears. The doctor was dressed in his best black suit, his golden watch and chain glinting across his waistcoat. In sharp contrast with the black cloth his dry white skin seemed to shine in the candlelight.

Carefully they eased him into the coffin, then straightened the creases in his clothes. 'Right, screw the lid on, Samuel. I'm off to The Three Bells. Coming, Thomas?'

But Thomas could not find his voice with which to answer. He merely shook his head and continued gazing at the kind, lined face he had seen smiling and comforting so often but was now so white and still.

'Huh! Suit yourself. What about you Samuel?'

'As soon as I've finished, sir, I'll be there.'

'Good, then I'll get you a jar of ale in readiness.'

He turned and was gone, leaving his two workmen alone with the coffin. But while Thomas was fondly gazing at the doctor's face, Samuel was busy taking stock of other things about the doctor. His sharp eyes had already spotted the watch and chain and were now drinking in the rich greenness of the large stone decorating the doctor's thick gold ring on his left hand. If only Thomas had gone as well, the two precious articles would have been tucked away in his own pocket by now. 'I'll finish off here, Thomas. You go now, I can see this is distressing you,' he purred slyly.

Thomas' voice still eluded him, so again he merely shook his head. Samuel cursed under his breath. He was not going to miss that beautiful ring or the gold watch. Still, if he couldn't get them now, he would later. 'Very well, I'll get on, then,' he said turning his back on Thomas. Then instead of getting the normal long screws from his pocket he slipped his hand into another pocket and took out a few of his special short ones. He slid the coffin lid over the corpse and proceeded to screw the shallow screws into the waiting holes. Then with a satisfied

look on his face, left the house in the direction of The Three Bells.

Although Samuel Peel wished for it every night, it was nearly two months after the Doctor's funeral before the little village was blanketed by a thick fog. Around midnight Samuel left his little cottage, his face well covered to keep the fog out and his special short-handled spade clutched tightly beneath his long black coat. One had to be careful these days; there were often patrols around the graveyards and Samuel had no intention of having his neck stretched at the end of a rope just yet. He fingered his way gingerly through wet smoke-filled streets until at last his hands clasped the mossy walls of the graveyard. The fog was so thick he could see no more than one gravestone at a time. Eventually he reached the stone he wanted – that of Doctor John William Edmunds. He took off his coat, folded it neatly at the side of the grave, took the candle from his pocket, lit it and picked up his spade.

He had been digging up the yellow clay soil for quite some time when his spade jarred beneath his foot. He smiled to himself, wiped the globules of perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand and decided to have a short rest. He felt he had done very well. He had been forced to do most of the work by feel, as the swirling fog made his candle practically useless. Yet he had reached the coffin in good time. It would be child's play now to wrench off the coffin lid, thanks to his foresight of using short screws. After quickly pocketing the watch and ring he would clamber out of this slimy pit, shovel the clay back in, then off home to admire his spoils.

He scraped the remaining patches of earth clear of the coffin lid, then wedged the blade of the spade into the dividing crack between coffin and lid. With a sharp heave and a twist that only came with years of practice, the lid crunched away from the base with the screws rattling and rolling in all directions. He bent down and explored the steaming blackness with his hand. His searching fingertips settled on a patch of wet slimy skin that felt like the face. His fingers crawled down along the hard row of waistcoat buttons, scattering tiny crawling things

as they went. The cold metallic chain quickly arrested his hand and in a second the watch and chain was resting in his own pocket. Now for the ring, he thought, and reached over to the side. His fingers reached the moist flesh of the dead man's hands and in so doing knocked something wet and snail-like away. There was a soft 'plop' as it hit the bottom of the coffin. Ah, this is it – his fingers closed around the cold ring and pulled, but it did not move. He pressed round the doctor's fingers and realized they had all swollen. Cursing the dead man, he pulled the hand to him, gripped the back of the hand with his left hand and the ring finger with his right, then with a sharp tug pushed the finger up and back towards the back of the hand. With a crisp crack the finger-bone snapped and after a little struggling and twisting Samuel wrenched the finger away from the hand. The ring joined the watch in his pocket, while the finger was thrown back into the coffin. He straightened up, replaced the lid with his foot, then tossed his spade up out of the hole. He grasped the sides and began to claw his way up, the thick mud squelched through his fingers and seemed determined to prevent him getting a grip to get out. But finally, after a jump, he managed to cling his way up through the oozing slime. He then filled in the hole, collected his things and melted away into the black swirling mist.

A week after his nocturnal exploit Samuel was laughing drunkenly at a coarse remark in *The Three Bells*. Really he was celebrating the nice bit he had made on a gold watch and chain he'd sold that day. He had thought of selling the ring as well, but had changed his mind. There was something about that ring, anyway he liked it, it did something for him. He had kept it hidden at home with the watch until today, then after selling the watch he had tried the ring on for effect. So well did it fit the bony finger that he was unable to get it off again. It's providence, he told himself, the ring is meant for my finger. 'Fill 'er up barman,' he spluttered over the counter, banging the pewter tankard into a stagnant pool of beer.

He was leaning heavily against the strong wooden counter twitching his eyebrows up and down at Sally the waitress



when his foaming tankard was returned. He was just about to drink when he spotted Thomas coming into the tavern. 'Hey, over here, Thomas me lad, what're you drinking?'

Thomas Carter steered his large frame through the tottering bodies to the counter. 'Ale, thank you.' His deep voice rumbled out his reply.

Soon they were both drinking merrily and even Thomas began laughing. During the evening while Samuel's gaze was fixed upon the glistening brown curves of Sally's breasts as she bent down behind the counter, the happy smile on Thomas's face drained away. His eyelids stretched upwards while his clear eyes riveted upon something that glinted with a green light on Samuel's hand. He knew that ring, he had watched it often while the hand wearing it had been tenderly bandaging him or holding a drink to his dying mother's lips. Then he looked from the ring to the man and his eyes narrowed, his lips tightened and Thomas swallowed back his anger and waited.

At closing time Samuel staggered from the tavern arm in arm with a man twice his size. Samuel was laughing and singing, but his companion was silent.

'Hold on, Thomas, we've missed the turn, you're as drunk as a judge.' Samuel giggled until he rocked at his comparison.

'No, this is the way.' Thomas' voice was deep and controlled as he half carried his little companion along the tree-lined lane.

'No! No! No! No! No! Will you listen to me, you doubting Thomas?' Again he practically collapsed with mirth. But Thomas continued a little farther until they came to the door of a long low building.

'You fool, Thomas, it's not time for work yet. This is . . . ' but he stopped short when he saw the look on his companion's face. Then a huge fist flew at him and before he could dodge he felt his face explode. Then his back thudded against the floor. A huge hand grasped his hair and winched him upwards and before he could see through the bright lights in his eyes he felt a cannonball pound into his stomach and again he crashed into the dust. Something dragged his shoulder up and he followed until a crashing blow sent his head jerking sideways and

mercifully the darkness engulfed his brain before he fell again.

Emerging from the tunnel of blackness, Samuel Peel squinted at the strong light. He felt dizzy and sick, and his face was throbbing with a burning pain. He felt a sharp tug on his finger which made him wince. His eyes opened wider and he saw Thomas trying to pull the glittering green ring from his finger. Samuel tried to tug his hand away, but failed to move it. His wrists felt as if they were paralysed. Then he saw that they were clamped in two vices on Thomas's workbench. What on earth was he doing here kneeling on the floor with his hands clamped rigid. Had Thomas gone mad? Why on earth was he tugging at the ring? Thomas had taken a fancy to it, that was it, he wanted the ring. But Thomas had no right to it, it was his ring and he was going to keep it.

'Won't come off, Thomas,' he slurred through bleeding lips. 'Anyway, it's mine, leave it alone, do you hear, it's my ring.'

Thomas hissed breath out through his wide hairy nostrils and let go of the ring.

'Want to go home, Thomas. Take me home,' Samuel pleaded pitifully.

Thomas made no reply, he merely picked up his wooden mallet and selected one of his sharp chisels from the rack. Samuel gaped in disbelief as he saw the sharp edge of the chisel being placed above the finger bearing the ring, then the black shadow of the hammer lifting. Then 'crunch' the pain shot through his arm and seared his brain. Red tears of blood were squirting out from the stump on to the workbench. The pain brought tears to his eyes, a thumping to his ears and a screech to his throat. Thomas, meanwhile, removed the ring from the severed finger, wiped it clean of blood and put it away in his own pocket.

'Thomas, Thomas.' The screams were desperate and echoed round the workshop.

But Thomas seemed quite unperturbed and was again taking up his tools. Another precise 'thunk' with the hammer and another digit flew across the bench leaving a red trail behind it. The hammer rose and fell again, and again, and again until Samuel, unable to bear the increasing pain again, fainted.

When he slowly came to there was no light to hurt his eyes this time. Instead he was being deafened by the clatter of thunder above him. It sounded like earth spitting against wood. There it was again. Where was he? He started to grope with his hands, then winced with pain as the raw stumps of his fingers banged against something hard. Hell, it's stuffy in here, he thought. Where am I? The steady pounding of earth was beginning to get fainter now, but the familiar smell of freshly dug earth seemed stronger. The next instant he was sure his heart stopped pumping as the horrible truth surged in on his brain. He was being buried. Thomas had gone completely mad; he was burying him alive. He beat his aching hands around him to make sure. They moved as far as the confined space of the coffin would allow. His heart was pumping madly now, he could hear the thumping echoing through the narrow box. He thrashed at the coffin lid with his useless stumps, but it was no good, he could do nothing. He couldn't hear the earth being shovelled any more now. All he could hear was the rhythmic thump of his heart and gasping of his breathing. The air was getting hot and stale, the pounding and gasping got stronger and stronger, his wild twisting and turning got him more and more tangled until he could no longer move. He opened his mouth wide to scream to protect his ears from the monotonous thump, thumping. But all that happened was that the little stump quivered and a pathetic gurgling noise emerged. Surely Thomas could have been satisfied with all his fingers. He could at least have left him his tongue to die with.

## SAD ROAD TO THE SEA

*By Gerald Kersh*

THATCHER felt sick, sick in the head. Something had gone wrong; something at the back of his skull. He had felt it: a click and a whirr like a broken clock-spring. Then time had stopped.

He had wanted some money, yes, wanted money desperately. He had lain awake the night before, thinking how fifty pounds would see him clear. But he had needed money many times before; had always needed money. Then why this? (Thatcher clutched his forehead.) He had thought the matter out. If everything else failed, he decided, he would ask George Fern to lend him twenty-five. Then, having fixed a hope on that possibility, he had fallen asleep. Oh, blessed sleep! Why had this dawn to break?

Dawn had brought depression, ill-temper, gloom; but no thought of murder. He had drunk his tea, given his two sons twopence each, and gone out. Murder? He never even thought of it. He would telephone George Fern, explain matters and ask for thirty pounds, promising to repay it in ten days. That would save him. Everything would be straightened out. He became almost cheerful, whistled *These Foolish Things*, went into his workshop quite briskly, to discover that the telephone had been disconnected. Gloom returned, hideous depression. Looking round the workshop into which the sunlight streamed in a great blinding beam, Thatcher was seized with an overwhelming desire to run away, plunge into a cool sea and swim – swim for hours, swim miles. The workshop nauseated him beyond expression. He hated everything in it – the cutting-table of scarred pine-wood with its iron-rimmed cutting-slit; the grotesque shears bound at the thumb-hole with a strip of grey tweed; the heat-rusted stove with its three twelve-pound

pressing-irons; the litter, the smell of cloth, the broken bits of chalk, the tang of oil that hung over the sewing-machine, the imbecile fashion-plate of the man in the travelling-ulster, 'Tailoring De Luxe, 1911', the enamel water-basin and the greyish ironing-cloths, the button-punch, the debris of wadding and broken basting-cotton, the sack of waste cuttings, the triangular clippings of canvas, the detestable brown-paper patterns, the lifeless pattern-bunches that hung on nails. . . .

He took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. Marsden's flannel trousers were finished, and needed only a final pressing. If, by some miracle, Marsden, Piper and O'Dowd all paid their bills this morning, he would be saved: but they would not pay their bills; they would give him two or three pounds on account.

'I have to pay cash for cloth, and ready money for wages,' he might say; but it was so much wasted breath. The little tailor? Bah, he is beaten before he starts. He cannot give credit, cannot get cash. 'Oh, God damn and blast everything!' said Thatcher, lighting the stove and banging down an iron. The burning match fell on the floor. 'Burn, God damn and blast you, burn down, burn right down, burn right down to the ground, burn to ashes!' he cried. The match went out. He went into the fitting room. Dust-motes swam in the sunlight; fine dust lay on the carpet and the mirrors. 'Tailor, tailor!' He felt his arms, gnarled and hardened. He could swim, he felt, a thousand miles . . . out . . . out . . . and then lie on his back floating while the little waves dandled and soothed him. Automatically, he damped a cloth, laid out Marsden's trousers, took the heated pressing-iron from the stove and went to work. Steam hissed. He looked at the wallpaper: he was in one of those moods which make a man stare, fascinated, at familiar objects. A smell of burning made him jump: the ironing-cloth was charred brown. Thatcher flung the iron aside, snatched the cloth away, looked and cursed bitterly. Marsden's silver-grey flannel trousers were ruined; a brown patch, bigger than his hand, marred the left knee. Nothing could be done. Thatcher sat down, too miserable even to swear.

*The sea . . . the sea. . . .*

Eleven o'clock struck. Thatcher counted his money. He had four shillings. But the rent! He bit his knuckles, banged on his hat and went out leaving the gas-jets roaring under the two irons on the stove. George Fern; he had to see George Fern. He almost ran into Charing Cross Road, leapt on a passing bus and bit his nails as the uproarious street jerked past. At the Corner House he jumped down, and walked rapidly into Great Russell Street.

But before he had reached the end of the first block he stopped, and bit his nails again. He did not want to see George Fern. He already owed the man ten pounds. How could he ask him for more? But if he promised, gave his word of honour, to return the whole forty within ten days, Fern would not refuse. Thatcher knew that Fern would lend him the money: Fern was wealthy; Fern liked the strange, gloomy, ox-like tailor. In any case, he could offer to work off the debt in suits or overcoats . . .

Thatcher walked on, much slower. At the entrance to the block of flats in which Fern lived he stopped again, loitered on the pavement in an agony of indecision. His left thumbnail fascinated him: he bit it slowly, meditatively. Each bite left a new rough edge, and those rough edges had to be bitten away – they simply had to be bitten away. Thatcher remembered his wedding night: his bride sat up in bed looking at him with large, timorous eyes, while he had bitten the nail of that same thumb. *Oh God damn it!* he thought, and ran upstairs. But at Fern's door his courage evaporated again. He hesitated, gnawing the thumbnail and smoothing his hair; then knocked sharply at the door. Fern was there: his face appeared.

'Oh, Thatcher. Come in.' Although it was nearly half past eleven, Fern was still wrapped in a red dressing gown. He was a man of independent means; a drinker, a cigar smoker, a self-indulger suspected of luxurious and unmentionable vices. 'Coffee?'

'Thanks,' said Thatcher, and then, catching sight of Fern's elegant white hands, grew ashamed of his own nibbled fingers and kept them out of sight.

'What kind of day is it?'

'Beautiful, beautiful, Mr Fern.'

'Ah. Well, well. And what brings you here so early in the morning?'

'I was passing and —'

'Quite right. Always drop in. Mind if I put the gramophone on? I've got a new record of Blue Peters and his Boys. It's crazy, just meaningless shouting, yet somehow or other I like it.' *Keek!* went the gramophone. 'God Almighty, now what have I done?' cried Fern. 'Ah, that's better.'

The music started with a strange clanking and a rattle of drums, and then a strained voice shrieked:

'Wha-de-do! Wha-de-doo! Iddy widdy, wha-de-diddy, whaddy dooo? Oh no . . . Oh wo-hoe!'

'I was passing, and I thought I'd drop in,' said Thatcher. 'I thought perhaps I could make you a nice flannel suit.'

'Well, well, you know how it is, Thatcher,' said Fern. 'I've been going to Tybalt and Tybalt for twenty years, nearly. Sorry, but you know how these things are.'

'Ah, but they charge you fifteen guineas,' said Thatcher.

'Sixteen. Besides, you know me: I never pay cash.'

Thatcher felt a little more cheerful, for he knew now exactly what to say. 'It just occurred to me that you wouldn't mind if I asked, Mr Fern. No harm in trying? Only you see . . .'

'Bad season, eh? Summer, and so on?'

Thatcher nodded. Damn the man Fern! Why had he snatched the words from his very lips. 'And I'm afraid I owe you a little money,' he muttered.

'Don't worry, don't worry,' said Fern. 'Now — listen to this bit!'

The strained mad voice rose to a gurgling screech: 'Whajji-deedy, whajji-dood, whajji-whajji-whajji dee-heedy hoo, oh Lawd! Oh Low-howd! Oh whaddiddi doo-diddy, doo-diddy, do . . . dee . . . dee-LAWD!'

*Is he worrying about that tenner?* wondered Fern. 'Have a cigar. Have some more coffee. Tell me how things are going?'

'Oh, there's plenty of trouble,' said Thatcher. 'I've got to find thirty pounds this morning.'

'That's a lot of money.'

'Ha!' said Thatcher.

Fern looked at him, and thought: *So that's it! Leading up to a touch, eh?* He was mildly amused as he watched Thatcher's sweating face. Lazy, easy-going, languidly good-natured, Fern lounged in his chair, and decided: *All right. If he asks me for it I'll let him have it.* And idly calculating, scratching the invisible figures with a fingernail on the arm of his chair, he worked out his cash balance . . . minus twenty-five . . . minus seventeen . . . minus forty-six . . . plus two-seventy-five . . . call it seven hundred. Thatcher could have the odd thirty if he wanted it.

'The trouble with me is, I can't get my customers to pay,' said Thatcher.

'No?'

'A few pounds on account; a fiver here, three there. And all the time, I have to pay out cash.'

'Aha?'

'I wondered . . .' Thatcher paused. *Now here it comes,* thought Fern. 'I wondered if you'd like to give me an order. I was, I was just passing . . .'

Fern grinned. 'Go on, you old so-and-so, you. You weren't passing at all. You came up here to ask me to lend you thirty pounds. Isn't that so?'

'No,' said Thatcher; and having said it, boiled with self-reproach. *Fool! Fool! Wouldn't it have been just as easy to say 'Yes'? Fool! Fool! Fool!*

'Now come on,' said Fern, laughing. 'Admit it. You said to yourself: "Fern's a mug; he'll lend me some money." Eh?'

*Laugh!* screamed the tortured brain of the tailor: *Laugh! Laugh it off; say 'Yes' and laugh and it'll be all right.* But his face remained blank, ox-like, and his heavy tongue said: 'No I didn't, Mr Fern. I just dropped in.' He rose. 'I've got to get along now.'

'So you don't want me to lend you any money, then?'

'No, thanks, Mr Fern.'

'More coffee?'

'No, thanks very much. I must be getting along.'

Fern was a kind man. He laid a hand on Thatcher's arm and



said: 'No, all joking apart; do you really want me to lend you some money?'

'No, really, I can manage all right.'

'Sure?'

'Thanks, yes, Mr Fern.'

'Well, look in again whenever you're passing, then.'

'I will, I will. Good morning, Mr Fern.'

'Bye, Thatcher.'

The door closed behind him. Thatcher walked down, gnawing his thumb. There was a little bit of loose skin above the nail, and for a minute or two the whole of his consciousness concentrated upon it. If only he could bite that bit of skin away, leaving a clean edge, he would be happy.

Then he began to curse himself for a fool. Fern had offered him money, pressed money upon him; and he had said 'No'. Was he mad? He walked slowly back. The workshop was full of dry heat, for the iron-stove was blazing red-hot. Thatcher kicked up the gas-tap, and pondered. He lifted the sack of cuttings, and calculated that there must be quite forty pounds of woollen rags, 'Mungo', saleable at fivepence a pound. He could not work that day. Thatcher grasped the slack of the sack in his strong right hand, slung it over his shoulder and went out again, this time to Cohen's shop in St Martin's lane.

Cohen was a dealer in woollen rags. He weighed the sack and said: 'Thirteen-and-six.'

Thatcher found his voice. 'What the hell do you mean, thirteen-and-six?'

'Look for yourself.'

'There's fifteen bob's worth there.'

'Now listen, Mister Thatcher; it's a hot day, so don't make me laugh. Thirty-two pounds at fivepence. Just over thirteen bob. All right, call it thirteen-and-six.'

'Make it fifteen bob for luck,' said Thatcher.

'I should make it fifteen bob for luck! Are you making me *rich* with your cuttings?'

'All right,' said Thatcher, and took the thirteen-and-six. He lingered in the shop. 'Oh, Cohen,' he said.

'Yes?'

'Like to do me a favour?'

'If I can. What?'

'I've dealt with you for a long time.'

'It's been a pleasure.'

'I always did stand up for you. I always did like your people.'

'So?'

'Lend me thirty pounds?'

Mr Cohen laughed. 'Is this the heat? Thirty pounds? Me? Where have I got thirty pounds? I'll tell you what I will do, I'll loan you a fiver, if you're stuck. But thirty? Haven't got it.'

Thatcher went out. *Am I crazy?* he asked himself. *Refusing thirty from a man like Fern, and then going and begging it from a man I've hardly spoken to a dozen times before?* Worry took hold of him. He used up his thumbnails, and started on the forefingers. When he entered the workshop, he found the rent collector waiting for him.

Thatcher froze.

'Well, Mr Thatcher?'

'Look, I haven't got the money just this minute, Mr Burke.'

Burke was a small man, old as the decaying house; an old-fashioned rent collector with a hook-like hand and a dry, serrated crack of a mouth. He wore a billycock hat of forgotten pattern, grey and greasy at the brim. A twopenny bottle of ink hung on a string about his neck. 'This won't do,' he said. 'You *know* it won't do.'

'Yes, but look: I'll have some money later on.'

'Later on, later on. When's later on? Today? Tomorrow? Next year? What d'you call "later on"?'

'I . . . This afternoon.'

'Two? Three? Four? Five? What's "this afternoon"? It's nearly afternoon now. You know it is.'

'Five.'

'Five, five? Five pm today? Now mind, mind. I'll come back at five. Five, mind. When I come at five, don't say "Six", or "Five-thirty", eh?'

Thatcher opened the door for him, nodded politely, and

said: 'Right you are then, Mr Burke.' At the same time he found himself struggling with an impulse to kick the little old man downstairs . . . one kick, one splintering, smashing, savage kick, right in the shiny seat of those sordid blackish trousers. . . . Smash, crash, jangle; bump-bump – how beautifully Burke would tumble downstairs! 'God, what wouldn't I give for a swim in the sea!' said Thatcher. Burke, already on the first landing, heard him and said: 'Nothing better to do?'

Thatcher beat his hands together. Why, why, why could everybody else on earth pay his rent while he had to fence and fiddle for hours of grace? And one word to Fern – one mumbled 'Yes' —

Thatcher brushed his coat resolutely, and walked back to Great Russell Street. Now everything was definite. He would explain; say 'I was too shy, too embarrassed, Mr Fern, to say "Yes" when you asked me if I wanted to borrow money from you. But the fact is, I do: I must, indeed. The rent collector is waiting on the doorstep for me. I could pay you back all I owe in a week or so.'

He knocked boldly. There was no answer. The porter, passing through the passage, said: 'You want Mr Fern?'

'Yes.'

'Out.'

'When?'

'Few minutes ago.'

'Back soon?'

'Tuesday.'

'What?'

'Gone to Bognor for the weekend.'

'Oh my God!' said Thatcher and dragged himself over to the British Museum, where he wandered aimlessly for an hour. Then he went to see Marsden, who lived in Hampstead. Marsden was not at home. Piper; Piper: Mr Piper might. . . . Mr Piper was away. O'Dowd? Thatcher consulted a notebook. O'Dowd lived at Fulham. It was so far away, and the day was so hot . . . *God damn it! I'll go and stand on his doorstep, as Burke stands on mine!* But even as he made this resolution, he knew that he would forget it before he had

walked a hundred yards. Sodden gloom, deathly depression came down upon Thatcher. He returned to Lemon Tree Court, and arrived at half past four. Everything was quiet. He filled his little kettle, threw a reckless handful of tea into his tiny enamel pot, rinsed a cup, and waited for the water to boil. 'God damn it, no milk!' He went to the door; flung it open; stopped dead. There, in his billycock hat, with his absurd ink-bottle, cold and malevolent as Death, stood Burke the rent collector.

'Why, why, what a way to open doors, Mr Thatcher. Just about to knock. Oh dear.'

'Come in.'

'Have you got the money?' asked Burke, taking off his hat and wiping his glabrous white head with a mauve silk handkerchief.

'I beg pardon?' Thatcher felt old and broken.

'I said —'

The kettle boiled over, its lid rattling. Thatcher took it off the gas-ring and filled the teapot.

'I said, *have you got the money*, Mr Thatcher?'

'Yes.' Thatcher looked at his reflection in the back of a teaspoon . . . he was all nose; the other features were squeezed back to the edges of the polished convexity.

'Good,' said Burke, uncorking the ink-bottle and licking the nib of a little collapsible pen, 'Well?'

'Eh?'

'Please, please, please! I'm in a hurry, a hurry. Come, come . . .'

'Just a minute.'

Burke held out an impatient, hook-like hand; rapped with the knuckles against the pressing-board. And at that moment, somewhere in the depths and the darkness of Thatcher's brain, something went wrong. Yes, it clicked and whirred. 'God damn you!' said Thatcher, and swung a twelve-pound pressing-iron up over his head.

'Stop!' said Burke, and that was the last word he ever spoke. Thatcher felt no jolt. There was a smack and a splash, as of bursting fruit falling from a height. He stood, grasping

the iron. 'God!' he said. Burke had exploded into an atrocious blur, a detestable red mess . . . the walls were splashed, the ceiling was spattered, as if a boulder had fallen into a red puddle. Something dripped with a slow bubbling hiss on to the hot gas-ring. The uncorked ink-bottle emptied itself languidly. 'God!' cried Thatcher, weeping with horror and disgust.

He realized, in that instant, that he was doomed; and realizing this, became calm. He locked the door, and then, with the toe of his boot, kicked the collector's coat open. The wallet was there, in the inside breast pocket. Thatcher picked it out gingerly, between thumb and forefinger; opened it, and pulled out the money that Burke had neatly arranged in its compartments – a pile of ten-shilling notes, a pile of pound notes, some postal orders and a cheque. 'Cheque,' said Thatcher, and put it back, adding, on a vague and foolish afterthought, one of the pound notes. Did he reason with some idiot-logic: *They can't say that robbery was the motive . . . ?* He never knew. His throat went dry. He drank some water. His hands were red and sticky: he washed them in the enamel basin. There was a dark glueyness on his clothes: he took them off, threw them down and dressed in his grey flannel suit which hung in the fitting room. He had brought it from home in order to press it. The left sleeve hung badly too: he had meant to rip it out and readjust it; but that didn't matter very much now. Something was running down his face. He dabbed at it. It was only sweat. His reflection goggled at him from the fitting-room mirrors; pallid, stolid, bovine. He noticed then, that there was blood on his collar. What was to be done about that?

He put his right thumbnail to his lips; remembered, lowered the hand, and spat. Collar. Collar. But there were the spun-silk shirts belonging to O'Dowd. He was to have altered them, taking in the collars . . . silk shirts, worth fifty shillings apiece. . . . Thatcher took them from a drawer, put one on and adjusted his tie with extraordinary care. It was a nice shirt, a gentleman's shirt. He felt the big roll of money in his trousers pocket, and his heart began to swing and gallop. Doomed?

Yes. One did not get away. But he might give them a run . . . go abroad. . . .

Without a passport? And with every port watched? And every radio transmitter pipping and throbbing, and every teletype machine stuttering and fizzing, and every wire thrumming, and every policeman staring?

Yet there was a way: there were cheap day excursions from the coast to Boulogne. Join the trippers, go to Boulogne, slip away? Hide? Join the Foreign Legion? Buy a boat. . . . At least. . . .

He returned to the workshop. Something was buzzing.

Flies. They had come through the open fanlight. They hung in a swarm over the destroyed face of the rent collector. 'God damn it!' cried Thatcher, and flapped at them with his discarded shirt. They rose; descended again. He pushed the body with his foot, meaning to turn it over. His toe touched something hard. It lay under Burke's coat, by the hip. Thatcher flipped up the coat-tail, and said: 'Why, God damn it!' It was a revolver.

He might have put it in the dead man's hand, fired a shot with the dead man's forefinger, screamed for 'Police!' and told a tale of self-defence. But the revolver fascinated him. He had often wanted to own a revolver. He plucked it out of the hip pocket, and examined it. Yes, it was real, loaded. Thatcher put it in his right-hand jacket pocket.

Should he set fire to the place?

No. People would scream, smoke would rise, firemen would come: everything would be discovered. But if he left the corpse lying there, and went out, carefully locking the door, days might pass before anything came to light.

But the boss! The employer! The man for whom Burke worked! Burke would not return! Man would ring police! Inquiries – everywhere Burke had called! They would knock, break down door, burst in, find a corpse, yell murder, raise hue-and-cry! The BBC would flash his description to ten million people! *And I stand here!*

'God damn it!' said Thatcher, and went out, locking the workshop door. He locked the outer door very carefully, test-

ing the padlock with all his strength.

When he found himself in the street, his heart began to hurt him. It banged and jolted. He wanted to go back. Now, in his absence, who might come...? No: the door was locked. Still...

No! He should fly, fly now, quickly.

*Crowds*, he decided.

Yet he wandered, not daring to go, yet afraid to stay... wandered the streets until night fell, avoiding the places where he was known, walking aimlessly.

The station at Fenchurch Street was crowded. Thatcher pushed a note through the ticket-office window, and said:

'Southend.'

'Return, sir?'

Thatcher experienced a terrible sensation of hopelessness, as he replied:

'No.'

He took his single ticket and caught the train.

\* \* \*

That was at 9.54. Thatcher had caught a fast train. It rolled, gathering speed, past the dreary tenements of Stepney, dotted with lugubrious yellow oblongs of faint and exhausted light; out, through the sombre wastes of Bromley, East Ham, Barking; away, through the mystery and melancholy of the eastern suburbs; beyond Dagenham, beyond Hornchurch, beyond the mournful limits of Upminster; towards the marshes and the mud-flats of the Thames mouth. Here, the river, indescribably defiled, seeps wearily out to the cool, clean sea.

'Benfleet, for Canvey Island!' Thatcher looked out of the window. He could smell the sea breeze: see the lights of the house-boats. The man sitting opposite him got out, leaving him alone in the compartment. A whistle squealed. The train jolted out. 'Leigh-on-Sea!' Now Thatcher could see the broken moonlight on mud, and, in the distance, a shining line of water. The tide was out. Cold and naked under the pure stars lay a black and fecund wilderness of salty mud, where green crabs crawled. 'Chalkwell!' Thatcher felt dreadfully

alone. 'Westcliff-on-Sea.' The train wailed, *Houuuuuu!* and rushed on, spitting grit. 'Southend! Southend!' Thatcher wanted to go back. But he left the train, passed the ticket collector, and went out.

He found himself in the High Street. Two girls dressed in trousers and blouses, and wearing paper caps inscribed with the words *Come up and see me sometime*, brushed past him, laughing. Thatcher felt that he was invisible. He considered himself as already dead; a ghost; beyond mankind, life and hope. Then he looked at his watch. Of course, of course, it had stopped hours ago. He accosted a policeman, and said: 'Could you oblige me with the time?' The policeman replied: 'Ten past eleven.'

'Thanks,' said Thatcher; then, realizing to whom he was talking, started and walked away. *It will be at least twelve hours before they find anything*, he thought, walking aimlessly. A paralysing weariness was coming upon him. *I must sleep. Tomorrow I swim.* His dim, blank eyes rolled slowly round; perceived a white house, an illuminated sign: PRIVATE HOTEL. He walked towards it; paused. Like a bubble in mud, one slow throb of fear rose in his brain, and sluggishly burst. God damn it, he was too tired to think. . . .

Thatcher went in.

'Room?'

'Single, sir?'

'Yes.'

'For how long were you thinking of staying, sir?'

'Eh? . . . A week.'

'Would you require full board and —'

'Yes.'

'We have just one, sir, a top-floor front, at three guineas.'

'Right.'

'Would you like to see it, sir?'

'Yes.'

Up, up, up, up . . . the stairs went round and round, husky with green carpet, winking with brass rods, wearisome, endless . . . past a thousand white doors . . . beyond five hundred landings.





night breeze. Below, the tide flowed in, placidly murmuring. *Tomorrow I swim*, thought Thatcher. Now, his weariness had passed. He paced the floor, touching with his fingertips every piece of furniture as he passed it, opening drawers and doors. The wardrobe was black and hollow as an empty coffin. The wash-hand-stand cupboard gave out a faint, musty smell; the drawer above jammed a little, and in it there was something that rolled and rattled. It was a tiny empty bottle which had contained Witch Hazel. Thatcher uncorked it, and sniffed at it; then crept back to the bathroom, filled it from the Spirits of Salt bottle and tiptoed to his room.

The little bottle had a moulded cap. Thatcher screwed it down tight. Now . . . what? Hide the bottle, of course. But where? That was easy. Thatcher opened his little worn pen-knife, and, with two or three expert jabs and jerks, ripped open an inch or two of the lining at the back of his jacket and slid the bottle inside. He always carried a needle or two under one of his lapels. Now he needed thread and cursed himself for having forgotten it. Cotton, Cotton, even a foot of common basting-cotton! 'Oh God damn it,' said Thatcher. But in such situations as this he was a man of resource. He took off his shirt, unpicked the thread that held on one of the lower buttons; threaded the needle with that marvellous flip of thumb and forefinger which only tailors and seamstresses acquire, and sewed up the lining with a few quick stitches. He scarcely paused to wonder why he did this. He knew that Spirits of Salt was terribly poisonous. Perhaps the possession of that concealed ounce of hydrochloric acid, like the feel of Burke's revolver in his pocket, helped him to feel strong, less vulnerable?

He undressed, looked at his sturdy, pale torso, reflected in the wardrobe mirror and thought: *Tomorrow I buy a pair of good white swimming trunks; and then . . . Ah! I shall swim and swim. . . .*

The light hurt his eyes. He switched it off and sat by the open window. On the second floor of a house at the bend of the street a young woman was undressing. She had not taken the trouble to draw her curtains. Thatcher saw her slide out of a

blue silk undergarment, before she passed out of the range of his vision; but he was not interested. Women? No. Drink? No. He transferred his attention to his fingernails. The nail on the third finger of his left hand was nearly a quarter of an inch long: he had been hoarding it, as a gourmet hoards rare wine. Now he started to bite it, slowly and voluptuously; gnawed it down to skin-level, sighed, and lay down on the bed.

One o'clock chimed.

Sleep struck Thatcher suddenly senseless, like a sandbag.

He was exhausted. That sleep was a little death. The pale things that squirmed under his consciousness, like insects beneath a log, scarcely stirred. Three hours passed. Thatcher's nerves, taut to numbness, replenished themselves. Little tingles of sentience came back into his brain. The pale, squirming things came to life and struggled. One by one, the grim black bats of memory unhooked themselves from their dark resting places, and dropped, fluttering.

Thatcher dreamed. He was swimming under deep water . . . warm, deep, creamy-green water, while translucent fishes of fluctuating shape slid past him, and streams of wriggling pink bubbles poured over and around his head, tickling his cheeks. At the back of time, a small voice said: 'This is a dream.' 'Oh, let me dream, let me dream!' cried Thatcher, and burst into tears. And then the water grew black, the stream quickened, sweeping him along, and the sweet green sea became the shadow-ocean of an intolerable nightmare . . . and the current was a train, an express train, rushing, screaming, through an endless night. 'I must go,' said Thatcher, and jumped. The air supported him: he flew, treading the pedals of an invisible bicycle. *But what if it breaks?* He fell. *I shall hit the ground! . . . I shall burst!* Out of a thick crimson puddle, a set of false teeth flew, gnashing and laughing. *The gun, the gun!* He pressed the trigger of Burke's revolver. A scream came out of the muzzle. 'The train!' yelled a voice . . . and he was running on all fours down a railway line, grasping the metals with his hands and hauling himself forward in great, sickening leaps. Ohooooo! . . . Ohooooo! wailed the train, and thundered

towards him, with its lamps shining like eyes. Yes, indeed – the train had eyes, and a mouth full of false teeth – and it was coming, at a thousand miles an hour – and between him and its glaring eyes, his wife was sitting, naked except for her bedroom slippers, curling up the ends of her long dark hair with a revolver while his two sons danced round her. ‘Katie! Katie!’ he shouted. But his throat was dry, and no sound came out. She sat astride the rails, dandling the boys on her knees. ‘Katie!’ shrieked Thatcher, and seized her. ‘Why, Georgie,’ she replied, and kissed him. Suddenly, she was young again. ‘Katie, the train!’ She laughed: ‘No, it’s only the milkman. Put your arms round me and be nice.’ He snatched her to him. Then Katie was Burke, indescribably burst; and in the middle of the redness, a set of false teeth champed and said: ‘George, do stop biting your nails!’ Then the train rushed over him, and he cried out and awoke, sweating in utter horror.

Train!

Train?

Yes, he could hear a train coming into Southend station. ‘God damn it,’ said Thatcher and rolled off the bed. He listened. The train steamed out. Outside, thrushes were singing, and gulls were uttering their hoarse squawks as they wheeled above the cliffs. His watch said six. ‘They will find the body today,’ thought Thatcher, going to the bathroom.

But they had already found the body. The train Thatcher had heard was the 4.25 am from Fenchurch Street. It was loaded with newspapers.

Every copy of every paper screamed bloody murder.

\* \* \*

For the house in Lemon Tree Court was old and tired. After two hundred years of dreary life in the corrosive city rain, it wanted to fall down. Its bricks let in dampness, and harboured strange insects. Sounds and draughts ran through the house unchecked. Feet on the stairs squeezed out a squealing gamut of creaks. The plaster clung to the laths by sheer force of habit and everything under the roof was tainted by the weary smell of condemned property. The floors, particularly, were unsound

and worn, rickety and cracked in every warped old board. Every splashed half-pint from Thatcher's enamel basin left its stain on the ceiling below. He should have remembered that, nor should he have forgotten that Tobin, the trousers-maker, was working late that week, finishing seventy-five pairs of white trousers for a multiple store.

Tobin had heard Burke fall. It was said that one could not spit without shaking the house. He was a little Dublin tailor, with an air of a tipsy leprechaun. His head was bald, but his ears were hairy, with tufts which protruded like greyish horse-hair from a burst cushion. 'May he rot in hell,' said Tobin. 'What's he up to now, then?'

'Sounds as if he fell down,' said Tobin's assistant.

'Did you not hear someone go up just now?'

'That'll be Mr Burke, Mr Tobin, going for the rent.'

'May his eyes drop out,' said Tobin. 'I've paid him, God be thanked.'

Footsteps shook the ceiling. 'There - he's walking about now,' said the assistant.

'Much I care if he flies up the chimney,' said Tobin. 'Now will you hurry up with them fly-buttons, then?'

They worked in silence until eight o'clock.

'Be damned to it,' said Tobin. 'Let's take a breath of air. Come to Mullaly's and I'll buy you a drink.'

'But didn't we ought to finish -'

'Am I master here, or am I not?' asked Tobin.

It was ten o'clock before they returned to work, and then they sewed savagely, like men trying to retrieve lost time. Half an hour later, Tobin uttered a curse.

'What's the matter, Mr Tobin?'

'Will ye take your bleeding nose away from here, may ye rot in hell!' he said.

'My *nose*?'

'Your nose. It's bleeding.'

'Not *my* nose,' said the assistant, investigating his nostrils with a forefinger.

'Look, then,' said Tobin, pointing. On the bench between

them lay a splash of blood as big as a shilling. 'What do you call that?'

'Hey!' cried the assistant, pointing to the ceiling.

There was a shining red patch, edged with dull brown. Even as they looked, one drop wavered and fell with a tiny splash.

'Will it be blood?' whispered Tobin. 'Go up and ask the man if he's all right.'

The assistant's feet thumped and squealed up the stairs; then clattered and creaked back. 'The door's padlocked.'

'It seems weakish for proper blood,' said Tobin, testing the consistency of a pink smear between thumb and forefinger. 'Gimme a smoke.'

'Should I call the police?'

'I'll do it,' said Tobin, and ran out.

Within thirty minutes, Thatcher's workshop door was open, guarded by a policeman, while Detective-Inspector Knatchbull hurried on his way to Lemon Tree Court.

'You could make some money out of this, telling the papers,' said the assistant.

'Begod I can,' said Tobin, and telephoned *The Comet*. 'What do you pay for the news of a murder?' he asked.

'What murder?'

'My name is Michael Tobin, number 7, Lemon Tree Court.'

'Yes?'

'Well, there's a gentleman been murdered on the floor above me, and the pollis is here.'

'What's that? 7, Lemon Tree Court?'

'Top floor. How much —'

'Thanks, but we had that in ten minutes ago. Our man's on his way there already.'

Tobin began to shout: 'Why, you dirty —' but the line was dead. 'Had it ten minutes ago! Had it ten minutes. . .'

'Ssh!' whispered his assistant. 'The CID has just come.' Detective-Inspector Knatchbull was going upstairs.

\* \* \*

Knatchbull was a cheerful and obliging man, with a face

which somehow did not belong to the twentieth century. It had the smooth placid air of a face in an eighteenth-century portrait. People conform to clothes, rather than clothes to people. Knatchbull's head was two hundred years behind its time: it would have looked best between a periwig and a flowered vest. It was globular, sleek, ruddy, and close-cropped as if to accommodate it to some perruquier's contraption of powdered horsehair. Just above the high arch of his left eyebrow there was a round black mole. His cheeks were full and pink under the thin glossy skin. Even his delicate little nose seemed to belong to a bygone period. The curve of his smile had a Jacobean remorselessness. He was a man in a mask. You felt that there was a subtle, secret meaning in his slightest gesture; a private signal in every blink of his heavy eyelids. His laugh was full of dark, Machiavellian enjoyment. He seemed to know something about you; something slightly discreditable, yet profoundly amusing. He was tall, plump, long-legged, short-necked, small of hand and foot; talkative, watchful, fond of a joke; soothing, sympathetic, strong as a bullock, and diabolically astute. It was Knatchbull who drew the Blackburn Murderer out of his hideout as a charmer draws a cobra, and sent him to the Old Bailey and the hangman. Knatchbull was the man of doggedness who followed shadowy Captain Flower for two years; the man of intuition who tracked him to Paris; the man of cold courage who, with a bullet in his thigh, walked across a dance-hall under revolver-fire and arrested him; the man of analytical wit who built his case in watertight compartments and put the black cap on the judge's head.

His instinct told him, now, that this case would be an easy one. He looked around the workshop – still wearing his air of a man with a secret joke – and in his mind little, half-formed pictures flickered and flashed. There lay the body, with its smashed head, in a pool of blood and water. There lay the twelve-pound iron, badly bloodstained; Thatcher's red-splashed suit and shirt, lying in a crumpled heap where he had thrown them. The braces were even attached to the trousers. In Burke's wallet, a hundred proofs of identity . . . a pound note, and a cheque, payable to R. J. T. Pennypond. 'Good,'

said Knatchbull, with the air of a man playing a guessing-game; and went into the fitting room. There hung two half-finished suits . . . one slightly worn grey flannel waistcoat on a hanger. There was a dampish smudge on the carpet in front of the mirror . . . probable, therefore, that he changed into the coat and trousers of the grey flannel suit. He had left his braces behind, which made it all the more probable. What ordinary man owns two pairs of braces? *'Though Spring is here, to me it's still September . . .'* sang Detective-Inspector Knatchbull, looking at two silk shirts which protruded, somewhat crumpled, from a hurriedly opened paper parcel. *' . . . That September (silk shirt) in the rain . . .'* Backward, point by point, like a cinema-film in reverse, the case unrolled itself.

Another detective came in. 'Thatcher hasn't been home,' he said, 'and his wife's worried.'

*'The leaves so brown came tumbling down, remember . . .'* Knatchbull sang, under his breath. Then he lit a cigarette and said: 'And Pennypond?'

'Yes, sir. The deceased was their collector. He should have been back by seven at the outside. He hasn't been later than seven for forty-five years. He has between a hundred and a hundred and thirty pounds on him.'

'Forty-five years, eh? Well . . . they'll have to excuse him just this once, I'm afraid. One hundred and thirty pounds, eh? Oh, yes?'

'And he carries a revolver.'

'Used to carry a revolver. Thatcher has that now. Who's that coming up?'

'Mr Monk, from *The Comet*.'

Knatchbull sauntered into the workshop, still humming: 'A hundred and thirty pounds, a hundred and thirty pounds! . . . Now what's this?' He picked a drawing-pin out of the wall, and detached a post card. It was a holiday snapshot, taken on some sunny esplanade. A plump woman in a pale dress lay back in a deck-chair holding two small, grinning, blond boys, while a strongly built man with an ox-like expression stood behind her and gazed at the camera.



'Get that man Tobin . . . Oh, Mr Tobin, I'm ever so sorry to trouble you, but would Thatcher happen to be the man in this picture, do you know?'

Tobin, who had been telephoning every newspaper in London, in a kind of reportorial ecstasy, nodded and said: 'That's him, sir, right enough.'

'Oh . . . *Un-der the spread-ing chest-nut tree, I lo-oved her and she loved me.* . . . Hm. What comes next, Parker?'

'Couldn't say, sir.'

'De-dum, de-de-dum, de-de dum dee, Neath the spreading chestnut tree. And you say you're quite sure that Thatcher was in about five o'clock?'

'Positive,' said Tobin, 'because I passed him on the stairs about half past four, I think.'

'Well, thank you very much indeed, Mr Tobin. It's been very nice of you. Goodnight. Yes, you may be sure I'll let you know if I want you.' When Tobin was gone, Knatchbull spoke to the doctor. 'And you're pretty sure he died about five o'clock?'

'Not much doubt.'

Knatchbull measured the waistcoat from the fitting room against the waistcoat from the suit on the floor; said, 'Yup.' He considered the coat and trousers. 'Well,' he said, 'he's about five feet nine, chest about forty inches, waist about thirty-seven, hips about forty-one: stocky kind of feller. Reddish-brown hair, Tobin said; rather curly. Light eyes. Face as in this snap. Probably wearing a grey worsted-flannel suit with a pin-stripe, and a silk shirt. Almost certainly has a hundred pounds or so on him, and a gun. Family man: watch letters going to the house. He's the sort of fellow who takes his money home to his wife; never stayed away from home before. Good. A respectable fellow, a thoroughly decent sort of man. Only . . . All of a sudden, *Bip!* Well, he left us everything except his address, even his photograph. Nice of him. Nice. He should have said where he was going: it would have saved both of us a bit of bother. Silly . . . silly . . . Very silly.'

Monk of *The Comet*, a wise old man in an Anthony Eden hat said: 'He put jam on it for you this time.'

'You never can tell,' said Knatchbull. 'Still – I bet an even half-crown we get him inside seventy-two hours.'

'No bet.'

Knatchbull, prowling round the room, sang:

*'The butcher boy, the butcher boy,  
I want to marry the butcher boy,  
Oh mama, oh get that man for me. . . .*

What comes after that?'

'Oh Mama, how happy I shall be,' said Monk.

'Much obliged, Charlie,' said Knatchbull.

\* \* \*

Mrs Charrington, proprietress of the Rosebud Private Hotel, looking at her *Comet* as she drank her cup of tea at seven o'clock next morning, saw a picture on the front page that made her scream. Blurred and spotty through enlargement from a dark old snapshot, yet unmistakably recognisable; ox-like and expressionless under a thick, black MURDER headline, there was the face of the gentleman in the top-floor front.

She became pale, and was sick. Then she drank a glass of water and ran to the police station.

\* \* \*

It was he, Thatcher, the missing tailor. He even called himself Taylor; was wearing a suit as described; carried a roll of notes as thick as a man's wrist; had arrived late last night. Mrs Charrington had known, all along, that something was wrong: he had a wild, desperate, savage look in his eyes – like – yes – a tiger. Or a wolf. If only her poor husband was alive. But thank God she had sharp eyes; otherwise, they might all have been murdered in their beds. And guns! If there was to be shooting, who would pay for the furniture! And the loss of goodwill? Nothing like this, she would have them know, had ever happened in *her* hotel before: no, nor yet in her boarding-house at Bognor, where she was known and respected. . . .

Was there a back entrance? The very idea. Of course, there was. And his was the top-floor front room? Hadn't she said so

already, and were they trying to make her out a liar? Good, good; then all she had to do was, keep calm. What? She keep calm? She, who was famous in two towns for her calmness, her imperturbability? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Mrs Charrington went into screaming hysterics.

Thatcher was thinking: *Now, I swim.* He might even drown himself: swim out and out until he could swim no more, then sink in the lovely green water. . . . He dressed. But could he go to a bathing-hut, with so much money in his pocket, and that fat revolver? He took the weapon out of his pocket, and balanced it in his hand. He might hide it under the mattress. But the girl who made the beds —

At that moment the door opened, and a big man in a grey suit stepped into the room. Thatcher, standing petrified, saw the glint of metal buttons in the passage. The detective, however, found himself looking into the muzzle of a big, blue revolver.

There was a second of silence. Then the detective said: 'You put that down. You'll only get yourself into trouble with that thing. Shoot me and *you'll* be the sufferer.' And he walked forward and took the revolver out of Thatcher's hand. 'Are you George Thatcher?'

Thatcher hesitated; then nodded, and said: 'Yes.'

'I have a warrant here for your arrest for the —'

'They should have paid their bills,' said Thatcher.

As they led him away he looked towards the sea and muttered: 'I wish I could have a swim.'

'Not this summer,' said the detective, and added: 'Besides, the tide's miles out.'

He was taken back to London, charged with the wilful murder of Theodore Judson Burke, and locked up.

Outside, the sun flared like oil.

It would have been a beautiful day for a swim.

\* \* \*

Thatcher sat in his cell and stared at the floor.

They had searched him, taken away his knife and matches, his watch (which never kept time), and even his spectacles.

Was it Crippen, the man who murdered his wife in order to enjoy his mistress with an easy conscience, who tried to kill himself with a broken spectacle-lens? The police took no chances. There was only one way out now, and that was through a trap-door. They had even removed the pins and needles from the lapels of his coat.

*And I didn't even get my swim!* thought Thatcher. *God, I wanted a swim!*

Weary, sick at heart, he lay back and looked at the ceiling. The bench was hard. Something was sticking into his back. He raised himself, and languidly brushed the bench with the back of his hand; then relaxed. Something struck the wood with a faint tap. Then he remembered: it was the little witch-hazel bottle.

He sat up. How was it possible? Preoccupied with the revolver, they had scarcely bothered to scrutinize the inner lining of his coat, and the bottle was so small and flat that, by some chance, it had passed unnoticed.

'God damn it!' said Thatcher, aloud.

A gaoler's head appeared at a little square hole in the door. 'Anything wrong there?'

'Lavatory,' said Thatcher.

It was a cool, sombre place, lined with leprous tiles. As soon as the door was closed, Thatcher tore the bottle out and unscrewed the cap. He raised the bottle to his lips; its tiny cold neck stung like a wasp. Thatcher's mouth filled with saliva. *Oh, God damn it, God damn me and everybody!* He flattened his tongue, prayed to God in one blurred flash of thought and emptied the little bottle down his throat, gulping wildly.

For a tenth of a second he felt nothing. In that fragment of time he crammed the empty bottle back into his pocket.

Then came fire.

Fire. He had swallowed fire. He had swallowed devils. He had swallowed hell, and it was consuming him, eating its way out. It was an explosion of pain. He could see it, like a splash of molten iron. He wanted to scream: crammed an arm into his mouth; bit through the coat and flesh and touched bone, but felt nothing but wild fire inside him.

Then Thatcher rose to his feet and stiffened his legs. His stomach twisted and heaved. He shut his throat resolutely. The linings of his throat, burnt out, stuck together. He uttered no sound. In that moment Thatcher the fool became sublime. He opened the door and walked out. 'Are you all right?' asked the gaoler. Thatcher nodded. 'Nothing wrong?' Thatcher shook his head, walking with long slow strides.

As the door of his cell closed on him again, he threw himself down on the floor. The jolt shook up the agonies within him. Burnt loose, his stomach was tearing itself up. He gagged himself again with another bitten mouthful of sleeve and arm. But his arm was insensitive. There was only one pain; an unimaginable bar of it – his gullet – leading down from a tongue that swelled like a bubble of white-hot glass to something that seethed, and writhed, and wrenched itself asunder.

Thatcher tore out his stubborn red hair and rolled over and over. Somewhere in his brain a voice said: 'Nothing can save you now.'

The goaler in the passage heard him scream, scream most dreadfully, like a trapped horse in a burning stable. He ran into the cell. Thatcher was vomiting blood and membranes.

By the time the doctor came, Thatcher was only half conscious. That is to say, he was conscious of nothing but pain.

'Why do they do it?' said the doctor, shaking up limewater. 'Why?'

'Will he be all right?' asked the inspector.

'His insides are burnt out.'

'But where did he *get* the stuff?'

'Don't ask me.'

'Do the best you can, for the Lord's sake.'

The doctor, filling a little syringe, sighed and shook his head.

'Will he live?'

The doctor emptied the syringe into Thatcher's arm. 'The poor devil,' he said. 'Look. He's bitten mouthfuls out of himself. Ugh!'

'I said, will he live? I'll be blamed for this.'

Thatcher was aware of the prick of the needle, and of a

strange spasm of peace. Then he felt himself swimming in waves of dark mist which lapped against a sullen, throbbing red ball of pain.

'Swim,' whispered Thatcher. 'lovely, lovely, lovely sea. . .'

At an immeasurable distance, a gentle voice said: 'No.'

That was the voice of the doctor, replying to the inspector.

The red ball faded. Only the throb of it remained. It was like the far-away beat of an engine. Then that also passed: there was silence. The mist dissolved: there was darkness.

Soon, even the darkness passed. There was nothing, nothing at all; and Thatcher was dead.



## THE BRINDLE BULL TERRIER

*By Dulcie Gray*

THE CHILD'S face was scarlet with rage and the tears were brilliant in her vivid blue eyes. 'You're a pig. A filthy pig. An absolute old sow!' she stormed.

Miss Dycie gave her a swinging slap which caught her on the cheek and sent her flying. 'Don't you dare speak to me like that you vile little girl!' she said. 'Go upstairs at once to bed.' She stamped her foot. 'Go on. Do as I tell you!'

'I shan't!' sobbed the child. 'And I'm not vile. It's you who are vile. And old. And you've got a horrible moustache, and I hate you.' She was crouching on the floor now in the position into which she had fallen when she had been hit.

Miss Dycie darted forward, catching the child by the dress at the back of the neck. 'Do what you're told, and go straight to bed,' she screamed.

'I hate you. I hate you. I hate you,' sobbed the child.

Miss Dycie's face hardened. 'I'll give you something to hate me for in a moment,' she said. 'You're the most disobedient child I've ever had to cope with, and I'll teach you to behave, if it takes me a lifetime.'

'You're a liar and a cheat,' said the child. 'You promised me that whoever found the plover's nest first could have the egg, and I found it, and you gave the egg to Nigel.'

'Nigel is a good boy. You're extremely naughty.'

'That has nothing to do with it. You promised, and you've broken your promise. The farmer said we can only have one plover's egg off the land, so now however many nests I find it will be no good.'

'Nigel wears glasses. He hadn't a chance.'

'Nigel's a sissy and I hate him.'



Miss Dycie lost her temper again. 'Go to bed,' she said, 'or I'll give you a good hiding.'

Janet moved slowly towards the door. 'One day you'll feel sorry for this,' she said.

Miss Dycie laughed.

All the way upstairs to her room, as she kicked her feet against every stair and all across the little bedroom itself, as she scuffed her shoes against each other on the wooden floor, Janet brooded about that laugh. She stared out of the window where a blackbird on the May tree in the front garden was singing its heart out, wondering how she could get her own back on Miss Dycie. 'Pig. Sow. Cow. Liar. Cheat!' she said to herself. 'Beast. I hate her. I hate her.'

She began to cry in earnest. 'Oh, Mummy, Mummy,' she wept. 'Why aren't you in England? I'm so lonely and unhappy. Everyone else at school has their holidays at home, and Nigel and I have to come here to rotten old Miss Dycie's. You don't know what a pig she is. I do! And you don't know what a pig Nigel is either.'

She wandered slowly over to her bed, sat on it forlornly and felt about under the pillow. Yes, it was there. Her favourite possession in the world. A book called *Misunderstood*. It was all about a little boy whose brother was always loved best, and who when his brother behaved badly and finally fell into a pond, dived in and saved him, and died surrounded at last by the love and understanding he had craved so passionately – a hero. Janet had identified herself with the little boy. She took the book with her everywhere, and read it constantly.

Janet and Nigel were stepbrother and sister. Their parents, Janet's mother and stepfather, were abroad (the stepfather worked in Ghana) and the children were at school in England. It was the Easter holidays and Miss Dycie the under-matron at the private pre-prep school they were both attending had offered to look after them in her charming little country house, in return for a quite considerable amount of extra money for the three weeks. Miss Dycie loved Nigel, but had no use for Janet, who in turn disliked her, and was always very naughty with her. Both children collected birds' eggs, and competed

fiercely against each other. As Janet had said, the local farmer, on hearing about the collections, had allowed them to look for plovers' nests in the fields, but only to take one egg. The egg was to go to whoever found the nest first. Janet had found it, but Miss Dycie had given Nigel the egg.

'Pig - Pig - Pig - Cow - Sow - Sow,' sobbed Janet. 'I hate you Nigel. I hate you both.' At last she stopped crying, dried her eyes and began to read, and Miss Dycie hearing the weeping die away decided to see what the child was doing. She crept up the stairs, and found her absorbed.

'I told you to go to bed,' she said.

'I've gone to my bed.'

'You know quite well what I mean. Stop reading and get into bed.'

'I won't.'

'Do as you're told.'

'I won't!'

'Give me that book.'

'No.'

'Give it to me at once.'

'No.'

Miss Dycie snatched the book away from Janet, looked at the title and laughed. 'Well, really!' she exclaimed. 'Of all the mawkish sentimental titles. *Misunderstood* indeed! I suppose you think you're misunderstood!'

'That's my book. Give it back.'

'I'm going to confiscate it.'

'It's mine. It's mine, it's mine.'

Miss Dycie went towards the door. 'It's mine until you can learn to behave yourself!' she said. 'Now get into bed as you've been told, and you'll go without your supper.'

'It's only four o'clock.'

'And your tea,' added Miss Dycie. She shut the door behind her.

Janet undressed slowly and got into bed. She was literally shaking with rage. 'I'll get my own back,' she said to herself. 'You see if I don't. You just see if I don't.' She buried her head in the pillow. 'But what can I do?' she asked herself.

She thought and thought, and finally the beginnings of an idea came to her.

'Serve her right,' she murmured. She climbed cautiously out of bed, opened the door quietly, then she listened. From here she could vaguely hear Miss Dycie and Nigel talking in the dining room below. There was also the faint clatter of crockery. 'Greedy things. They're having their tea,' she thought. She slipped out of the room, and tiptoed along to Miss Dycie's bedroom. Here was Miss Dycie's own very precious collection of books. She had repeatedly told the children that they were very valuable, and they were her own most treasured possession.

Miss Dycie's room was large and light and extremely chintzy. The curtains were flowered, the bedspread was flowered, and the walls and ceiling were pink. There was a pink ruched lampshade for the bedside table, and two pink shaded lamps on the dressing table. The dressing table itself was kidney-shaped, with a flowered chintzy frill and a glass top on which stood an array of cosmetic jars, a silver-backed hairbrush and comb, two silver-backed clothes brushes and a silver-backed hand mirror. There were also two photograph frames; one contained a photograph of an old man and a woman standing in a garden (Miss Dycie's mother and father, guessed the child), and one a young and good-looking man.

On the wall by the left hand side of the bed, was a small wooden bookcase, and in it were several rows of leather-bound books. 'She's taken mine, I'll take hers,' said Janet.

She took one of the books out of its shelf and leafed through it. It was very heavy, bound in scarlet, and the pages had gold edges. What should she do with it, she wondered. What would hurt Miss Dycie most?

Miss Dycie's bathroom led off the bedroom, and Janet opened the bathroom door. 'I'll spoil her rotten books for her,' she said aloud. She had known she wanted to spoil the books before she came into the room. But how? Now the idea became clear. She turned on the bath water, put in the plug and threw two red leather books into the water. In a gratifyingly short time the red dye began running, and the leather itself

darkened to black. The pages buckled and presently with a little help from Janet, the binding loosened and came away. One or two pages now floated to the top of the water. Janet watched in great satisfaction. She went back to the bedroom, collected some more books, threw these in and was in the act of throwing in a third lot when Miss Dycie caught her.

Janet had never seen anyone so angry. Miss Dycie's face was dead white, and her eyes looked almost mad. She first of all boxed Janet's ears, then she picked her up, tucked the kicking child under her arm, took her back to her room, and threw her on the bed. 'I'll kill you for this,' she said. She picked up one of Janet's leather shoes, jerked up the child's nightdress and set about beating her. Janet screamed and screamed, but the almost demented woman went on beating her. The child's flesh became scarlet. Great weals formed themselves on her body, and she tried to protect herself by hiding her head under the pillow.

'I'll kill you, I'll kill you,' panted Miss Dycie.

Nigel who had come into the room unnoticed, watched the beating impassively.

Suddenly Miss Dycie saw him, controlled herself with an enormous effort and tried to smile at the little boy. 'Nigel!' she exclaimed. 'What are you doing here?'

'I came to watch,' said Nigel expressionlessly.

'Janet has been a naughty girl. She has been so naughty that I shall have to send her away, because I never want to see her again.'

'Shall I have to go away too, Miss Dycie?'

'I don't know, dear. We'll leave Janet for the moment, and you come with me to the dining room, and we'll finish our tea.'

They left the weeping hysterical little girl where she was and went downstairs.

'What did Janet do?' asked Nigel.

'I can't tell you now, but it was something so wicked that God will never forgive her,' said Miss Dycie.

'Will you ever forgive her?'

'Never!'

Nigel helped himself to cake. 'You hit her very hard,' he said.

'Yes, but no harder than she deserved.'

'You said you wanted to kill her.'

'No, dear. Never.'

'You did. I heard you.'

'No, dear.'

'Very well, Miss Dycie.'

Miss Dycie tried to smile again, but she was still so shaken with emotion that the smile looked ghastly. 'She deserved everything she got, Nigel,' she said.

'Yes, Miss Dycie,' replied Nigel placidly.

The hours passed. Janet turned and twisted with pain and terror on the bed. Miss Dycie read *David Copperfield* to Nigel by the fire in the drawing room, gave him bread and dripping for his supper as a special treat, tucked him up in bed and kissed him goodnight.

'Are you going to kiss Janet goodnight too?' he asked.

'No, dear.'

'Never again?'

'No, dear.'

'Serve her right,' said Nigel in a pleased voice.

In spite of all that had happened, Miss Dycie was faintly shocked at this.

'Don't you want Janet to be forgiven, dear?' she asked.

'No,' said Nigel. 'I don't like her.'

The two of them stared at each other for a moment, then Miss Dycie kissed the boy again.

'Go to sleep, Nigel,' she said.

At ten o'clock she went out into the yard to see if Sheba, the guard-dog, was all right, before going to bed. Sheba was a four-year-old brindle bull-terrier bitch. She had been bought by Miss Dycie as a guard-dog after an attempted burglary three years ago. She was enormously strong for her size, with powerful shoulders, a flat head and slightly bloodshot eyes. She was nervous and highly strung, and her temper was extremely unreliable. Miss Dycie was not a little afraid of her. When she had first arrived at Miss Dycie's house, Miss Dycie

who had thought she loved all dogs, had allowed her into the house during the day, but the dog had a curious habit that had made her quite unsuitable as a house-dog. She used to stare at Miss Dycie until Miss Dycie found herself forced to stare back, then she would growl viciously. Once or twice she had even flown at her when Miss Dycie had moved too suddenly, or when the dog had been frightened by a sudden sound. So now she was kept in a kennel in the yard, on a chain.

The only time she ever showed any sign of pleasure or affection was when Miss Dycie brought her her food at midday. Tonight as Miss Dycie came near her Sheba bared her teeth and growled.

'Goodnight, Sheba,' said Miss Dycie firmly. Sheba stared at her from the kennel, her eyes glistening.

Miss Dycie closed the back door, and bolted it. She then turned off all the lights downstairs, went upstairs into Nigel's room, saw that he was asleep, crept to Janet's room, heard no sound, and went to her own room and to bed.

At three o'clock she awoke with a start and heard the sound of floorboards creaking. She sat up in bed, felt for her dressing gown, felt her way to the door and opened it.

Dimly silhouetted in the moonlight she saw Janet creeping down the stairs carrying a suitcase.

She snapped on the light. 'Janet!' she called. 'What do you think you're doing?'

Janet ran on down the stairs.

'Janet, come here. Come back at once.'

The child went on down the stairs, and now Miss Dycie noticed she was lame. She ran after her, and caught her up in the hall. 'Where are you going?'

'I'm leaving here,' said Janet. 'I'm not staying here another minute.'

'Go back to bed.'

'No.'

'Where do you think you could go at this time of night.'

'I shall go to the police station and show them my bruises,' said Janet.

Miss Dycie was frightened, and because she was frightened

she became angry again. 'You were a naughty girl, and you had to be punished.'

'I think you're a bit mad, Miss Dycie,' said the little girl.

The woman and child faced each other. Both were angry. Both were frightened. Each hated the other completely.

Miss Dycie swooped on Janet a second time, hauled her screaming to the bedroom, hurled her inside and locked the door. Janet beat against the door, kicked against it and continued screaming.

'Scream away!' shouted Miss Dycie. 'No one can hear you here, you know.'

She went downstairs and gave herself a brandy. 'Little bitch!' she exclaimed viciously. 'Little bitch! How dare she!' But she knew now that she was in trouble. If Janet managed to escape and get to the police station with those bruises all over her, Miss Dycie could be in for a bad time. She sat shivering in front of the electric fire, wondering how to save herself. She'd have to keep Janet a prisoner, of course. That was vital. Unless – Unless – Perhaps she could stage an accident. But what kind of accident?

Half an hour later Miss Dycie went out to Sheba with two large lumps of raw meat in her hand. 'Good girl, Sheba. Good girl,' she called softly. She gave Sheba one lump, undid the chain and led the surprised and sleepy dog into the house and up the stairs. Sheba made no protest.

At Janet's door, Miss Dycie said 'Good dog' again, unlocked the door, threw in the second piece of meat and shut the dog in with the little girl.

She heard Janet gasp with fear, as the dog bounded into the room.

Later that night she heard a wild scream, a terrible growl and then all was silent.

The next morning when Nigel was eating his breakfast Miss Dycie began talking to him. 'Nigel,' she said. 'I have something very terrible to tell you.'

Nigel looked at her without speaking, a large piece of bacon suspended on his fork halfway to his mouth.

'Did you hear anything during the night?'

'What sort of thing, Miss Dycie?'

'Any kind of noise?'

'I may have done. Why?'

'A dreadful, dreadful thing has happened to her. You remember that I had to punish Janet yesterday?'

'Yes, Miss Dycie.'

'I'm afraid Janet didn't take the punishment very well, and I suppose with some dreadful sort of wish for revenge, she went and let Sheba out of the yard.'

'Did she, Miss Dycie?'

'Yes, and she took her to her room. And you know what I told you about Sheba's nerves, and how she gets vicious if you stare at her, which is why she's never allowed in the house?'

'Yes, Miss Dycie.'

'I suppose Janet remembered too, and I suppose she must have thought she'd let the dog loose on me or something. Anyway, she must have frightened Sheba herself and Sheba went for her and killed her.'

'Killed her?' asked Nigel blankly.

'Yes. Poor little Janet is dead.'

'And where's Sheba now?'

'Still in the room. She'll have to be destroyed, of course.'

'Poor Sheba.'

Again, as she had been the evening before, Miss Dycie was shocked at Nigel's attitude. 'Yes, poor Sheba,' she agreed. 'But, Nigel, the police will have to be told, and I want you to tell them what I've told you now.'

'What shall I say about yesterday?'

'I'll tell you just what to say, Nigel, and you must say exactly what I tell you, will you, dear?'

'Can I have Janet's birds'-egg collection now that she's dead?'

Miss Dycie gave a start of surprise. 'Yes, dear, of course.'

'And another scrambled egg?'

'Of course. Have mine, I'm not hungry.'

There was a long silence, then Nigel said: 'We're going to have to do quite a lot of thinking about those bruises, aren't we?'



Miss Dycie felt her heart leap. 'What d'you mean?' she asked. Her mouth had gone dry.

'Of course, I'm only eleven, but I'm not a fool,' said Nigel. 'And just as a start, could I have some extra pocket money this week?'

## SUGAR AND SPICE

*By A. G. J. Rough*

**JIMMY WAS** playing, quite happily, alone in the garden. He preferred to be alone for, in this way, he could satisfy both his childish curiosity and thirst for conquest by journeying on exploratory expeditions to the far-flung corners of the spacious, overgrown garden, without having to heed the reprimanding cries of his mother. Consequently, buried deep among the long grass and in splendid isolation Jimmy was at comparative peace with his private world. The sun was high in the sky and his miniature jungle kingdom held many romantic possibilities for the long day ahead.

At lunchtime the boy's mother called him to the house. He strongly resented this intrusion on his privacy, but his growing appetite overcame his dislike of adult authority and he slowly, indirectly, unenthusiastically, ambled up to the back door which led into the kitchen. Jimmy was dusty and begrimed as a result of his exciting exploits in the undergrowth and he felt hurt when his mother scolded him for being in such a state. However, he obediently washed his hands, and then, as is the way with small boys, ravenously ate his lunch while his mother smiled at him, thinking herself fortunate that her child was already so self-sufficient and so independent.

After lunch it was raining and Jimmy's mother forbade him to leave the house, so he squatted in front of the coal fire in the living room, staring absently into the flames with his large, innocent, china-blue eyes. His mother watched him as, suddenly remembering something, he dug his small hand deep into the pocket of his shorts. He withdrew a grubby matchbox which he opened to reveal a rather large, hairy and lethargic garden spider – undoubtedly one of the morning playmates. Before his mother had regained her composure, Jimmy, with the completely indifferent air adopted by most young children,

had unceremoniously plucked the legs from the spider and cast the body into the fire. He smiled as he saw the momentary puff of flame among the coals and as he felt the nervy appendages twitching in the palm of his hand.

Having received a severe tongue lashing and yet again having been refused permission to enter the garden it seemed to Jimmy that he would be doomed to spend the afternoon in the company of his smaller sister Louise. Louise was always prim and proper and shared none of her brother's spirit of adventure. Jimmy had no time for Louise.

The mother was quite happy and relieved to see the children go upstairs together. The playroom was much cleaner than the garden and besides, there was another fire up there to keep the room warm. The children would quietly enjoy themselves until teatime.

The afternoon passed and at five o'clock Jimmy's mother made her way upstairs and along the passage to the playroom. After opening the door and surveying the scene it took a few seconds before the stark horror of what she saw registered on her countenance. Turning ghastly white and then letting out a piercing, almost unearthly scream, the woman turned, ran, stumbled and half fell down the stairs, while her anguished cries echoed through the house below.

Jimmy frowned. He had long since given up trying to predict adult behaviour patterns, so he clutched the scarlet-dripping saw from his 'Junior Handyman Set' more tightly and decided to carry on playing. On the table lay the limbless body of Louise, gagged, tied down with thick string, resplendent in a crimson glory of blood which gurgled from fleshy, hollow sockets, slid thickly from the table and flowed sluggishly across the carpet, extending macabre pseudopodia to all corners of the room. Sweet smoke perfumed from the fire where the charred, infantile limbs popped, crackled and blistered merrily.

Jimmy scratched his head with an annoyingly sticky finger. He had often wondered what made Louise tick. Now, if the rain had stopped, perhaps he'd be able to go back to the garden. That would be much more fun.

## THE COMPUTER

*By Rene Morris*

THE DAY HAD started the same as any other day, with sunlight pouring in at the window, and the faint aroma of bacon frying. Amon Kane stretched his long legs beneath the warm blanket and tried to think of nothing, but his mind had already started to dwell on the day's business, and try as he might, he knew that sleep was impossible. He threw back the covers and grudgingly slid out of bed, washed and dressed, and still yawning, went down into the kitchen. Tania turned to smile at him as he entered, setting the plate she was holding down upon the table in front of him.

'Thought you were never coming,' she said, still smiling.

Amon stared at his plate for a moment, savouring the rich fragrance that rose up, filling him with ravenous hunger, and then bit deeply into the soft, pink bacon, sighing contentedly.

'Oh, before I forget,' Tania said. 'There's a letter for you. It's marked "personal". It was delivered by hand.'

Amon looked up quickly. 'When did it come?'

'Ten minutes ago. Another business appointment cancelled I expect.'

He took the thin blue envelope from her and stared at it. His name and address were printed in capital letters, and in the bottom left-hand corner his thumb felt the pattern of perforated dots. He rose from the table, a cold knot tightening inside his stomach as he went slowly up to his room. He closed the door and sat on the bed, staring at the envelope, half afraid to open it, yet knowing that he must. With trembling hands, he tore carefully along the top and pulled out the small, white card. The words swam before his eyes, and he could not read them because his hand was not steady. He placed the card upon the bed, and kneeling down, read slowly:

Eminent Citizen Amon Kane. (Number 27681)

Subject: Male. Five feet ten. Blond hair. Blue eyes.

Limp in left foot. Name: Anton Keppler.

Crime: Murder.

Address: 2 Farraway Block,

Cedar Way.

Exterminate: 4.15. Tuesday. August 5th. 2100.

Card to be returned on completion of duty.

Special Computer Branch.

No. 50021.

It seemed incredible that the computer had chosen his number, and yet, as an Eminent Citizen, he knew that one day he would be called upon to rid society of its unwanted. After all, he had agreed that it was far better to rely on the computer, for its accuracy was infallible. It was decided that trial by jury could not effect the same speed and humanity in dealing with its unlawful, as could the computer. He recalled the long, low room with its flickering panels of red and green light, and the strange, abrupt spinning of tape as it tugged on brown reels behind polished glass. He had felt a sense of awe as he watched the needles quiver on their white dials, recording time and place, sex, and intensity of human feeling. Within an hour, the computer had picked up and analysed the shock and fear waves that sped across the domed city, pin-pointing the exact source, and following the mental disturbance with unerring precision. He had been one of twelve, each man chosen by the computer to act on behalf of society. Why should he feel any guilt? It was in the order of things that he should obey – in fact, his duty.

Somewhere a man had killed. Amon wondered about the man, wondered if his morning had started like any other. Did he know that at four-fifteen today – yes today – he would die? There was no escape. It was no use trying to run, or hide, for the computer *Knew* where he would be at four-fifteen; had already sorted and sifted his brain pattern within the cold consciousness of its own. Already, the body of the victim would have been removed, and every minute detail of death recorded

and filed away in the memory-bank. He had to admit that there could not be a better way. Keppler would not know his executioner; but at the moment of death the computer would flicker and blink his soul into the memory-bank of eternity.

Amon picked up the small, white card that ordered death, and slipped it back inside the envelope. He stood for a moment looking for a hiding place, somewhere he knew it would be safe, but decided that to leave it anywhere in the room would be dangerous. Above all, he did not wish Tania to know of his mission. How could she understand? How could he explain the complexity of man and machine?

He placed the envelope deep inside his pocket and went down to Tania.

'I'm off now, darling,' he said, trying to sound as he always did.

Tania came from the kitchen, and reaching up, kissed him for a long time on the mouth. He tried to respond, but somehow the shock of the letter had sapped him of all feeling and he could only stand there, waiting for her to release him.

'Have you got everything?'

He felt his pocket. Had he got everything? Somewhere at the back of his mind he was suddenly aware that there was something that he had forgotten. The gun. It came to him in a flash. How could he have forgotten such a vital part of it? He sped back up the stairs to his room, and unlocked the drawer of the writing desk. His hand felt inside and touched cold steel. It was not like any other gun he had ever seen, and as it lay on the palm of his hand, he found it hard to believe that so small an object could spurt liquid death inside a man's brain. Although he had handled it many times when being taught how to use it, he still felt that it could not possibly kill for there was no mark, to speak of, on the target sheet. Today, he would point it at a man's head, and fire. He would feel the small weapon jerk in his hand, and watch a man fall dead - with only a tiny pin-prick of blue somewhere on his forehead. He took the card from his pocket and stood wondering if it would not be better to leave it here, in the drawer; but decided

he had better take it with him so that he could read the address again – that way, there would be no mistakes.

Amon pressed the green button and waited for the auto-path to slow down. He stood watching the thin line of people as they were hurried by, their faces blank and white as if they were dead, without the senses of living, feeling or caring; and he envied them their isolation, while all the time his stomach tightened and the muscles of his face grew stiff. The auto-path slowed to walking pace and he stepped on. He tried to think of the new auto-path that had just been completed downtown. It was a vast improvement on the old type, and he knew it was the best thing he had ever designed. Today, at four o'clock, he would be travelling on it – taking death to Keppler.

Everything seemed so normal. His secretary greeted him in the usual brisk manner, coughing discreetly as she placed the mail in front of him and waited silently until he had finished. She smiled as he looked up, and he wondered if she had detected anything in his face.

'Oh, Alese, before I forget, I shall be off at four today. Better leave the tele-tape on in case anyone rings.'

'Yes, Mr Kane. Anything else?'

'No, I don't think so,' Amon said thoughtfully, and then: 'Oh yes. There's an electrical fault on the new line. Have it attended to, will you, Alese?'

'Yes, Mr Kane. It will be seen to today, it's only a minor fault.'

Amon nodded. Alese went out quietly closing the door behind her, and he tried to think of something that would bring her back again. He needed to talk to somebody, somebody with normal fears; anything to take his mind off Keppler – and the damned computer. But he knew that it would not be normal to take Alese away from her work at this time, and he wanted everything to be normal. It was expected of him. So much was expected of him. The hours crept by, and he watched the fingers of time move slowly and silently, eating away the precious minutes of life. In the long, low room, the computer would be flickering hungrily, waiting for the stimulant of shock-waves to set the tapes turning, and the searching

fingers dancing inside the framework of white dials. It was impossible not to think about it. What did the computer know about conscience? And, suddenly it did not seem right that it could order death by another's hand without feeling anything at all. Would he ever be able to forget? Would he, in time, just store the memory of it somewhere at the back of his mind like the computer? His gaze turned again to the fingers of time. They had grown larger, blacker, and the hour hand had almost reached four o'clock. He stared in disbelief. Where had the time gone? What had he done with it? What had Keppler done with it? Had he wasted it away as he had done or had he fled from place to place trying to hide his guilt away from the computer? Damn the computer. If he ever saw it again, he would smash it to pieces with his bare hands. But the time had come to carry out his mission, and he knew that he must. It was too late to alter anything now, he had agreed along with the others that this was the best way. The best way for whom? The computer? Keppler? Certainly not him.

He felt as if he were walking in his sleep. People jostled past in waves as they came off the main town auto-path. He moved with the crowd, hardly aware of what he was doing. The auto-path started to move forward and he was hemmed in on all sides by swaying bodies. In the distance, the red lights flashed destinations, and the button beneath his finger felt round and hard, and he took his hand away for fear of pressing it before his sign came up. The auto-path stopped and started, with people surging on and off every two or three minutes as they neared the city centre, but gradually, as they left the city behind, the crowd thinned a little and the street names flashed less frequently. Then suddenly, Cedar Way flashed in the distance, and he was pressing the small, hard button beneath his thumb. The auto-path slowed and stopped, and he stepped off on to the pavement and looked about him for the large block of flats. He felt only the queer kind of sickness that rose up inside his throat, and the hard knot of nerves cramping his stomach. He looked up at the vast building before him, it had the same block shape as all the others he had designed, fitting perfectly inside the straight, orderly streets that he had taken so much



trouble to leave uncluttered. He entered the huge building and stood for a while staring at the white walls, and the entrance at the other end of the corridor that opened out into another street. The caretaker's door stood open, but there was no one inside.

Amon took the small gun from his pocket, and released the safety-catch. He walked stiffly, his hand trembling, and cold sweat standing out on his forehead. Outside number two, he stopped. It was difficult to control the trembling, and he swallowed the sickness that welled up in his throat like a surging tide, while his mind fought to accept the thing that he was about to do. Leaning against the white wall, he stood with ears straining, trying to hear a movement inside the room, but there was no sound except for the wild hammering of his heart, and the short, sharp intake of his own breath. Amon steadied himself. The clock on the wall above the door pointed to four-fifteen. Not a minute more or less. Raising his hand, he knocked loudly on the blue panelling, the dull echo losing itself along the corridor. Everything was still. Then, from somewhere inside came the unmistakable shuffle of footsteps, and he could hear the uneven tread of Keppler. He waited, frozen, as slowly the door opened to reveal a short, fair-haired man. He stared at Amon curiously, his eyes moving from face to gun questioning, and quickly turning to fearful terror. Amon felt his finger tighten on the trigger. Keppler stood for a moment staring at him in disbelief, and then he seemed to crumple like a piece of rag. He fell to the floor and lay twitching, his hands still clutching his head, his worn-out slippers half off. God! He was dead. It was over – for Keppler and for him. He felt weak and spent with mental exhaustion. He wanted to move away from the sight of Keppler, but his legs would not obey. His hand reached out and gripped the handle of the door, closing it, blotting out the sight of Keppler.

Somewhere along the corridor came footsteps. Amon turned to see an old man in overalls walking towards him. The old man stopped when he saw Amon, a toothy grin on his wrinkled face.

‘Is he out, then?’

Amon heard himself answering. 'Yes. It looks like it. I'll come back later.'

'I don't think he'll be long,' the old man went on, 'there's a seat over there if you want to wait. I'm just going to fix this.'

Amon nodded, and went stiffly across to the long, leather seat, hardly aware of what he was doing. All that he could think about was Keppler, just lying there, dead. He needed to rest a while, and he sank down on the seat, his mind in turmoil. Vaguely, he watched the old man fumbling inside his pockets. Watched while he sorted the odd shapes in his hand, and the screwdriver working at the blue panel of the door. After a while, he returned the screwdriver to his overall pocket, and looked over at Amon.

'Never knew a man that bangs doors like this one. Mind you, you'd think that in this day and age they'd have something a bit more durable. I suppose the chap that built this place wanted glass. No good for numbers though. Cracks, you see.'

Amon nodded, and the old man moved on up the corridor and disappeared into the caretaker's office. He stood up, staring at the number plate, cold disbelief in his face. There was a nought after the two. It was number twenty . . . number twenty. Stumbling to the opposite door he traced the numbers with a trembling hand. Twenty-one. Cold fear gripped him, and the numbers swam round and round inside his head, merging and spinning. He had killed the wrong man . . . killed the wrong man . . . and then he was laughing. He couldn't stop laughing. The computer was NOT infallible after all. It was only as good as people. It was useless. In the long, low room, the computer fought desperately with the strange pattern of signals, flickering panels of light flashing hurriedly to sift the information, and the black fingers spun on the white dials. A small, white card dropped down into the viewer. It read: Amon Kane (Number 27681): Information Unknown: Computer Faulty.

The flickering lights faded, and the reels of brown tape tugged convulsively behind polished glass, as quietly, the computer turned itself off.



## SUDDENLY - AFTER A GOOD SUPPER

*By Martin Waddell*

DENIS WAS at rest in the midst of a crowd of his relations, but he was not aware of their presence, for it was dark inside the vault, and darker still inside his coffin. He was alive, and the rest of them were dead; their location was all they had in common.

It was a horrible predicament, but Denis had not yet regained consciousness sufficiently to realize it. If he dreamed in his by now light coma, it was of a sumptuous supper he had enjoyed in the Old Lodge Inn east of Briding and the long walk across the downs to Aferhill which had followed; a walk through the best of autumn worlds. On this high note, his life had apparently ended. He now lay in a damp, dark vault with a particularly nauseous smell which could only be blamed on the onset of decay in his grannie, whom he had buried the week previously.

Denis had apparently passed quietly away in his sleep. His face bore no trace of the licentious life he had lived, but had obligingly composed itself in an expression of pious innocence which wronged the man as much as it delighted his aunt, the last of the line. It is not amusing, in the light of what subsequently happened to Denis, to learn that his father and grandfather had passed away in exactly the same fashion; suddenly, after a good supper. His brother William, mercifully, had died on active service, mourned only by the man who had to scrape him off the wall over which he had been, somewhat stickily, distributed. William, it would seem, was the lucky one.

No one but his aunt was at all concerned at his passing, and she was really rather pleased. Grannie, grandson and aunt had

lived a long time in Aferhill in a state of mutual resentment. To follow grannie and grandson to the grave had more than delighted the maiden lady; though charitably we must assume that even she did not imagine for a moment that, as they laid him in the tomb of his ancestors, Denis was lightly breathing, all unseen in his coffin. In the nature of the family's malaise it took the subject the best part of four days to regain consciousness, and this interval in itself had so far been sufficient to ensure that no one was around to answer their frantic knocking when it came.

With Denis, all this was to change. If he had been kind and considerate to his elderly relatives he would have gone the way of the rest of the family; bad enough. As it was he . . . well, he got what he deserved.

On the morning of the fourth day, the day after his interment in the vault beneath Aferhill church, Denis at last opened his eyes in a white satin world. It was a narrow world, tremendously uncomfortable; for his arms were pinned across his chest by carefully concealed stitches that held them to his jacket. Some hours later he finally found the strength to attempt a movement . . . but he was held tight . . . this, in a way, was his own fault, for he had, quite by chance, ended up in the coffin of the aunt who had now outlived him. On his sudden death she had felt it incumbent upon her to let him have it, his need being more pressing. Denis, in a spiteful mood one day, had made up a box each for aunt and grannie, a gesture which had become a matter for severe acrimony between the trio, for the two ladies took it as an indication that he wished to get rid of them, as indeed he did. The remaining aunt was only too happy to see her unpleasant nephew installed in the coffin he had specially made for her and, if it proved a trifle too small for him, that was just too bad. She had him put in very quickly, being a methodical old lady, managing to bend his legs a little before rigor mortis set in . . . or what passed for rigor mortis in the eyes of the medical men; from Denis' point of view, an unfortunate assumption. Had his knees not been thus inexpertly bent by his aunt, the coffin might have closed quite comfortably over him, but, as it was,

the lid did not quite seal out the air — damp, musty, dead air — with something of the odour of his dead grannie's decay in it. Air seeped through the gap between the imperfectly fitted lid and the box and kept him from smothering, which may have been the fate of his father and grandfather, at least it is charitable to hope so.

He tried to press up the satin-lined lid that held him down . . . he tried and tried again with what strength he could muster. He battered upon it, he shouted, but there was only his dead grannie to hear . . . at least she was the only person around with ear-drum left unrotted, the rest were quite past that stage, poor dears. Not that his grandmother's unrotted ears were much use to her then, or to Denis, though they were later to prove quite a delicacy.

It was of no avail. He passed rapidly from fear to desperation and from desperation to exhaustion. When he once more awoke he was no better off; the satin still pressed down upon his cheek . . . his rouged cheek, for his aunt had done her best by him. He lay perfectly still in the silence of the coffin, all too conscious that what little strength he had was fast dwindling, that a gnawing hunger lurked outside his fear, a hunger matched only by his intense thirst.

He had to get out of his aunt's coffin.

Denis was not without resource. He knew certain of the secrets of his aunt's coffin: one of which was that, although it seemed to be made of the very best wood, it was not. The coffin-making had been an unpleasant gesture, typical of the man, but he had never seriously intended to bury either of the two ladies in style. He had paid for a good-class varnish, but not for good wood. The coffin was, as coffins go, a frail affair.

He thought over this aspect of his dilemma calmly, or at least as calmly as he could be expected to, considering the cruel circumstances in which he found himself. He knew the vault quite well, having inspected it prior to the occasion of his grannie's funeral. It was of an oblong shape, with coffins laid in orderly ranks along the racks, three to a space on each rack. He knew just where his own coffin must be situated, on top of

that of his great uncle Mortimer, some eighty years dead, and he realized that if he could but cause great uncle Mortimer's crumbling coffin to give way beneath the weight which had been placed upon it the two coffins might together fall to the stone floor of the vault, with every chance that the one which contained him would burst open.

To achieve this – not inconsiderable – feat, it was necessary for him to attempt to jog his coffin from within, and this proved extraordinarily difficult. Had his coffin not been so light and ill-made, it is doubtful if he could have brought it off, but bring it off he did. The coffin rocked on top of long dead Mortimer's . . . Mortimer who had, distressingly, passed away in his sleep, suddenly, after a good supper . . . and the old rotting box gradually began to give way. At last Denis felt his own coffin tilt a little, and redoubled his efforts. There came a soft crunching sound which was the impact of his coffin shell on Mortimer's exposed thigh bone. A jolt, and a jolt, and yet another jolt, and Denis' coffin began to slip. Then he was falling and the next moment the coffin jarred on the stone floor of the vault and he lost consciousness.

He awoke with something grey and dusty on his chest, something held within a crumbling veil of shroud, something mummy-like, a wizened brown face set against his cheek in a desperate grin, crumbled lips and bared gums, eyes like yellowed peas in their socket pods. The falling coffins had jumbled them together, limb for limb; Denis and what was left of Mortimer.

No matter . . . he was out. The door of the vault allowed a thin chink of light by its hinges and in it he could see the coffins set in order around him, here and there the gleam of a white bone through crumbled wood, a cobweb which was withering cloth . . . or skin.

He put the dusty disintegrating thing which was Mortimer against the side of his broken coffin, cleared as much as he could of the corpse dust from his hair and eyes, and consoled himself with the thought that the worst was over, he had only to get out of the vault.

He had only to get out of the vault.

This task he faced with confidence, not unfounded. The strange malaise of the family, which he had only now come to understand, that which had sent a seeming death to one member after another, suddenly, after a good supper, this strange swift sickness had been anticipated by at least one ancestor, who had been much mocked for his pains. Thankfully, Denis now turned his mind to finding the chain that led up through the earth to the deathbell in the graveyard above, a bell reserved for the use of the living dead who were normally sealed in their coffins and unable to get at it.

\* \* \*

It had been a cold and blustery afternoon in the world which Denis had left behind him. The wind had whirled and burred through the larches which overhung the graveyard wall, the rain had lashed monotonously down on the church roof, a slate or two had shattered on the paving stones below; otherwise all were well, but inside out of the cold.

By five o'clock a storm had risen, a gale roared over the headland and sea pounded the pier at the foot of the church lane. In the semi-darkness of his vault, down in the church foundations, poor Denis knew nothing of all this. He was miserably groping round in the gloom, searching for the bell-chain. He slithered over moist coffins, tangled his erring hands in the bodies of those long dead, embroiled his feet in random rib cages as coffin after coffin crumbled beneath his weight. His only course of comfort was the moisture on the walls. He sopped it up with the end of his shroud which he then pressed to his mouth, so that at least he had a little to drink.

It helped, but it did not ease the demand of his gnawing hunger.

He forced himself to forget everything but the chain, and at length he found it. He had very little energy left, but he laced his fingers in the links and allowed himself to swing against it.

In the world above, the bell tolled faintly amid the clash of lightning and the rolling thunder, the distant hum of the sea and the swift pattering of the rain. Its note rang out over the



deserted graveyard, but otherwise was lost in the bustle of the elements. People went to their beds undisturbed, without imagining for a moment that Denis was hanging from the end of the chain, his knees resting on a dead nephew.

\* \* \*

Later . . . it must have been much later, he wakened to find that his nephew's ribs had given away, and the snapped bones had raked his thighs. There was no voice to cheer him, no sound from the outside, just the still of the corpses round him, the yellow white of exposed bones.

The bell was no good. He had to try another way. He had to get out. The steel door of the vault could not be opened, no way out there. But if he could remove some of the brickwork around him . . . he needed an instrument to work with.

The third coffin he opened provided him with what he was looking for, an unrotted thigh bone. He detached it from the skeleton of a dead relation and hacked vainly with it at the plaster joining the bricks . . . he made no impression.

The effort almost finished him. The desperate craving for food finally overcame him, now that the last hope had seemingly slipped away. At first he tried eating the damp edge of his shroud, but that was no good. He had to have food if he was going to live. He took one of Mortimer's few bones that remained intact and tried to gnaw it, but Mortimer's bone crumbled in his hands. He tried eating moss from the damp floor, scraping it up with his fingernails . . . but there was not enough, not nearly enough. He no longer had the desire to do anything but find food to ease his craving.

It was then, and only then, that he remembered his grannie.

\* \* \*

The storm had settled when the bell began to ring again, and this time it was heard by several people, and with great annoyance. It was, after all, two o'clock in the morning, though Denis was not to know that, and would not really have cared if he had. The bell tolled loudly, fed with all the strength and vigour of the desperate man below, tolling for his life.

Churchwarden, vicar, then policeman. One by one they climbed the hill to the graveyard, saw the bell and the moving chain.

It was, they supposed, something to do with the storm. An underground stream said the policeman, without much conviction. They really should go down to look. This idea appealed to no one. It was the middle of the night, and a graveyard, and the bell was, when all was said and done, the property of the living dead.

The vicar, a practical man, was for removing the clapper and going away, but the policeman had his duty and insisted. It was necessary in the circumstances to summon Denis' aunt from her bed, which she quitted with great reluctance, and, this done, they took torches and truncheons to the source of the trouble.

It was a solemn procession which found its way through the old oak doors and down the damp steps to the crypt, an unpleasant and ill-frequented place at the best of times, dead end lodging for the local nobility. Down the flagstoned aisle they walked, at last coming to the great steel door.

What followed was unpleasant for everyone but Denis. The door swung violently open after they unbolted it and Denis staggered out, a wild figure in a ripped shroud, his nails torn with scraping for moss, his language . . . especially when he addressed his aunt . . . profane.

In considerable confusion, they carried him away upstairs and laid him on the purple cushions of a pew, while the churchwarden was sent scurrying across the green for the local doctor.

It was his aunt who first noticed the nob of bone which Denis clasped in his hand, thick flesh straggling from it, ripped sinew a-dangle against the tattered shroud. It was the gravedigger who had the unpleasant task of reassembling what was left of the still fresh carcass in the vault below, replacing as best he could the bits which had been chewed.

They kept it to themselves, even the aunt agreed on that. Denis, who had never found his grannie particularly to his

taste, had now to admit to all and sundry that he owed the old lady a great deal. He would not have a word said against her.

He had, after all, been miraculously restored to life . . . suddenly, after a good supper.

## THE BENEFACTOR

*By Walter Winward*

THE FAT MAN began to laugh, then stopped suddenly as several passers-by stared at him curiously. He walked on quickly, blowing his nose to cover his embarrassment.

Stupid people, looking at him like that. They wouldn't be so inquisitive if they knew who he really was. Oh no! Still, laughing aloud in public was a habit he would have to conquer. Someone might remember him, and that had to be avoided at all costs. But it was difficult to suppress his mirth once it started, and he would wager his life that no one within hearing range could hazard even an approximate guess as to the reason for his laughter. They would probably think him a middle-aged eccentric, or one of those people who compensated for their weight by treating the whole of life as a huge joke. Well, let them think.

Not that his thoughts were amusing, far from it. It was his own cleverness that he found so humorous. Here he was and there they were – the remainder of the world – and no one recognized him. He could talk to shop assistants, publicans, even policemen, and they were all compelled to be mechanically polite. One day he would tell them. Some day they would all know.

He breathed deeply and looked at his watch: early, as usual. Never hurry on the actual day, that was his rule. Plenty of time for a stroll.

He walked to the end of the street, where the cobbles graduated into green fields, and marvelled that the Kent countryside was only half an hour away from his London flat. Just thirty brief minutes and the bleak backyards and asthmatic sparrows were replaced by tranquil orchards and

leisurely cows. A perfect day; the twentieth such in the last five years. Not perfect because of his surroundings but because of the errand. Sometimes the sun did not shine. Sometimes it was November and not June. But the day always ended in complete satisfaction, always left him with enough memories to keep him alive until the next time.

Not that there was much respite between the jobs – or was that the correct word? Not really. Job implied work, and he found only pleasure in his activities. In Sunderland, Liverpool, Southampton or London, he was doing what he wanted at all times.

London was his favourite by a long way, but he had already been in the city for almost a year. A year and three jobs – he really would have to find another word – four jobs by the time the day was over. Yes, it was essential that he move on, which was sad because London offered both variety and anonymity. And there was always the problem, in a smaller town, of finding a flat which suited his needs exactly. It had to be secluded, in a basement or lower-ground floor, and the landlord had to be someone whose major interest was collecting the rent and not prying into his tenants' affairs. These requisites were easily satisfied in London, but elsewhere . . . Nevertheless, he had stayed longer than was prudent, and he could return in a year or so.

He took a final look at the landscape, sighed aesthetically and began to retrace his steps.

Despite his girth he moved quickly and easily, and his flabbiness gave lie to a considerable strength. On more than one occasion his apparent innocuousness had encouraged would-be thieves to make an attempt for his wallet. They invariably became hospital cases. He knew that his obesity and outward amiability were his most valuable assets, and he made capital on both.

St Mary's Children's Home (or, as it was locally and less euphemistically known, the orphanage) lay at the far end of the High Street, and it was towards this that the fat man made his way. At the gates he paused for a moment to watch a couple of young boys wrestling, and then walked swiftly up the

driveway and into the main building. A few minutes later he was ushered into the warden's study.

'My dear Mr Russel!' exclaimed the warden, rising and extending his hand. 'How delighted I am to see you!'

Russel, the fat man, murmured something inaudible and prayed that the other was not going to be his usual irritating self.

'And I'm not the only one who'll be pleased you've come,' continued the warden. 'Janet was so disappointed that you couldn't make it last week. It took us an hour to stop her crying.'

'I was upset myself,' began Russel. 'Not for myself, you understand, although that was part of it, but because I'd let the child down.'

'I know what you mean. I know exactly what you mean. And, believe me, it's refreshing and comforting to hear someone talk the way you do.' He sighed. 'Our task is not an easy one, and I'm sorry to say that a number of our visitors look upon the children as nothing more than a weekend diversion for themselves. Indeed ...'

'Yes?'

'I was going to say ... No, it sounds most ungracious.'

'Please!'

'Well, I was going to say that were it not for the appalling lack of married couples wanting to visit our children, I would never have considered a bachelor ... I'm sure you understand what I mean.'

'Of course.'

Encouraged, the warden continued:

'Even with the shortage of couples, if you and Janet had not taken an immediate liking for one another, I should never have entertained it. But she is a difficult child' - he smiled effusively - 'thirteen-year-old girls always are.'

'You can rest assured she'll come to no harm with me.'

'Mr Russel, I know, I know! Janet's one of the happiest children here. For three days after one of your outings she talks of nothing else. And she spends the remainder of the week looking forward to your next visit. Believe me, I consider

it a privilege to know such a Christian as yourself. You may consider yourself a benefactor, Mr Russel, a true benefactor!’

Russel stifled with difficulty the chuckle which was beginning in the pit of his generous stomach. Really, the man was more pompous than ever. And as for Christian and benefactor . . .

A knock on the study door interrupted his thoughts.

‘Come in.’

The door opened and Janet entered. She saw Russel immediately, and after a moment’s initial shyness, flung herself across the room and hugged him. Russel put his arms around her and returned the embrace. He felt an inner surge of acute excitement as he touched the girl for the first time in two weeks. The warden looked on, beaming.

Russel stood up. Janet held his hand very tightly, as though frightened he might disappear if she let go.

‘We’ve got a great deal to do and see,’ he said, addressing the warden, ‘so if you don’t mind we’ll leave right away.’

Outside, Janet asked:

‘Why couldn’t you come last week?’

‘It wasn’t possible, I’m afraid. Someone I know was very ill and I had to look after him.’

Even as he spoke he thought of how he had spent the previous Saturday: sitting alone at home, wanting desperately to see the girl, yet aware that missing a visit would make her even more anxious for the next one.

‘Someone more important than me?’

‘No. Of course not. You’re the most important person in the world.’ He saw her brighten. ‘Did you miss me?’

She squeezed his hand.

‘You know I did, Uncle Ben, you know I did. I thought I’d never see you again.’

He patted her head.

‘Silly girl. Where would you like to go today?’

‘Oh, you choose. You’re better at it.’

‘All right. We’ll go to London.’

‘London!’

‘Yes. As a special treat. Don’t you want to?’

'Oh, yes, yes!' she exclaimed. 'I've never been before. But isn't it an awfully long way?'

'Not really. We can be there in an hour.'

He watched her out of the corner of his eye as they waited for the train. So exquisite and so untouched! Mere buds of breasts quivered gently under the thin cotton of her summer dress. The short white socks and sandals, instead of detracting from her approaching maturity, emphasized it. She was the creature that all men, in their secret dreams, wanted: a woman with the mind and simplicity of a child. As if to confirm this precept a youthful porter pushing a trolley whistled at her as he walked by. The girl, embarrassed, looked away. Russel ground his teeth and mentally spat after the youth. The child was not for the like of that trash! He, Ben Russel, would see that she was never deflowered by some callow adolescent in a filthy bed-sitter.

Throughout the journey to London Janet chattered incessantly. Where were they going? What were they going to do? Wasn't it exciting? Russel answered her questions with a patience and *bonhomie* born of long experience. They were going to Battersea Fair first of all. She was going to do anything she wished. Yes, it was exciting. For both of them, he added to himself.

They took a taxi from the station and arrived at the fair-ground at three o'clock.

'It's so big,' whispered Janet, incredulously. 'I've seen pictures of it but I never realized it was so big.'

They went from stall to stall, from amusement to amusement. The girl's eyes never stopped exploring for a second, and Russel's eyes never left the girl.

At the rifle range, where she failed to hit a single target, he paid the proprietor to let her have a prize: a woollen rabbit.

'But I didn't hit anything,' she protested.

'Of course you did. You just couldn't see from where you were. He wouldn't give you a prize if you hadn't, would he?'

In the Ghost Train, the car they were in lurched and he fell against her, his hand briefly touching her thigh. So cool, he thought; so deliciously cool and firm. Aloud, he said: 'Sorry.'



'What for?'

'I lost my balance.'

'That doesn't matter. I like it when you're close to me. It's less scary.'

She moved nearer and he found his hand trapped between her leg and his own. Oh, so firm! Despite the cold of the tunnel, he began to perspire. Please hurry, please hurry, he silently begged the unseen operator of the car.

There had never been anyone like Janet before. The others had always been too prim or too forward, too fat or too thin. Never anyone like this. Please give me the strength to continue. Please let me not frighten her.

The car suddenly burst forward into the sunlight. The girl straightened up and Russel's hand was freed. He trembled as he wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead. Janet stared at him.

'Were you frightened in there, Uncle Ben? You look white.'

'Just the heat.'

They wandered around the fair until six o'clock, then Russel asked:

'Are you hungry?'

'I am a bit.' She looked at him. 'Have we got to go soon?'

'Go where?'

'Back to . . . Back to the Home.'

He smiled.

'No. I saw the warden before we left. He's given us special permission to stay out until eleven o'clock, because I didn't see you last week.'

'Eleven o'clock! That's wonderful! We've got hours.'

'A few hours.' Just a few hours, he echoed silently. 'And as a treat,' he continued, 'I'm going to take you home and cook you supper myself. Would you like that?'

'I'd love it, Uncle Ben, I'd love it.'

They walked out of the fairground and into the Park, Janet clutching her rabbit thoughtfully.

'What are you thinking about?' he asked.

'How happy I am. Can't I stay with you for ever, Uncle

Ben? Can't I? Can't I? I don't want to go back to the Home. Ever!

Russel looked dubious.

'I'm not sure about that,' he said. 'The warden might not allow it.'

'He would if you asked him. I'm sure he would.'

'And that's what you want?'

'Oh yes, yes!'

'You'd have to promise to be a good girl and do everything I told you.'

'I would. Anything!'

Russel relaxed. The first part was over. It was all too easy.

'Then I'll ask him,' he said.

'Oh, Uncle Ben!'

They took a taxi at the Park gates and all the way to Russel's home Janet hugged her benefactor and told him how good and obedient she would be.

'Now you sit down and watch the television while I make supper,' said Russel, once they were inside his flat.

'Can't I help?'

'No. You're my guest. And guests must enjoy themselves.'

After supper, he sat looking at her for a long time. Such purity. Such rare purity. Hair as black as the Devil's heart and skin as white as swansdown. He ached to touch her, and it took a considerable effort to restrain the impulse. It wasn't time, he reminded himself.

But how different she would be from all the others. Not like Lola, who had been so willing to pay for her entertainment in the only way she knew. Or Joan, who had been frightened. Or Betty, the coloured girl, whose deformity had so sickened him. Not like any of them. Janet was unique. Full of the angelic goodness which Peggy, the first, had possessed. He had tried to save Peggy from a life of corruption and the Church had had the blasphemous gall to call his actions indecent. Indecent! Almighty God! Couldn't they see what would happen to her? She'd be eighteen now and probably sleeping with half the men in Christendom. All he'd tried to do was help; just show her the way a man would use her. How could that be indecent!

She hadn't screamed or complained. She'd been excited and interested. Yet they imprisoned him. Him! A Saviour! God, what torture the prison had been! The white coats. The lights. The endless questions. But they freed him. He'd been too clever for them. But Peggy had gone. Lost. Poor Peggy. Janet wouldn't be lost. He'd save her. Few of them were worthy of his attention. Janet was. It had taken five years to find her. It could take a further quinquennium to find another like her, if he ever did. So everything about the evening had to be perfect. Timing was important, precision timing. So many minutes for this, so many minutes for that. And as the clock struck ten . . .

'Isn't it getting late, Uncle Ben?'

'What!' He realized he had shouted and quickly apologized. 'I'm sorry. I was thinking. You startled me. Late, did you say? Not really. It's only half past nine. We've got plenty of time. Besides' - he smiled - 'you can't go without seeing your surprise.'

'Surprise?'

'Yes.'

'A present!'

'Yes. Come along. I'll show you.'

Russel led the way out of the dining room and down a flight of stairs. He opened a door and stood to one side.

'There!' he said, and pointed.

Draped across a small bed was a white full-length gown. The girl walked slowly across the room. She looked at the gift for a moment, picked it up and began to cry. Russel caressed the nape of her neck.

'Don't,' he murmured.

'But I've never had anything so beautiful. Never in my whole life. Oh, you're so kind!'

'Put it on,' he said gently.

Her tears stopped as she stared at him.

'But it's . . . I mean, it's a night-dress, isn't it?' She held it in front of her. 'I can see through it.'

'Of course you can. And it's not a night-dress. It's a sort of bridal-gown. Please put it on. You said you'd be a good girl and do everything I told you.'

'Yes, but . . .'

'Oh, I see. You don't like it.'

'It's not that at all, Uncle Ben.'

Russel turned away with feigned petulance. In the mirror, he saw her trying desperately to decide between hurting him and what she instinctively knew to be wrong. He watched the reflection until he felt certain her resistance had weakened, and then spoke.

'And I thought you really wanted to live with me for ever.'

She said nothing for several minutes. Then :

'Shall I put it on here?'

'Only if you want to.'

He closed his eyes and let his mind go blank. His hand went to his heart in an endeavour to still its frenzied beating. It was here. The moment had arrived.

'It's on,' whispered the girl, and he turned to face her.

She was everything he had imagined. Her head lowered, she stood trembling. Through the thin material he saw the small breasts in all their youthful glory. His eyes travelled the length of her body, taking in with rapacious greed the soft curve of her hips, the smooth roundness of her belly.

'Come here,' he commanded. The girl, as though in a trance, obeyed.

She stopped in front of him, tearful and afraid. She felt an overwhelming desire to cry out, scream, but something seemed to have happened to her voice. It was his eyes that held her. They grew larger and larger until they were as big as pennies. She felt his hands on her body.

'It's almost ten o'clock,' he whispered. 'Almost ten o'clock. Come.'

He led her through a door and into a large, dimly lit room. How strange, she thought, it seemed like a church. A small church. There was the Bible. And there the cushions to kneel on. There was the crucifix. But something was wrong. The cross was upside down. And there was no altar, just a marble slab.

'Lie down!' Russel ordered from behind her. 'On there.'

There was no fear any longer. It had all disappeared. It was

a new and wonderful experience to lie on cool stone dressed in nothing but a thin gown. Something marvellous was going to happen. She knew it.

She could hear a voice above her, chanting. Such a lovely sound. What was he singing? Impossible to understand. Now louder. Not too loud, please. Uncle Ben, it's too loud. You're hurting my ears. Oh stop! Stop!

Softer now. Much better. More understandable. What were the words? They sounded familiar. Evil from us deliver . . . Not us lead . . . This us give . . . The Lord's Prayer! That was it. But he was saying it backwards. How strange and fascinating.

She would be late back and the warden would be angry. But that didn't matter. What a story she would have to tell her friends.

By her head, his insane eyes gleaming, Russel began to moan. Purity. Chastity. Virgin. Sacrifice. No one like this. Frenzy. Beauty. Milk-white skin. Running red. Red over white. Church. Hate. Rome. Hate. Rome. Rome. Excommunicate. Prison. Never again. Too clever. Revenge. Teach them. Teach them all. Peggy. Teach her. Outcast. Hate. Hate. Janet. Save her. Pure soul. Purify. Glorify. Sanctify. No more. No more. Live. Rise. Revenge.

Ten o'clock.

Russel stepped into the girl's vision and looked at her. He showed her what he held in his right hand. As she opened her mouth to scream, he drew the long knife across her throat, and the blood gushed forth.

Red over white.

Shrieking terrible obscenities at the top of his voice, he tore the white gown to shreds, exposing the flesh beneath. Shuddering uncontrollably, he began removing his clothes in preparation for the final ritual.

## SUITABLE APPLICANT

*By Charles Braunstone*

MONICA CONWAY stretched lazily on the golden beach, the summer sun evenly caressing her warm brown body and pale blue bikini. She ran an exploratory hand over her bare middle and decided it had cooked enough – she didn't want a nasty red colour, just a deep brown tan.

'I think I'll turn over for a while, Helen,' she said, and with that she rolled her shapely, supple body over on her gritty towel, closed her eyes and prepared to soak in more warmth. There had been no reply from Helen who was studying the 'Wanted' column of the newspaper, her dark green eyes searching each separate situation, weighing it up and then passing on.

'Be an angel and rub some cream on my back,' purred Monica. She must make sure not to burn anywhere. Men didn't like pretty girls with red peeling skin, and Monica liked men. Helen sighed to show she was not doing very well with the paper.

'I don't think we'll ever get a holiday job,' she stated gloomily.

'Oh, cheer up, we're bound to find something. Give me the paper a minute.'

Helen started smearing the white cream along her friend's shoulders. It had been over a week now since they had finished their three-year course at the Teachers' Training College and it was another eight weeks before they started teaching at their respective schools. It would have been wonderful to spend those weeks lazing in the sun like this but for that you needed money. It had been Monica's idea to find a job, and at first Helen had not been very keen but her fair-haired athletic friend in the blue bikini had been very persuasive.

She had now finished the back and shoulders and was starting on the legs. She regreased her fingers from the little blue tin and pressed on. On the back of Monica's left thigh, she worked gently round a white scar about the size of a thumb nail and shaped like three inverted V's.

'How did you get this scar, Monica?' she asked.

'What? Oh, on my leg you mean. It was when I was a naughty little girl long ago – always running and jumping until one day I fell on some glass. Why? Does it stand out a lot?' There was alarm in her voice; she knew that the scar was a positive blemish on her beauty and men didn't like girls with scars.

'No, no, Monica, it's ever so small – you wouldn't notice it normally – it's just that I'm so close to it.'

Monica said nothing and Helen realized she had touched on a sore point with her friend. There was a silence between them for the next ten minutes while above them the gulls screeched and called to each other as they glided in graceful arcs. The sea gushed and foamed over the smooth glistening pebbles which rumbled in protest as they were dragged to and fro.

'Now, how about this?' Monica had broken the silence with an excited note in her voice. '“Wanted – young intelligent lady as companion to retired surgeon. Suitable applicant will live in. Salary arranged at interview. Apply – Sir Henry Ward, Borewood Manor.”' Monica's eyes flashed her excitement. Helen was dubious and said so, but it was obvious Monica had made up her mind to try for the position.

That evening, back at the boarding house, many letters were scribbled and dispatched, and Helen realized that this three-year old friendship of theirs was probably about to be strained by the parting of their ways.

A few days later, as they struggled with blunt knives and bent forks to catch their eggs and bacon which slid elusively in the sea of grease on their plates, Mrs Walton waddled in, smiled, gave them each a letter, allowed her chest to wheeze a few times and waddled back out. The outcome of the mail was that Monica was to get her interview with Sir Henry while Helen had acquired a job as a waitress at the local golf club.

Later that day, with promises to keep in touch, they parted. As Monica's head bobbed out of the window of the moving train calling farewells, Helen had a sinking feeling that Monica should not be doing this, but why she could not say.

Two days later, Helen received a postcard: Dear Helen – Got the job. Sir Henry is a dish. I'm living in the lap of luxury. Pay £20 a week. Love Monica.

'Twenty pounds a week,' Helen gasped in genuine disbelief. 'Twenty pounds a week for doing what?' She thought of her own £7 a week for slaving back and forth with her little trolley of full plates, then empty plates, full cups, empty cups, full glasses, empty glasses for hours and hours until her feet, legs, arms and back screamed out for rest. Every evening she lay exhausted on her lumpy bed searching up and down the 'Wanted' columns; there must be an easier way of earning some money, if only she could find it.

On her fifth exhausted evening her tired eyes had only another half column to scan when suddenly she felt her blood pounding at her temples, her heart quickened and her eyes widened in disbelief. Was she seeing things? had she reached that point of exhaustion when the senses play tricks on the mind? She read the advertisement again slowly, shaping each word with her lips like a child learning to read: *Wanted – young intelligent lady as companion to retired surgeon. Suitable applicant will live in. Salary arranged at interview. Apply – Sir Henry Ward, Borewood Manor.*

It was Monica's job, Monica's £20 a week job. Monica give up £20 a week; very unlikely. Yet there it was in black and white. Wrong paper, that's it; it must be last week's. Her eyes searched out the date. No, it was that day's paper. There must be some perfectly reasonable explanation. Monica was ill, too ill to do the job, that's it. But before she could relax to this thought, she knew if Monica were ill she would have come back or got in touch with her or sent for the rest of her things.

That night, sleep eluded Helen as she wondered and pondered, created a reason, examined that reason until the flaws destroyed it. She had made no progress at all when she finally



fell asleep except that she had made up her mind to be the suitable applicant and get that job to find Monica.

\* \* \*

'Do sit down, Miss er —'

'Lloyd, Helen Lloyd,' she volunteered, and sank into a deep green leather chair, crossing her legs to provide an adequate view of her shapely knees.

'Ah yes! Lloyd, of course. Er — may I call you Helen?'

'Please do,' she invited, with her best 'I'm the girl for the job' smile.

'Right, Helen it is, then.'

Behind the green leather-topped mahogany desk sat Sir Henry Ward, his snow-white hair brushed immaculately back from his tanned and still very handsome face. He was now fifty-six, but looked a good five years younger. He had retired from surgery early to enjoy the remainder of his life in luxury with the money he had inherited. His crisp blue eyes studied Helen's letter of application.

'Well, Helen,' he said. 'First let me tell you about the work.' He gazed at the antique brass lamp on his table and spoke as if he were offering the job to the lamp. 'You'll be expected to live here at the Manor and humour me. You will be expected to discuss subjects intelligently, listen patiently to my accounts of past operations,' he paused, smiled at the lamp, then swinging round in his chair to look out of the window behind him, continued, 'play tennis or croquet with me,' and then to a bust of Haydn on the bookcase, 'and chess or cards when the weather is inclement.'

Now the blue eyes rested on Helen. 'Well, what have you to say, my dear?' Helen smiled respectfully.

'Well, I was captain of the college tennis team and in between matches enjoyed many games of croquet and chess. As for cards, however,' she paused for a second, then looking sheepishly at the shiny black toe of her shoe continued, 'I'm afraid my room was always the den for card games after lights out.' Her confession over, she brightened and concluded by saying, 'And I feel sure I will enjoy our discussions and I look

forward to hearing the exciting details of your past operations.' There was a pause while the mind behind the blue eyes recovered from the swift clear answer to all his needs.

'Capital! Capital! Now to the question of salary, Helen. If you can continue as you have started today, then I feel I can offer you £25 a week. Well, what do you say?'

While Helen smiled and purred her thanks to him, her mind was stabbing questions about £25. Why £5 more than for Monica? What could she do that Monica couldn't? Why, why, why had Monica given up this job? It looked like money for old rope.

'Good, then it's settled.' He was opening the door now. 'Harper!' he shouted. 'Ah, there you are. Show Miss Lloyd to her room. She is joining our little family.'

'Very good, sir.'

She took an instant dislike to Harper who was a very short, thick-set man with black bushy eyebrows above his sunken little eyes. His small thin-lipped mouth looked cruel below a nose which had tufts of black hair protruding from the wide nostrils. Her room, however, was very bright and comfortable, with the sun gleaming through the two large windows. Helen was unpacked and feeling very much at home when the dull booming of the gong summoned her to dinner.

Sir Henry sat at the opposite end of the long refectory table which was heavily adorned with gleaming silver on a pale blue linen cloth. A large five-branched silver candelabra twinkled with the flickering flames of the candles in the centre of the table. Harper held the red leather carved chair for her and eased it forward as she sat down.

'I hope you'll find the food to your liking.' Sir Henry's voice sounded odd coming from such a distance over the long table and Helen had to hold her head a little to one side to smile back past the candles. 'But I can assure you Harper is a real wizard in the kitchen.'

'Hm, some wizard,' she thought. 'With his face, witch would be a far better description.' Later, however, Helen felt very guilty at that thought, for as she wiped the corner of her mouth with the pale blue napkin she knew that it had been the

best meal she had ever tasted. Everything had been cooked perfectly and served immaculately by Harper. 'Delicious!' she complimented as Harper removed the dirty dishes from her side of the table. He gave a sharp nod in answer, but his face remained expressionless and again Helen felt uneasy as the large hairy hands flickered before her eyes until Harper finally retreated to the kitchen.

'Yes, I think Harper's rather proud of his sweet and sour steak Chinese style,' laughed Sir Henry. 'I did warn you he was a wizard.'

Helen began to relax again now that Harper had gone, and spent the rest of the evening in front of a roaring log fire, listening to lengthy gory details of tricky feats of surgery before finally bidding Sir Henry goodnight and going to her own room.

The following morning, she awoke with a hazy idea that her sleep had been disturbed at some time or other by irregular thumping noises. Yet she could not quite fit the appropriate action to that noise. Maybe it was all a dream, yet she felt she had stirred slightly out of her sleep, enough in fact, to remember the shafts of moonlight falling through the windows of her room and lighting up the Constable pictures on the wall. Trees – that's it. Chopping trees – of course. Someone, maybe Harper, had been chopping one of the trees down for firewood. This problem solved, she made her way down to breakfast.

At the head of the wide, winding stairs, she stopped abruptly. What, at night? Chopping trees by moonlight – ridiculous. She must get a grip on herself. She was allowing her fear of Harper to get on top of her. No one would chop trees at that time of night. It must be something else, it had to be something else, but what?

'Good morning – Oh dear! Did I startle you, Helen?' She had been so engrossed with her thoughts that she had not noticed Sir Henry come to the foot of the stairs.

'Oh, good morning, Sir Henry,' she rushed. 'No, no! You didn't startle me at all.' Go on, ask him, she told herself. Don't hide it, ask him. Bring it out into the open. You haven't done anything wrong. There's probably a simple explanation.

'I was er . . . just um . . . wondering,' she started hesitantly. 'Well, I think I heard some um . . . er banging. Yes, that's it – banging noises in the night and I couldn't quite make out what er . . .' Her voice trailed off as she felt the colour flood to her face. She realized she was making a fool of herself. Sir Henry's cheerful expression faded in a flash, his eyes narrowed and he looked extremely concerned.

'My dear Helen,' he said, 'please forgive me, it is all my fault. Oh, if I'd only realized I was keeping you awake, I would have stopped instantly.'

'Oh no, please, it wasn't that bad,' she exclaimed. 'It was just that I was puzzled, that's all. Please don't apologize.' The smile had returned and the pale blue eyes were normal again.

'I can't have my guest being puzzled, now can I,' he smiled up at her. 'Come along, my dear, Harper isn't quite ready with the breakfast, yet. What do you say to solving the great mystery before breakfast?'

Helen skipped down the stairs; she knew he was laughing at her, but at least she knew now that whatever the explanation, it was obviously going to be very simple and Sir Henry would probably pull her leg about it often in the future. Still chuckling to himself, Sir Henry led her through the breakfast room into the large kitchen where Harper was working industriously preparing their breakfast.

'I'm just going to show Miss Lloyd my little playroom, Harper,' said Sir Henry.

As they had entered, Harper's thick, hairy hands stopped working and he obediently opened a large metal door in the farthest wall of his kitchen.

'Thank you, Harper. This way, Miss Lloyd.'

Helen followed Sir Henry through the open door and accidentally rubbed her arm against Harper's ape-like arm as she went. A quick shiver ran through her body as she felt the thick matted black hair scratch along her skin. She pushed her way quickly inside the room to get as far away from Harper as she could and then stopped dead in amazement.

She was standing in a miniature operating theatre. Rows of gleaming stainless steel instruments lay neatly on large tables

around the room. In one corner a large sterilizer steamed continuously; in the centre of the room beneath a large arc lamp stood, not an operating table, but a large scrubbed butcher's table.

'I'm afraid my money did not run to an operating table,' laughed Sir Henry, following her eyes and reading her thoughts. 'I'm afraid this is the next best thing.'

Helen stared at the room in disbelief. 'B-but, this isn't a hospital,' she stammered.

'Oh, good heavens, no,' said Sir Henry, 'but I do like to keep my hand in. You see Harper buys all our meat in bulk from a nearby farm. As I know the farmer well, he allows us to have the dead animal skinned but intact. Harper then stores it in the ice room,' he said, pointing to a large door in the wall. 'Then when we need some meat, we get one out, lay it on the table and I operate.' He slapped his hand on the large table. 'Nothing tricky, I fear, as the animal is already dead.' He looked disappointed, then continued: 'But I find it keeps my eye in and my hand steady.' He held his hand out in front of her to demonstrate how firm his nerves were. 'Not bad for fifty-six, what?' he asked.

Helen smiled weakly, she had not yet got used to the atmosphere of the room. 'It gives me plenty to cut with the scalpel,' continued Sir Henry. 'Plenty of long wide cuts give a surgeon a chance to see what he's doing, you know. I then remove the heart, kidneys, liver, etc., or anything else Harper needs for his cooking, then . . .' he walked over to one of the side tables and Helen followed him hesitantly, 'I finish the carcass off with these little beauties,' he said, picking one of the implements from the table. Helen stared at the bright surgical axes, saws and large knives like the ones she had seen in butchers' shops. He laid a large knife back in its row on the table. 'Harper then stores the meat back in the ice room and burns anything he does not want.' He smiled triumphantly at her. 'Well, what do you think of it?'

Helen cleared her throat. 'Wonderful, quite wonderful,' she said, forcing a smile. 'I think it's a very good way of er . . . keeping your hand in.'

'Good, I'm glad you like it,' he said, turning and walking to the door. 'Come along then, my dear, I'm sure you're ready for breakfast now.'

Helen took a last look round and scurried after him. 'Then I suppose the banging was . . .' She didn't finish the sentence on purpose.

'Yes it was me, I'm afraid,' he said. 'Amputation is sometimes very tricky work and as I was rather tired and it was getting late, I decided to finish the job off with the axe. I hope my little hobby has not upset you, my dear,' he asked with a concerned look on his face.

'No, not at all,' said Helen, feeling much better now as they were back in the breakfast room.

'Good,' he said. 'Anyway, I promise, no more operating in the evening, I'm not going to have you upset or disturbed in anyway.' He patted her arm tenderly as he spoke. 'We're ready now, Harper,' he called, and they both sat down to breakfast.

The days at Borewood Manor seemed to pass so quickly for Helen. She enjoyed every minute there, playing tennis in the sunshine, swimming in the small heated pool, eating the very best food, living in the lap of luxury and, what's more, actually getting paid for doing it. However, as the days went by she seemed to sense that Sir Henry was getting very interested in her. At first, it had been a friendly handshake after tennis. Later, when walking together he had held her shoulder or arm while pointing at a distant bird or landmark. Once, he had put his arm round her shoulders as they walked in the grounds. She'd also noticed Sir Henry's keen blue eyes on her when she was in her tennis skirt and especially when she was in her bathing costume.

Helen was beginning to feel a little uneasy about all this. Was it possible that Sir Henry was falling love with her or was he the sort of man to take advantage of a girl at his home when she least expected it. Then a startling thought struck her. Could this be the reason Monica had left him? He had made his advances upon Monica and she had told him what she thought of him. Yes, this made sense and it also explained why the salary had been raised for her – the salary was his bait to

get the girl he wanted – it was all making sense to her now. What about yesterday when they were both in the swimming pool and he had swum underwater behind her and suddenly grabbed her legs. Was that just some fun on his part or was it another one of his ways of getting near to her, of touching her. Yet, Helen had to admit to herself she did rather enjoy his strong hands gripping her. In a way she was quite fond of him herself. Anyway, why not? Many girls would give anything to be married to someone with a title and a great deal of money. He was fifty-six, yes, but still very young in heart and very good looking. Quite a catch really, so if he wanted to share his wealth with her, why not?

Her mind made up for her, Helen made her way across the lawn to the house. Another thing she thought of was, if I were his wife I wouldn't have to be afraid of hairy Harper any more. If I wanted to I could get rid of him. As she sat down for dinner that evening she found herself being very polite to Sir Henry, smiling encouragingly at him whenever he spoke. He was in his usual good mood, laughing at his own jokes and anecdotes. She thought to herself as she watched him, if he asks me to marry him I'll definitely say yes.

Harper placed a large steak in front of her and then another in front of Sir Henry. Then coughing politely, said: 'I'm afraid this is the last of the steak, Sir Henry.'

'Not already, surely,' said Sir Henry.

'I'm afraid so, sir,' replied Harper.

'Ah, well! You'll have to go over to the farm tomorrow then, Harper.'

'Very good, sir.' Harper bowed slightly and disappeared into his kitchen.

Helen sliced away at the thick steak. It was beautifully cooked as usual – tender and tasty. In fact, it was so good, she hardly spoke until she had nearly finished. 'I think that is the best steak I have er . . .' She stopped abruptly. She had just sliced the last piece of meat from the thick fatty skin. As she pushed the skin across her plate, it toppled, disclosing a clear mark about the size of a thumbnail and shaped like three inverted V's.

The knife and fork fell from her shaking hands with a clatter, blood raced and pounded through her head, her mouth opened and closed, then opened again but no sound came out. She sat paralysed in her chair seeing only the three inverted V's, nothing else. Voices sounded far away in the dark mist around her.

'Harper, come quickly. It's Miss Lloyd.'

'What's wrong with her, sir?'

'I don't know. She seems to be looking at her plate.'

Strong arms got hold of her, she was being carried away from the three inverted V's. The strong hands roughly laid her down on something hard. Through the mist she could see a large round light glaring down at her. Then hairy hands began to rip her clothes away. She wanted to stop them, but couldn't. Then she felt those strong smooth hands gripping different parts of her body as they had gripped her legs in the pool.

Those voices again: 'An excellent specimen here, Harper.'

'Really wonderful example, sir.'

'No need for you to go to the farm in the morning after all, Harper.'

'Indeed no, sir.'

'Shall we begin then?'

'Ready when you are, sir.'

'Capital, capital. To work then.'

'Scalpel?'

'Scalpel, sir.'

'Large saw.'

'Large saw, sir.'

'Helen, Helen, wake up.' The voice bleating from the blackness sounded familiar. She half opened her eyes and blinked in the dim red light. A naked red bulb shed its crimson glow over a large room that she hadn't seen before. Her muddled brain worked feverishly to try to recall the events before she had lost consciousness. A chill passed through her body as she remembered Harper's hairy hands pawing her. Then there was that voice again.

'Helen, it's me, Monica, over here against the wall.' She turned her head and peered into the red gloom.



'Monica!' she gasped with relief. 'But I thought you were dead. Oh, Monica, I'm so glad you're alive.'

'Huh! You may be, but believe me I'm not, and neither will you tonight. Take another look at me.'

Puzzled by this odd answer, Helen strained her eyes to glean some more detail. She gave a sharp gasp as she realized that Monica was quite naked. Then her gasp turned to a choked gurgle when she saw that Monica looked exactly like the statue of Venus de Milo in Paris. Her arms had been amputated just below the shoulders and also her legs just below the hip. Monica was just hanging against the far wall by a thick leather strap that wound around her beneath her breasts.

'Oh my God, Monica,' she croaked, 'what have they done to you?' Monica made no reply to her question but merely turned her head away from her. It was at this point that Helen became aware of the tightness around her stomach. Instinctively she tried to ease it with her hand, but was distracted by something white twitching at her side. What she saw made her forget all about her stomach. There in the red gloom where her right arm should have been was a white-bandaged stump dangling from her shoulder. Her shriek of horror intensified as she saw the same sight in place of her left arm. The blood pounded in her temples as she screamed and screamed, praying she would awake from this nightmare. Her body was trembling with hysterical sobs and cries as she gazed down past her own bare breasts to the thick leather strap around her, then on to her two short bandaged thighs.

Her eyes were swimming with tears when the bright white light suddenly illuminated the room. Through the wet mist she made out the forms of Dr Ward and his hideous little servant Harper.

'Oh dear me, you mustn't upset yourself, Helen, my dear.' The doctor's voice trickled to her ears. 'You must be brave like Monica. You'll soon get used to it after a while, won't she, Monica?'

She heard Monica's voice pour a stream of abuse in reply, but the calm voice continued unperturbed: 'While I'm attending to Miss Lloyd's dressing, will you unstrap Monica and

take her to my bedroom, Harper?’

‘Certainly, sir.’ There was a shuffling from the far side of the room. When Helen had shaken the tears from her eyes she was alone with Dr Ward. He began methodically snipping away her bandages with a pair of little scissors, while Helen, numbed with shock and fear, could merely watch him like a dumb animal.

‘You see, my dear Helen, you have been under heavy sedation for some months now, so you will be very weak for a while.’ His smooth voice prattled on as calmly as if he were examining a sore throat. ‘Excellent!’ he exclaimed. ‘All healed beautifully.’

‘You butcher,’ Helen spat out at him, beside herself with rage.

‘Oh come, come, my dear. I do think the appropriate word is artist, don’t you?’

‘Butcher, butcher, butcher!’ screamed Helen with all the strength she could muster. Sir Henry smiled mockingly at her and patted her hot cheek.

Just then Harper reappeared.

‘All tucked up in bed and waiting, sir,’ he exclaimed from the doorway.

‘Capital, capital, thank you, Harper, and I think Miss Lloyd is ready for you to sample tonight. Goodnight, Helen; Goodnight, Harper.’

As Sir Henry left the room, Harper bowed his head with a respectful ‘Goodnight, sir.’ But when his head rose again, there was a new gleam in his eye, that Helen had never seen before. She pressed her head back hard against the stone wall, closed her eyes, and screamed. Her little pink stumps wagged pathetically in the air as Harper’s hairy hands rubbed her skin as he undid the thick leather strap.



## MY DEAR HOW DEAD YOU LOOK AND YET YOU SWEETLY SING

*By Priscilla Marron*

FLORENCE under the floorboards did wonders for Wilbraham.

Made a new man of him. Shed several years he did. Light-hearted laughing days again he knew.

Wasn't going to caper off like Crippen. Not mad about male impersonators. No rage for the rolling deep.

Tap dance over her tomb he did. Delight fandango. Lissom as an agile lad.

Came, however, uncomfortable evenings. Songs by sad deceased. Visible in various sections. A wife in slices sings.

Haunting contralto she had. Real eerie. Sang better than Wilbraham danced she did. Cause connubial envy that can. Killing thing for vocally out-voxed fandango flinger. Hence histrionic hacksaw. Planks of heartfelt thanks. Sorry, Florrie. So long, Flo.

*You mustn't imagine it's dead I am  
Though it's sitting without my head I am,*

sang Florence.

Wilbraham wasn't liking it one bit.

*You mustn't imagine it's drunk I am  
Though it's warbling without my trunk I am,*

sang Florence.

Enthusiastic Wilbraham wasn't in the least.

*You mustn't imagine it's nuts I am  
Though it's knifing you through the guts I am,*

Florence charmingly carolled.

Wilbraham wasn't even listening any more.

Neighbours got nosy. Called cops. Wilbraham wantonly extinct. Hatpin through heart.

Florence *uxor intacta* under floorboards. No parts peculiarly missing. Songless. Hand sticking up though. Second hatpin in it. Poised for posthumous assault.

Sad moral story. Stick to divorce court. Take no hacksaw to your *hausfrau*. Direct route too drastic.

Employ intermediary. Practise do-it-yourself by proxy. Eschew fatal fretwork.

You'll be stronger longer the fewer you skewer with that gnat bat the matrimonial wife knife. Fact exact!

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